

INNOVATIONS SERIES

Innovations in  
**pre-service education and training  
for English language teachers**

Edited by Julian Edge and Steve Mann

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# Foreword

Adrian Odell

The British Council is pleased to offer this volume in our 'Innovations in...' series. The series aims to bring to the reader a wealth of ideas and practices in English language teaching (ELT), and to stimulate new thinking and experimentation, by providing accounts of innovative experiences from a range of international contexts.

The focus of this volume is on the pre-service education and training (PRESETT) of English language teachers. In terms of research conducted, articles written, and the circulation of new ideas, PRESETT tends to be a neglected area within the wider field of ELT. Far more is written about in-service education and training (INSETT). We hope that this volume will contribute to a redressing of that imbalance.

PRESETT is clearly of importance. National governments dedicate considerable financial and human resources to it, and school education systems should be able to count on the expertise and fresh ideas of new teachers emerging from initial training courses. We hope that this book will afford an opportunity for the sharing of such fresh ideas within and between national education practitioners and systems.

There exists a certain danger in PRESETT that initial training can be seen as providing an approved, finished model of teaching. This can mean that continuing professional development (CPD) has to bear an extra burden when it comes to introducing new approaches in the classroom for practising teachers. Furthermore, a newly qualified teacher moving into the public sector education system following a university course may well have been exposed to more theory than practice. Also, the pedagogy of his or her lecturers may not have modelled flexible, student-centred approaches. The collection should help educators to address such issues.

We, the British Council, are delighted to offer you this volume, which brings together a truly international set of fresh perspectives and experiences. We hope they will be of real interest and practical value to anyone involved in teacher education and training.

Finally, I would like to express our thanks to our editors, Steve Mann and Julian Edge, and to all of those who have written papers for this publication.

**Adrian Odell, Adviser, English and Examinations**  
British Council



# Overview – Innovation as action new-in-context: an introduction to the PRESETT collection

Steve Mann and Julian Edge

When we invited proposals for inclusion in this collection of papers on the pre-service education and training of English language teachers (henceforth PRESETT), we received 141 responses from 32 different countries. The selection process was very difficult. Some criteria, however, were clear from the outset.

First, to count as an innovation, we needed reports on *action* that had actually been taken. A new idea is not an innovation. Innovation demands concentration on process; it demands that we pay as much attention to how we teach or train as to which topics get covered along the way, or the tools that we employ. We asked contributors to make clear the steps and detail of introduction, implementation and evaluation of their efforts, because it is the realisation of an idea in *action* that constitutes genuine innovation.

Second, whether action counts as innovation depends on where and when that action is taken. We have hyphenated *new-in-context* in the title of this chapter in order to emphasise the importance of setting, of time and place, of norms and expectations. In a situation where learning is seen as the memorisation of facts to be tested by an end-of-year examination, for example, the introduction of formative assessment would be seen as an innovation. Conversely, in a setting where learning modules and criterion-referenced, continuous assessment are the norm, the introduction of assessment by end-of-year written examinations of formal knowledge would be an innovation. Samb's chapter (Chapter 2) in this collection gives us insight into the former type of innovation in Senegal. At the time of writing, the British government seems to be moving in the opposite direction in England (BBC 2012).

A third criterion, centrally important in the work of teacher-educators, is a commitment to practising what we preach. We see it as incongruent that:

*... while teacher educators promote reflection among teachers, they seem to have less tendency to consider reflection as a method for their own practice.*

(Moon 1999: 57)

Part of such necessary reflection involves considering the perspectives of our teacher-trainees. Put quite simply:

... as we implement innovations in our own programs, courses, and teaching strategies, we need to find out how teacher learners respond to these innovations, and how they affect teachers' practices.

(Johnson and Irujo 2001: 07)

In addition, such reflection requires teacher educators to ask reflexively of themselves, 'What has this innovation contributed to my own development?' Motivated by the same set of attitudes that underpinned the series of International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) conferences and publications appearing under the banner of *Teachers Develop Teachers Research* (beginning with Edge and Richards 1993), we asked authors in this collection, 'not to talk about [innovations] as topics, but to report on their actual experiences' (*ibid.*: 6). Consequently, each chapter has a space for considering how stakeholders have evaluated the innovation being reported and also a space for individual teacher-educator reflection on their own development.

In the spirit of that last point, it would be fair to note one way in which our own development has been enhanced during our work as editors. We have learned to ask new (to us) questions about the nature of PRESETT in relation to in-service training (INSET). Both of us are used to working in contexts where the distinction is simple: PRESETT is the training and education one receives before starting to work as a teacher. INSET is the training and education that one receives during one's career as a teacher. For many of the authors in this collection, that distinction holds true. For others, however, it does not. In Oprandy's work in the US, for example (Chapter 5), just as in Dick's work in Sri Lanka (Chapter 8), the norm is for groups of participants with and without experience to be trained and educated together. For the purposes of this collection, we have made a point of asking writers to focus on the effects and outcomes for *pre-service* teacher trainees. However, the effect on one's education of learning the ropes in the company of others who have already done some time in the ring, if you will forgive our boxing metaphor, is an element of the experience that we have not pursued here. We recognise now that we need to pay more attention to the value of such shared experiences. Mercado (Chapter 3) contributes directly to this discussion with his institutional approach to the induction of novice teachers, offering an explicit response to Farrell's (2012) call for the gap between pre- and in-service teacher education and development to be bridged.

Having selected the chapters that we wanted to include, we were faced with the question of how to organise them. In the broadest terms, the chapters all concern themselves with the connections between thinking and doing in learning and becoming. This is a theme also addressed by Edge (2011) in his discussion of the interacting roles of *Copying, Applying, Theorising, Reflecting and Acting* (CATRA) in being and becoming a teacher. These dimensions featured in our original call for proposals and can be traced throughout the chapters.

*Copying* is, admittedly, a term frequently tinged with negative overtones, but it is not to be so understood in this case. A great deal of teaching tradition deserves to be copied and passed on to the next generation. This is the purpose that underpins several of our chapters as they deal with various forms of awareness-

raising and introduction to the profession. It is clearly important to Erkmen's trainees (Chapter 10) as they shadow a teacher through a full working day, leading one of them to comment:

*I learned so many things about classroom management, environment and the teacher's attitude and style. For my practice teaching next year, I will use some of the techniques that Mr K used.*

The particular strength of Erkmen's innovation, however, is the way in which she scaffolds the shadowing experience in order to enable trainees to make informed judgements about just what to copy.

In dealing with observation and feedback, Lengeling (Chapter 4) reminds us that there is still important work to do in considering how these aspects are approached and managed. She adds a new dimension as she creatively 'borrows' techniques from ethnography and uses them innovatively. She shows that requiring PRESETT teachers to take notes in a less prescribed and judgemental way can help them better understand and learn from the teaching that they have observed. The PRESETT innovation in this chapter lies in the ways that an ethnographic approach to 'objectivity' and 'estrangement' provides a new basis for awareness-raising and the building of evaluative capacities. As we saw with Erkmen, awareness and evaluation are essential to meaningful educational continuity.

In order to enable his PRESETT teachers to move beyond a frustrated reliance on what their textbook contains, Cheng (Chapter 6) introduces well-elaborated principles of materials design. In China's recent past, teachers rarely had to concern themselves with such principles, as textbooks were uniform and prescribed. Student teachers now learn how to apply these principles in order to engage with the types of decision that materials writers need to make. In this way, pre-service teachers are encouraged to develop critical awareness and build a sense of agency. Such awareness is in line with Northcote and Lim's (2009: 27) observation that teacher educators miss an important opportunity for 'building the capacity of pre-service teachers' if they only maintain 'traditional teaching and learning methods in their courses and programmes'. Moving beyond a concentration on dissemination of information, with pre-service teachers playing passive roles, provokes a more engaging and critical process.

Squarely in the area of language teaching methodology, Van Batenburg (Chapter 13) reports on her growing awareness of the need to augment the standard sequential relationship of theory/practice, in which trainees are taught theory and then expected to put it into practice, with a 'sense-making process ... where theory serves to re-organise students' lived experience'. This approach to theorising leads her beyond the age-old dichotomy between theory and practice towards a more integrated view of praxis in line with recent sociocultural thinking.

A number of the papers in this collection are concerned with particular activities or tools that encourage and support *reflection*. It has been argued elsewhere (Mann and Walsh 2011) that reflection can be a vague and rather flabby concept for pre-service teachers if it is not operationalised in a systematic way. Velikova (Chapter 12) focuses

on the importance of reflection and provides evidence of the way it is promoted through a portfolio development framework. Here we have an inside view into how many different aspects of the course (for example teaching practice, the interactions between beginning teachers) are made more reflective experiences through the adoption of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL). As well as giving examples of specific portfolio-based reflective procedures, Velikova's contribution shows that, although pre-service teaching is necessarily an evaluated space, the portfolio at least provides a balance where individuals and peers can assess their own competences and skills. Not only does the portfolio enable them to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their teacher education, it also encourages them to monitor their progress, collaborate and interact as they select materials for the classroom, plan lessons, team teach, and exchange visits for observation and feedback.

Oprandy (Chapter 5) deepens our understanding of avenues for reflection by focusing on the nature of professional communication itself. In this chapter, PRESETT trainees learn 'how teachers can work collaboratively on "talking shop" about their work/craft without succumbing to the usually evaluative nature of such discussions'. The interaction reported in this innovation has far-reaching implications for the potential richness of alternative relationships between pre-service trainees, novice teachers and their experienced colleagues.

Mercado (Chapter 3) provides an action-oriented programme comprising, 'a powerful conglomeration of professional development opportunities that cater to a diverse set of new teacher needs and preferences.' Particularly interesting in this chapter is that Mercado is describing a course that inducts teachers into his own institution and aims to retain those novice teachers there. This is very different from the situation in teacher education courses (whether state system or private sector) that focus on the process of training teachers to make the transfer from their education course to their actual place of work. At the same time, one reads in Mercado's account an enthusiasm for motivating programme participants not only to join the institution, but also to join in a rewarding way of life.

Dick (Chapter 8) is perhaps the most trenchant advocate of the importance of teacher learning being grounded in practical *action*, with the principles involved, the 'top tips', having to be derived anew on each occasion. This makes her subsequent reflection on having written her chapter all the more powerful. First of all, she finds her practice strengthened by her reflection on it. She continues:

*I find myself ashamed to admit that during this exercise I have been guilty of exactly what irritates me about some trainees on pre-service teacher training courses. That is, trainees who, when introduced to a new activity or technique, can use it (because it has been modelled to them) but have no idea what it is actually doing or where it is appropriate to use it. In fact, they do not really understand what it is they are doing. Similarly here, I have used Top Tips in input sessions and in teaching practice feedback sessions for years but have never really taken a step back and queried why it worked and what it did.*

Dick's comment brings us back around to styles of copying, and how copying without reflection can lead us into a cul-de-sac of educational stagnation, rather than along a path of sound educational development. And to select an example directly complementary to Dick's, it is noticeable that we highlighted above the significance of *reflection* in Oprandy's innovation. An additional personal conclusion that Oprandy reaches, however, involves the continuing importance of letting trainees 'peer over my shoulder' to see how he does things. This brings us back to the tradition of master practitioners, apprentices and a legitimate role for *copying* underpinned by awareness.

Such insights also help explain why we, as editors, soon realised that to attempt to organise this collection around the conceptual elements of copying, applying, theorising, reflecting and acting (CATRA) would not be appropriate. The point is not that some chapters exemplify one CATRA element and some another. The CATRA elements offer different perspectives to take on any innovation, not a category system for separating innovations out from each other. As we have said above, we do find that these different perspectives on teacher learning can be useful. However, each innovation in its own right derives its strength from the intermingling and mutual support of these various elements.

With regard to such intermingling of elements, Samb's chapter (Chapter 2) is the one that attempts the broadest reach. It ranges across international policies, national strategies and cultural norms, some of which are in tune with each other, some in more or less open conflict, and some unreliably shifting, before anchoring his innovatory work on formative assessment in classroom interaction. As we each attempt to respond sensitively to the affordances and constraints of our own contexts, it can do no harm to be reminded of others' contexts. Samb writes:

*More specifically, the structure of our classrooms, designed for a maximum of 60 students, cannot be made to accommodate over 90 students satisfactorily simply by having them share desks in threes instead of twos.*

And if we pause for thought there, we cannot but notice a massive contrast between Samb's setting and that of Ashcraft and Ali (Chapter 9) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In the UAE, money is available and innovation encouraged in the attempt to develop a national education strategy that is not dependent on migrant workers passing through, attracted by the salaries on offer. This makes possible Ashcraft and Ali's *Continuing Professional Development Practicum*, which extends the concept of the observation of classes and the shadowing of the teacher's day, to include membership of professional associations, attendance at conferences and other aspects of a professional life. As readers in our own contexts, we are required to learn from the principles involved and ask not, 'Could we afford such a programme?' but 'How might we also draw new teachers' attention to these broader possibilities?'

As we continued to debate ways of organising our collection, we returned again to a discussion of innovation. Having emphasised the importance of context, we nevertheless had to acknowledge that a collection of reports on twenty-first century innovation might be expected to feature a number of projects that feature the use of information and communications technology (ICT) and multi-media more prominently than those we have looked at so far. This is indeed the case.

We certainly do not hold the view that there is anything inherently innovative about ICT and multi-media. They have a particular draw, as pre-service teachers have become more digitally savvy but, like paper-based materials, they need careful selection, trialling and evaluation. Özdeniz (1996) has written about the dangers of simply filling a course with new ideas so that it looks ‘innovative’.

If ICT were to have a ‘patron saint’ (and if you are willing on this occasion to excuse the quasi-religious metaphor), it would surely be Janus, the Roman god of doorways, able to look backwards and forwards at the same time. That is to say, we must always keep our pedagogic purposes in mind when asking if some technological breakthrough helps us achieve those established ends in some more effective way – as with portfolios. And, at the same time, we need to keep up to date with technological breakthroughs in case they open up a line of pedagogy that would previously have been unthinkable – as with corpus linguistics. Overemphasise the given and we are stuck in the mud. Overemphasise the new and we are rudderless in an ever-increasing stream of gadgets. (The metaphor-count climbs higher.)

Exploration of the relatively new frontier of corpus analysis and corpus-informed materials continues (and will continue) to be a phenomenon in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) publishing and teaching. We wanted to include at least one contribution that showed how corpus tools might be used in teacher education, but wanted a contribution that, rather than simply blowing a trumpet for corpus analysis, took a balanced view of what a corpus approach might offer for a particular group of trainee-teachers. In some ways, Özbilgin and Neufeld’s account (Chapter 11) shows mixed results. The immediate benefits of their corpus-based approach (iCorpus) in their teacher training context are relatively limited, but such innovations need a longer term view and careful consideration and this is the case they make. What is valuable about Özbilgin and Neufeld’s account is the way they consider not only the innovation in the teacher-training context but also how it relates to the experience of teacher trainees in their first years of teaching.

PRESETT has to have one eye on the context in which novice teachers are going to be teaching; the other eye can focus on the immediate PRESETT context. Increasingly both contexts may benefit from taking account of the possibilities for personalisation and flexibility that blended learning offers. There is increasing interest (for example Ng 2009) in how face-to-face and online activities can be combined in a blended approach. Hanington and Ellis (Chapter 7) provide an account of making optimal use of both the face-to-face and the virtual environments available to them in the pre-service training context. However, they also know that viable and meaningful learning with technologies is something that teachers will be increasingly expected to be comfortable with in their future classrooms, as they will need to integrate network-based learning into their students’ language learning. Hanington and Ellis provide an account that shows how practitioners need to continue to devise and revise an approach in order to make it usable by pre-service teachers. Perhaps more importantly, the extent to which such an approach is usable is individually determined and so there is a focus on personalisation and choice in trying to cater for the course participants’ diverse needs.

Again, returning to the relationship between context and ICT, it is widely held that short pre-service teacher training courses are limited in what they can achieve (for example Brandt 2006). There are problems in providing a learning experience that is more than an introduction to presentation, practice and production (PPP) and/or the basic principles of communicative language learning (CLT) and there may be differences in the level of knowledge about language that individuals bring to the course. Given the particular problems of such a short introductory course, we thought it important to include a contribution from a practitioner who is trying to innovate in such a context. Gakonga's solution (Chapter 14) is to develop an online grammar course. This is an interesting innovation from two perspectives. Firstly, given the daunting problem of lack of contact time, she provides a potential solution before the training begins. Secondly, knowledge about language (KAL) is usually dealt with as a process of transfer of knowledge to the group, whereas this is a process that is both personalised and interactive. PRESETT teachers have flexibility of access, they can revisit the site ([www.elt-training.com](http://www.elt-training.com)) and they also have opportunities for interaction. This contribution puts the focus on freely available web-based tools (such as *myBrainshark*) and, because such resources are numerous and ever-changing (see Stannard 2012), we see it as inevitable that PRESETT teachers will have to get used to using and evaluating such online tools.

Like Gakonga, Kurtoğlu-Hooton (Chapter 1) provides an example of how a particular web-based tool (Pebblepad) provides flexibility in course design. In her case the innovation concerns using this tool to facilitate reflection outside the traditional face-to-face seminar. This chapter shows a process where both PRESETT teachers and teacher educators have to make accommodations and changes in practice as they adapt to teaching and learning via a digital technology (an e-portfolio based system). Kurtoğlu-Hooton's account makes clear that although a particular new tool or technology may have potential, it is the modifications and tweaks in its implementation and use that make it an appropriate methodology for the featured context.

Having considered our more ICT/multi-media-oriented chapters, we also discounted the idea of organising the book around some kind of technology-cline. A sequence of increasing technological sophistication might be seen as carrying unintended implications as to what is 'advanced' or not. It would, moreover, run counter to our position above on the located nature of significant innovation.

Nevertheless, we remained face-to-face with the stubborn linear reality of language. The particular significance of linearity in this instance is that the chapters have to be placed in a sequence, even though there is no obligation on the reader to approach them in this way.

As we considered this final organisational challenge further, we reconsidered our initial purposes. We wanted worldwide coverage, with high quality chapters that came from a range of settings and dealt with different aspects of innovation that might potentially be transferable to other PRESETT contexts. We had an abundance of high quality articles, some of which we had to lay aside because that part of the world would otherwise be over-represented. We had an abundance of geo-cultural coverage,

which meant that we were able to select only high quality articles. We have also gathered together a variety of distinct voices, the differing perspectives and accents of which we find enriching.

In the end, we decided, with apologies for our final guiding metaphor, to follow the light. Our sequence takes you from context to context across the planet on which we live, as it turns daily before the sun. With regard to our collection of PRESETT innovations, and following our admittedly Eurocentric, Greenwich-timed map, we begin our day with our introductory chapter here in the UK. We then pass to Nur Kurtoğlu-Hooton down the road in Birmingham, where she works with student teachers from as far afield as our chapters themselves. We then head generally westwards, following the sun out over West Africa, across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas, pushing on across the Pacific Ocean to the great Asian landmass, down through south-east Asia and across the Indian Ocean to the Arab Gulf before reaching the Mediterranean Sea and so on to Europe, before returning once more to this North Sea island that we two editors call home.

We offer our sincere thanks to the authors for their innovations and their commitment to the communication of them. We hope, too, that many of the innovations that were evident in the papers we could not include will continue to flourish and will find a platform for other practitioners to have access to them.

To our readers, we hope that you find these chapters informative and enjoyable. More than that, we hope that they will stimulate your own continuing innovations. Should that be the case, please note that the email addresses of all authors are provided and all have said that they would be pleased to continue the interaction started here.

It would be very satisfying if our current collection could provide a catalyst for further sharing of ideas, materials, tools, approaches and perspectives on PRESETT internationally. It is obvious that this is a somewhat neglected area of teacher education, but one which is extremely important and which has committed and innovative practitioners.

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# Innovations in PRESETT



# 1

## Providing ‘the spark’ for reflection from a digital platform

Nur Kurtoğlu-Hooton

*Because I have realised that if we get to grips with it and make use of it, um, it does empower you.*

Tendai, an MA student

### Context

#### Educational

I teach in a UK university, on an MA Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programme which requires the student teachers to undertake supervised teaching practice. As part of such practice, they plan their lessons (working in groups of three to four as well as individually) and teach their own lesson while being observed by their peers and the supervising tutor. They then receive feedback on their lesson, initially in the form of oral feedback held in groups, followed by written feedback given individually.

The group oral feedback sessions provide the medium for the student teachers to construct meanings jointly based on their reappraisal of their previous knowledge and beliefs in the light of new information and experience. This is in the spirit of sociocultural theories of learning, for example Singh and Richards’ (2009: 202) view that ‘human learning is emergent through social interaction’ and that events and processes, and the way they interact, shape the individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. During the oral feedback interaction, the student teachers are expected to reflect back on their own as well as their peers’ lessons.

Reflective practice is an established but underexplored feature of teacher education programmes (see for example Zeichner and Wray 2001, Korthagen and Vasalos 2005, Ghaye 2010), and is often taken for granted. However, if student teachers are expected to reflect, we teacher educators need to facilitate the reflection process and promote opportunities for them to engage in reflective conversations. During oral feedback, student teachers are often given opportunities to reflect on their teaching experiences and answer tutor questions such as:

- What did you like about your lesson?
- What would you have done differently and why?

- What did you like in your peers' lessons?
- How did it feel to be teaching the students today?
- What would have improved Activity X?

These questions provide an opportunity for reflective talk, but this is often informal and haphazard (see Clarke 2008). To maximise the benefit, it is useful to approach the work 'in a systematic and considered way' (Clarke 2008: 164). In this chapter I share my experiences of how my colleagues and I helped enhance student teacher reflection.

### Technological

Several years ago I was introduced to a piece of software, PebblePad, which involves the use of an e-portfolio based system. According to Joint Information System Committee, UK (JISC) an e-portfolio is 'the product created by the learner, a collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning' (2008: 6). Initially I experimented with the system for personal and professional development (e.g. by setting up action plans for writing a journal article). As I discovered that the tool had not only provided me with affordances but had also supported my own thinking about theoretical concepts in my work, I began to consider whether I could use the software within my own teaching. I decided to devise a programme of study that involved the student teachers in building an e-portfolio while studying on the teaching practice module. In this chapter I will explain how this online software was set up as a medium for learning (as part of a project funded by the Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice – CLIPP), and how it created the environment for the student teachers to receive formative feedback on their portfolio tasks from tutors. I will highlight the perceived learning benefits of this digital medium, drawing on my own evaluation as well as the student teachers' perspectives. In addition, the responses to portfolio tasks will be exemplified in the chapter. Tutor comments on student teachers' responses will also be shared to show how scaffolding was provided in encouraging the student teachers to build their e-portfolios, as they responded to the portfolio tasks that they were set by the tutors.

### Innovation

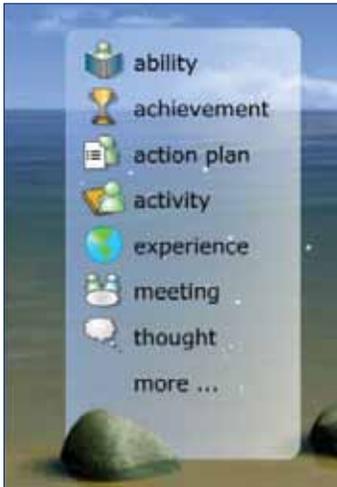
Perhaps a good starting point is simply to show what the digital site looks like when logged in:

**Figure 1:** My PebblePad landing page

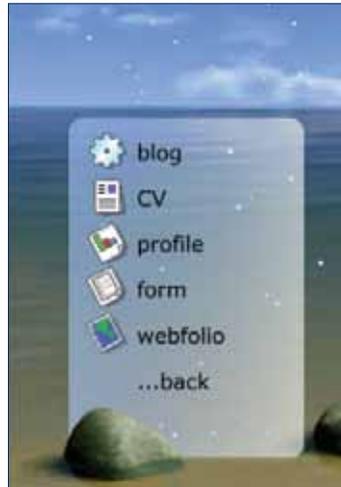


When clicked on, the 'create new' pebble enables the user to choose what PebblePad itself calls 'assets' (see Figures 2 and 3 for these assets):

**Figure 2:** Assets listed under the 'create new' pebble



**Figure 3:** More assets



Most of the interface is user-friendly but, as with any other such technology, several training sessions were held to ensure the student teachers were comfortable enough to use the system. I also had some informal one-to-one sessions with my two colleagues who were working with me on the Teaching Practice module at the time. It was essential that all three of us used PebblePad in giving formative feedback to student teachers so that none of them felt disadvantaged.

Using the menu, I created a 'webfolio' (titled, Learning from Teaching Practice – see Figure 4) to provide structured learning for the students. Each student was given access to it via an invitation to join through a password-protected link.

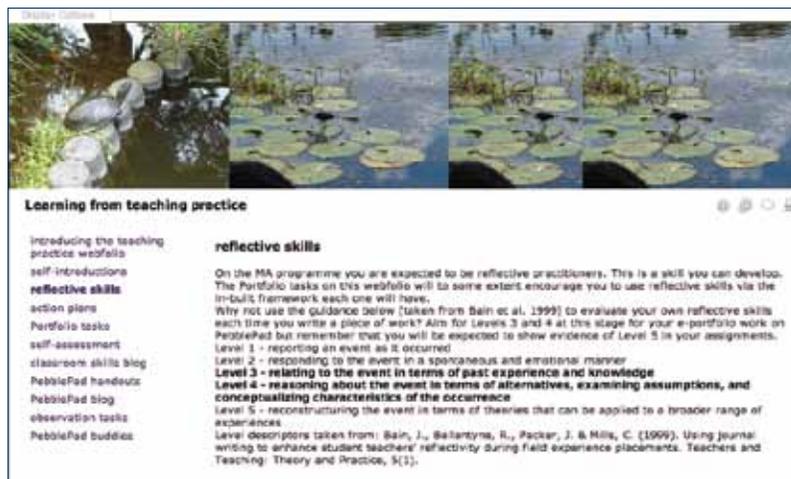
**Figure 4:** The webfolio landing page



The webfolio involved many different pages, some of which consisted of information for the students, while others were blogs to which students could post messages.

The menu on the left-hand side of the page shows links that are clickable – links to essential information. Some of these (for example the portfolio tasks) were continuously updated during the course. The link titled *self-introductions* gave each student teacher the opportunity to say a little bit about themselves and what they are hoping to achieve on the teaching practice module. The *PebblePad* blog linked to a page which encouraged them to post any technical queries they may have concerning the platform. The link called *reflective skills* contained the following information:

**Figure 5:** Reflective skills page



I have found these levels of reflection useful in my teaching as I can point out to the student teachers that there is an important difference between the levels in terms of how reflection is exhibited in each one. The differentiation among the five levels makes it clear that as a person moves up levels he/she shows higher level reflection skills, for Levels 1 and 2 are clearly descriptive whereas Levels 3, 4, and 5 show that the individual can make connections, provide reasoning, and theorise practice.

The *classroom skills blog* was a link set up for the group to have a platform for discussion. Here's a short excerpt from the blog:

**Figure 6:** The classroom skills blog

**Checking whether students understand a task**

Can anybody give me advice on how to check whether students understand my instructions?  
I have so far tried:

- giving an example
- asking one student to explain task to other students.

Do you have any other suggestions?

1 Comment / Post Comment

---

**Classroom management**

It is really an important aspect for students to study in good environment and atmosphere...  
My question is 'How can we make classroom atmosphere better?'

5 Comments / Post Comment

---

**Stopping students talking in their own language**

How would you stop students from using their own language in class without humiliating them?

3 Comments / Post Comment

---

**Time management :-@**

What could a teacher do so as to improve time management? What should he/she consider when designing the lesson plan? Do you know any book / journal / chapter of book relevant to this topic?

2 Comments / Post Comment

This group blog encouraged the student teachers to seek guidance from one another and the tutors on issues related to classroom skills. For example, one teacher asked a question about ensuring a good classroom environment (see second entry titled 'classroom management' in Figure 6 above) to which five comments were written. These comments ranged from a student teacher comment:

*Have a look at Suggestopedia. This method may help you in your classes. After you have read about it, you will have the chance to adapt some aspects of it to your own teaching practice. You can get some ideas of how to decorate your class.*

to a tutor comment:

*See Hadfield's 'Classroom Dynamics'. Amazon blurb: Explores the problems teachers have managing groups, and suggests [...] Location in Library: 3rd floor 407 HAD.*

I have so far given a brief overview of what the e-portfolio-based platform looked like and exemplified the different assets of the webfolio, including the links that were set up within it. I now wish to proceed to focus on and exemplify what the individual webfolios contained.

## **Individual webfolios: an environment for teacher–tutor interaction**

The teachers were encouraged to build their own teaching practice webfolio (i.e. their own e-portfolio) by responding to the four portfolio tasks they were set. In this section I will exemplify student teachers' responses to portfolio tasks and demonstrate how these tasks might have encouraged them to reflect.

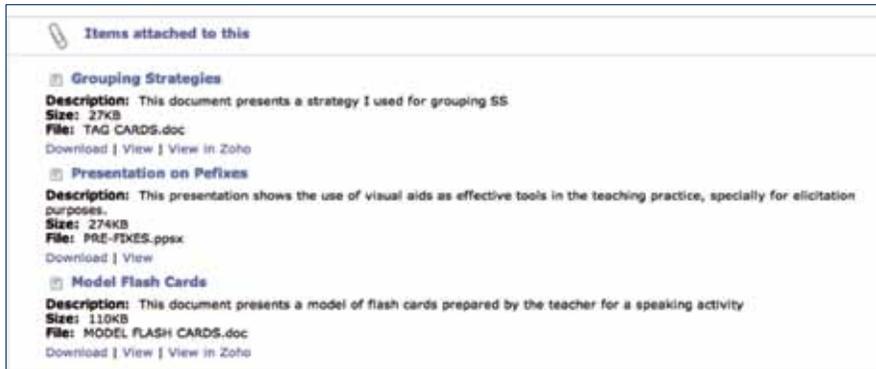
The first portfolio task asked the student teachers to select their own area for focus for critical incident analysis, the second one focused on contextualisation of a lesson, the third one, on error correction. The final portfolio task was a self-assessment task encouraging the teachers to reflect back on all the four teaching practice sessions they had taught up to that point (see Appendices 1–4 for these tasks). The questions set in a task (see for example, e-portfolio task 1 in Appendix 1) provided the stimulus for the student teacher to provide attention to detail in their own lesson, thus fostering reflective opportunities. In effect, each of these tasks served as an *e-tivity*, the term Salmon (2003: 3) uses to describe any framework that enhances 'active and interactive online learning by individuals and groups'. She notes that e-tivities involve the use of what she calls, the 'spark' – a small piece of information, stimulus or challenge – to which participants post a contribution, engaging in an interaction which involves responding to the postings of others. This is followed by the act of receiving feedback or critique from an 'e-moderator' (see Salmon 2003: 1).

In the study reported in this chapter, the content of each portfolio task provided the spark for promoting student teacher reflection. They articulated their responses using the classroom skills blog for group learning and the 'Gateway' (within the system) for posting their responses to each portfolio task (one task per week). The tutors provided them with written feedback and critique online (via the Gateway) sharing their comments with them through private access.

The Gateway enabled all three tutors to see the work that had been submitted but the student teachers could only see their own work and any tutor feedback on their task. The collection of student teacher responses to tasks made up the student teacher e-portfolios.

The software allows e-portfolios to be presented with links to documents such as PowerPoint presentations, Word documents, and audio files. Figure 7 shows an example of how a student teacher attached some evidence to her portfolio task in support of what she had discussed in her response to the task, i.e. the e-tivity:

**Figure 7:** Attaching items in response to portfolio tasks



In effect, these attached items serve the same role as appendices in a paper-based portfolio, the differences, however, being that multi-media can be used. As everything is linked together and digitally stored and logged, every asset the user has created or has been sent by others (for example tutor feedback) remains in the individual's e-portfolio system. The assets can be accessed from any computer, any place, any time by the user so long as that user remembers their log-in details. As a user, I can log in even now and still see all the different assets I have created over the years; some shared with other users, some created for my purposes only. I can also see all the e-portfolio task responses submitted to the Gateway by the MA students, and the tutor responses where the tutor has decided to share their response not only with the individual student teacher but with other tutors too. This digital archive of all assets is a powerful element of a platform such as the one that is discussed in this chapter.

## Evaluation

### Semi-structured interviews

Nine student teachers (half the group who had taken part in the project) volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences of using the digital platform. These nine were also the ones who had completed all the portfolio tasks (while others had chosen to do only some of them, possibly owing to the fact that the tasks were not compulsory and used only for formative feedback). Below, I discuss the findings from the semi-structured interviews that were conducted. Student teachers' perspectives are reported, followed by my own evaluation. The names that appear in the transcripts are the student teachers' real names as all those interviewed preferred their actual names to be used in the reporting of the research.

All three extracts show that the e-portfolio tasks have been a useful and worthwhile experience for the student teachers. In Extract One, Tendai, from Zimbabwe, is sharing her initial reservations about the use of the software, and her prejudices concerning the amount of work that would be involved. She then explains how her views changed once she realised that what she was doing was empowering and liberating (lines 14–15):



### Extract Three: 'a space that pushes oneself to meditate'

1. **Liling:** it is a helpful bridge, bridging channel between the tutor
2. and the student, as well as the student and the other
3. students, and the second thing is that, it is a space
4. that pushes oneself to meditate on a certain issue.
5. Sometimes a person does not have the time to see, to
6. meditate, and it's a good time for meditation.
7. [ ... ]
8. Well, um, personally I think that sometimes people
9. become indifferent to the things that they are very
10. familiar with. I mean after we have finished the teaching
11. practice, um, it is quite likely that the past memory will be
12. forgotten in a short period of time, but if, like as a trainee
13. teacher we were given a task, it gives you, again, an
14. encouraged view to think more about that kind of issue,
15. and you also need to think about the related concepts in
16. teaching field, or the related theoretical understanding in
17. that field, and I think it is very beneficial for a person to
18. develop their professional understanding, like in our case,
19. it should be crucial.
20. **Nur:** Ok. Would you say, in this case, that meditation is
21. like reflection?
22. **Liling:** Yes.
23. **Nur:** Ok, so you would use it synonymously.
24. **Liling:** Yes.

Lines 12–19 in this extract point up the ways in which the tasks encouraged reflection as she notes that she is likely to forget details of what happened in a lesson but focusing on a task encourages her to remember the details as she reflects on the experience.

All nine student teachers who were interviewed highlighted the benefits they had achieved in using the digital platform. Apart from the extracts discussed in some detail above, their comments also included:

*I learned something I can take back to my country.  
If I write notes I can lose them but if I write them in PebblePad, I can log into my  
PebblePad any time and all my assets are there.*

Hafizah, from Malaysia

*I designed it how I wanted to have it. I think it's nice that you can personalise it.*

Lisa, from Germany

As users of the platform, the student teachers had experienced some problems, too. These problems tended to be of a technical nature: in particular, the connection time during the day being slow in the halls of residence, and the server sometimes being busy. Some student teachers also noted that they would have liked more participation (from their peers) in the classroom skills blog.

This section has exemplified student teacher perspectives as revealed during the interviews. I will now discuss excerpts from student teacher e-portfolios, and share tutor comments that were given to some of the student teachers.

## e-portfolios and tutor feedback

Extract Four is a student teacher's response to the first portfolio task. I share it here as an excellent example of how a student teacher can engage in reflection if given the opportunity. As is outlined in Appendix 1, the task comprises five questions, which the student teachers were encouraged to answer:

### Extract Four: 'I made a big effort but...'

1. *What was the problem exactly?* The lack of proper listening material and the low levels of student attendance.
2. *How did you handle it?* I recorded the dialogue myself but [ ... ]
3. *Why did you handle it the way you did?* Because I thought that the dialogue was the only choice I had left, so I stuck to it. As for classroom management in general, I let my emotions take over when I should have thought of ways to create a more intimate atmosphere, something that would get students talking. [ ... ] I struggled to bond with my students to no avail and failed to see other possibilities.
4. *Would you handle it the same way again? Please explain:* Maybe I should have broken the rules a little bit. I should have talked to the rest of the team to let them know that I would be changing the listening activity. [ ... ]
5. *Has the incident changed your view of how to go about the practice of teaching?* Definitely. My confidence is much lower though. I made a big effort but emotions are hard to control sometimes. I know problems like these happen in real life but it's a bit rough to face them at the very beginning. [ ... ]

(Note: the task response was shared via the Gateway and was accessible 'online only' by the tutors.)

In her response to Questions 1, 2, and 3 above, we see the student teacher reporting on an aspect of her classroom experience, detailing what had happened, then explaining what her feelings were at the time of the teaching as well as afterwards. In Bain et al.'s (1999) classification of reflective skills (see Figure 5) these can be classified as Level 1 and Level 2 of reflection, respectively. In answering the fourth question, the teacher reasons about the event by considering alternatives, as she considers the possibility of breaking rules. She picks this up from her view that she found it difficult to bond with the students and was unable to see other possibilities. In her response to the final question, she draws parallels between her classroom experience and real life encounters. The extract is a clear example of how prompts enable the student teacher to work at higher levels of reflection.

I shall now share here what the tutor had written to the teacher in response (see Extract Five). The tutor commends the student teacher for her honest analysis and summarises for her the two issues that seem to arise from the teacher's reflections. Such a summary is useful firstly because the teacher may not have been aware at the time of writing down her reflections what issues she was pointing out.

The tutor summary acts as a dialogue between the tutor and the teacher, encouraging that teacher to reappraise what she herself has decided to share knowing that there is someone who listens and someone who can offer their own perspective. The 'dialogue' is intended to help shape the teacher's thoughts and learning (in keeping with sociocultural theories of learning). The tutor's encouraging comments throughout the piece of feedback is reassuring, hopefully for the student teacher herself, too:

#### **Extract Five: 'when we think about teaching in this way'**

Subject: **Re: Critical Incident Analysis TP1**

Posted by: **Fiona Copland** on 19 November 2008 08:36

1. [ ... ] you highlight two issues in particular – nerves and materials.
2. You come up with solutions to both and [ ... ]
3. You show that you are focusing on the learners' experience in this
4. reflection and how your performance impacted on this.
5. I think when we think about teaching in this way, we are
6. more likely to provide useful learning experiences as we focus on
7. the learner rather than on ourselves. [ ... ]

### **Relevance**

Atherton (2012), in his highly provocative talk on 'The Limits of Reflection', portrays what he himself calls 'a partisan account of reflective practice'. He asks questions such as 'How do you get (beginning teachers) to think reflectively?' and 'What does a teacher have to do to fail reflection?', and argues that reflection cannot be scaffolded or taught. He then somewhat paradoxically adds that it can be facilitated. His exemplification comes from contexts that involve summative assessment and there is no acknowledgement that reflection might be scaffolded to help learning or that it can be used as a basis for formative feedback.

My experience as a teacher educator has shown me that reflection on teaching practice can be scaffolded and enhanced with tasks such as the ones in Appendix 1–4. In this chapter, I have shown how the tasks were integrated within a digital platform, and how the student teachers were guided to build their e-portfolios. When I initially set out to integrate the software within the teaching practice module, I did not know what the reactions of the student teachers would be. On seeing that the majority of them were showing engagement with it, I decided to extend the uses of the software to a subject specific module that I was teaching on the MA programme. I asked the student teachers to use the action plan asset within the software to send me their assignment outlines so that I could send them formative feedback. This worked well as it encouraged an asynchronous dialogue on the screen, and the thread of interaction was all visible on one page, making it user-friendly both for the tutor and the student teacher.

All students and staff at the university have PebblePad accounts. The project reported in this chapter has explored how a digital platform such as PebblePad could be integrated within a teaching and learning environment.

## Self-development

As I was experimenting with the software, I often found myself comparing this medium of learning with paper-based approaches. A paper-based portfolio brings together different kinds of materials (texts, photos, pictures, posters, etc.); an e-portfolio based system can do the same but it is also fluid (see Hughes 2012) and vibrant, and has flexibility (not to mention easy storage) as the user is able to link the different assets he/she has created, having the option digitally to attach assets to other assets. I have considered whether there are differences between reflecting on the screen and on paper. Salmon, who has written widely in the area of e-learning, claims that communicating through text on the screen is a genre in its own right (2003: 6), that the activity of writing on the screen 'can be playful, liberating and releasing' (Salmon 2003: 7), and that 'emotions can surface and be expressed' more easily, with the involvement of emotions helping to promote reflectiveness (Moon 2000, Salmon 2003). In my experience so far, I have found both media can promote reflective practice, but I will give it further thought in the future.

Of course, there is also the issue of time. In teaching practice feedback there is only so much time. With e-portfolios one is given extra time, and more thinking space. I have learned that an e-portfolio-based system such as PebblePad provides a dialogic teaching space (Hughes 2012) enabling the teacher educator and student teachers to have reflective conversations individually and with one another; that student teachers can share information with one another; and that teacher educators can engage in different kinds of reflexivity, using the platform, should they wish to.

The value of formative feedback stood out for me as another learning experience I encountered as a result of the project. From the student teachers' point of view formative feedback is no doubt a useful experience. Hafizah, sums this up nicely when talking about the e-portfolio tasks:

### Extract Six: 'we can self-assess and you can give comments'

1. **Hafizah:** Yes, they are useful, because we tried to get feedback by
2. ourselves, like tried to answer most of the questions, so
3. that it really reflects and re-evaluates our teaching
4. practice, I think in a way, you know, we can self-assess
5. and you can give comments on how well we assess
6. ourselves.

At the end of the project, I decided to compare some of what I had written as formative feedback with that of my colleagues. As the feedback was digitally stored I was able to access most of these via the Gateway. Searching through the tutor feedback made me realise that my colleagues were doing something I did not seem to be doing myself. They were not only summarising their understanding of the student teacher's response, but also reformulating what they understood the student teacher to have written and/or highlighting for the student teacher the main points that seemed to come out of their response. I will not exemplify this here as such an example was discussed in Extract Five above. Furthermore, when I looked back at the kind of formative feedback I had written to the student teachers, I did not find any instances where I had challenged student teacher beliefs or any that

involved helping them make connections. I selected these as areas I would work on in developing my own feedback-giving skills. In reflecting on colleagues' feedback, I realised that if the medium of formative feedback had been that of a paper-based portfolio I might not have seen the kind of responses my colleagues had written and would have therefore missed out on the learning opportunities their feedback offered to me. The longer I had the chance to reflect on the kinds of feedback, the more I realised that opportunities could present themselves for me to engage in a kind of reflexivity – one that Edge (2011) calls 'expansive reflexivity' – finding opportunities to recognise patterns and making connections to previously unrelated areas of my experience. Indeed earlier this year I was engaged in the setting up of a closed group 'Postgraduate TESOL Programmes' Facebook page for current MA students and alumni, in the hope that such a platform could be used for the sharing of TESOL issues, ideas, conference news, comments, achievements. There is potential (and demand from the users) for posting TESOL related issues for discussion. This is an area I wish to pursue further in my role as teacher educator.

In reflecting on the study I also realised that working with an e-portfolio based system requires a culture shift not just by student teachers but by the teacher educators, too, as each has to adapt to teaching via a digital technology. New digital technologies and multi-media are 'transforming our classrooms from spaces of delivery to spaces of active inquiry and authorship' (Weis et al. 2002: 153), but we need to bear in mind that 'technology, without the pedagogy can be a fetishised and empty learning and teaching experience' (Hughes 2008: 438).

So can student teacher reflection be scaffolded? Can it be done purposefully via an e-portfolio based system that uses a dialogue-based pedagogy? I think you know what my response would be by now.

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my colleagues Fiona Copland and Muna Morris-Adams, and our MA students for taking part in this study. I am also indebted to Tim Hooton, Anne Wheeler, and Rowena Yeats, for providing technical support and expertise throughout the project.

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## Appendix 1

### e-Portfolio Task 1: critical incident analysis

Think back to some incident or development that happened in class which you had not planned for, for example:

- a disciplinary problem
- an unpredicted error made by a student
- an unexpected lack of understanding
- a decision on your part that you would have to teach the lesson differently from what was planned, etc.

What was the problem exactly?

How did you handle it?

Why did you handle it the way you did?

Would you handle it the same way again? Please explain.

Has the incident changed your view of how to go about the practice of teaching?

*Adapted from Wallace, 1991: 14*

## Appendix 2

### e-Portfolio Task 2: contextualisation

Listen to the recording of your lesson. Choose one particular activity. State briefly what the activity was and at what stage of the lesson it took place. State its aims.

Reflect on whether/how you contextualised the activity. Comment on its effectiveness.

Write it as an 'experience' within PebblePad and aim to submit it a few days before your next teaching practice.

Please send your experience to the Gateway.

## Appendix 3

### e-Portfolio Task 3: error correction

Listen to the recording of your lesson. Choose one instance where there was either some teacher or peer correction. Transcribe the example you have chosen and analyse it paying particular attention to:

- a. how the error was corrected
- b. whether it seemed appropriate to correct it, and why.

If there was no example of error correction in your lesson, reflect back to identify where some correction could have taken place, and comment on:

- a. why it would have been necessary to correct
- b. how it could have been done.

Although you might prefer to use your own framework when you present your response, you might find the following structure useful:

Transcription of the example:

Analysis (how/whether/why):

Reflection on what was done:

## Appendix 4

### e-Portfolio Task 4: Self-assessment task

This task can be found under the section titled Professional Activities, available online [www1.aston.ac.uk/lss/staff-directory/hootonn/](http://www1.aston.ac.uk/lss/staff-directory/hootonn/)

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# 2

## Formative assessment for a pedagogy of success

Mawa Samb

### Introduction

I considered it appropriate to write this chapter as my career path enables me to cast a critical eye over a system that nurtured my first steps and then saw me grow from a high school teacher in the Senegalese countryside into a teacher trainer at the Centre Régional de Formation des Personnels de l'Éducation (CRFPE) Dakar, which is the centre in charge of the initial and in-service training of teachers in Senegal's capital city, where I have worked since May 2011. I also teach part-time at the university, in the Faculty of Arts, and in one language institute in Dakar. In addition, as president of the Association of Teachers of English in Senegal (ATES), which involves teachers at all levels, I can humbly state that my perspective is that of a frontline teacher who has been exposed to realities and practices commonly shared in the profession, while also being able to see the different facets of English Language Teaching (ELT) in my country from various angles.

This chapter is mainly motivated by a desire to shake the baobab tree (a symbol of power and longevity), so as to break down the *status quo*. In fact, we teachers have been failing students on a large scale without any deep questioning of what is going on. The truth is that the easiest and most comfortable way for us to cope with our elitist system is to treat our students as unfit dunces. Fortunately, some women and men, really committed to ELT and to restoring fairness and equity, have been challenging the system by questioning its mainstream practice of failing most students in local and national exams.

Our tests and evaluations simply reflect our teaching procedures, which ignore learners' needs. Far from being learner-centred, and even though communicative language teaching (CLT) is theoretically what is in our national curriculum, ELT in our country has not broken with the routine work of reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar found in textbooks used as curricula. However, aware of all these discrepancies, some teachers started speaking out, addressing decision-takers and main stakeholders to demand urgent reforms. In this chapter, I try to show how national policy, international co-operation, and individual efforts have been involved in bringing about an innovative response, which is finding expression in the introduction of formative assessment.

## The context

### National

Senegal, formerly a French colony and independent since 1960, is located in West Africa. It has about 12 million people with around 50 per cent of them under the age of 16. Senegal's official language is French, while the major spoken languages are Wolof, Pulaar, Serer, Jola and Mandinka.

Senegal is a poor country frequently affected by recurrent droughts that badly harm its economic situation. Around 60 per cent of the population live from agriculture, which has been suffering since the 1970s from a lack of seeds, investment, and efficient policies, leading to a massive rural exodus. The other major contributing issue has been the indebtedness of our country to various sponsors (especially the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the huge budget deficit that has prevented it from repaying those debts. Consequently, fearing a default, the Bretton Woods institutions decided to impose structural adjustment policies on Senegal, with the aim of reducing public expenditure. These measures had a negative impact on educational policies as, with money supply severely constrained, the state stopped recruiting teachers, building schools, and training teachers.

### Educational

We inherited our educational system mostly from the French and all state schools use French as first language, with English as a second or third language. Traditional education in Arabic also exists alongside this system.

Even though the Senegalese State has decreed the slogan 'Education for All' through the programme called *Education Pour Tous* (EPT) – itself a component of our Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) that encourage poor countries to get all their children into school by 2015 – there remain great educational discrepancies for various reasons. In remote rural areas, access to education is very difficult and, in those areas, many girls are denied the right to education for cultural or religious reasons. Indeed, Senegal, a country where over 80 per cent of the population are Muslims, has many people who intentionally refuse to take their children to 'French Schools' for fear that they may become uprooted or adopt attitudes contrary to their Islamic faith. Instead, those parents take their children to Koranic schools where they study only the Holy Koran and can stay until the age of 12. At that point, only a minority of them join French-medium schools, where mismatches of age and previous curriculum cause further difficulties. Literacy, defined as being able to read and write in either French or Arabic by the age of 15, is estimated at around 40 per cent.

Our education system, despite serious lacks in all areas, ranging from classrooms, to teaching materials, to teachers, is also highly elitist in that most students drop out of school due to the entrance exams that they must pass to go to the next level. Indeed, at each level of our system, students must take exams to move from primary to middle school, from middle to high school and from high school to university. To make things worse, in the poorer areas, many students cannot even pay for registration fees in state schools that do not exceed US\$20 a year. In other cases, students have to walk five kilometres to go to the nearest school. Furthermore, when the rains start, some schools stop their activities as, during the rainy season that may

arrive in May, those schools built as 'provisional shelters' can't survive the rains and stop their school year early, even though it does not officially finish until June or July for students taking a national exam.

### **Overseas expertise**

Partnership with overseas governments and institutions plays an important part in the development of our educational endeavours. In a country like Senegal, it is important that we acknowledge support when we receive it, without being naïve about the relationships involved.

In the 1990s, training was organised for teachers of English throughout the country in collaboration between the English Teaching Office (Bureau d'Anglais) and the British Council. This involved sending many teachers of English to the UK (for summer courses, or on one- or two-year programmes in British universities), so that many ELT experts nowadays are graduates of those training opportunities. On top of that, the British Council helped the Ministry of Education both in terms of logistics and didactic materials and also helped many teachers get free registration in its resource centres. The British Council also flew an expert from South Africa to Dakar in order to help facilitate the revision project of our curriculum. In fact, after sponsoring the project revising our national curriculum for over a year, the steering committee, of which I was a member, applied to the British Council for extra support for assessing the job done. That expert helped stabilise many of our concerns, in addition to providing us with an outsider's view, which was essential to us.

However, five to seven years ago, with shrinking budgets, the British Council reshaped its policy by focusing mainly on other issues, such as gender and leadership. The first consequence was that it stopped sending teachers to the UK for training. It then reduced the British Council Summer Courses (run in collaboration with the Ministry of Education) progressively from 14 days to one week and then finally eliminated them. It then stopped funding ELT workshops, and instead, started charging teachers for training on its premises. Actually, it became very business-oriented, allowing little space for ELT activities. Then, two years ago, there was again a new change in its policy and it resumed funding ELT activities to the great satisfaction of all ATEs teachers and the ELT community in general. Once again, the British Council is hosting ELT seminars on its premises and has recently appointed a language adviser in Dakar in addition to sending one ATEs representative to the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) conference in Britain. So now, the hope of many teachers is to keep up with that new orientation of the British Council as it can greatly help cope with the training needs of many teachers.

We have had similar experiences with the American Center, which has been instrumental in the training of many Senegalese teachers and teacher advisers through the programmes that it has offered in co-operation with the National Commission for Teacher Training (CNA) and the English Teaching Office. In addition, we have had the Fulbright teacher exchange programme that has encouraged teachers to be more active in their local professional groups (known here as *cells*). Members supervise English clubs and get more involved in the lives of their schools

as, during selection interviews, they are asked what they have done for their schools. The American Center has also offered many workshops and seminars to teachers of English, not to mention sending each year one ATES representative to attend the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) conference in the US. ATES's main sponsor for all its activities involving professional development has been the US Embassy, through its Regional English Language Officers (RELOs), who tour all the regions to support teachers in remote areas, provide them with materials, and accompany guest speakers.

Today, while two generations of English teachers in the period under review have received some excellent training, it is a reality that, with budget cuts, our main two donors have decreased their support and diminished drastically the number of teachers that are trained or sent abroad. All that has resulted in a greater number of new teachers having no training or immersion in the target language at all. It is to be hoped that opportunities from our main two donors are going to be increased to allow future generations of teachers at least to enjoy the expertise of people who have benefited from such scholarships or training and who must somehow pass on what they have learned. Even here, a further risk is that most of those who received training overseas are no longer active, or may be retiring in one or two years. Furthermore, even if training offered in Senegal by experts from the US or UK is very important, it is a reality that two or three days of training can't be compared to a one- or two-year period of study abroad.

As I have said, we recognise the support that we receive and are grateful for it. At the same time, we also recognise that, as in the case of the Bretton Woods institutions already referred to in the economic sphere, this support will necessarily follow the perceived interests of the countries providing it, whether cultural, economic or otherwise oriented (Kumaravadivelu 2006). It may be reduced, or diverted, or taken away. For this reason, our main responsibility is always to work towards identifying our own aspirations and developing our own paths towards them. In this, we see a major role falling to ATES.

### **ATES conventions and workshops**

ATES organises its own annual convention and English language day (ELD) events involving all decision-takers in the field of ELT, pulling together teachers, inspectors, teacher trainers and language experts from other parts of the continent. Whenever ATES has an ELD, it invites guest speakers from abroad who share their expertise with the audience. Over the years, typical themes developed have been: *New changes in ELT*, *New issues faced in ELT*, and *Evaluation of national exams*. From the wishes and concerns that emerged from the audience, all stakeholders agreed that new changes were crucial to remedy the great evils our system was confronted with. Let us look at some of these more closely and then see how one focus of attention emerged and has been pursued.

## Issues faced in teaching and learning

### Untrained and burned-out teachers

Schools are now being built again all around the country, and mainly in rural areas that badly need them. However, most teachers in remote areas either do not know about the existence of the revised Senegalese curriculum, or, if they do, it is not accessible to them, or, in many cases, they don't know how to exploit it. Furthermore, most teachers are reluctant to move to remote areas and, if they are new recruits posted there, they have no experience. On top of that, the government appoints teachers who have not had any pre-service training, in order to cope with the popular demand for teachers in their areas. The direct consequence of all this is that large numbers of new teachers have not received adequate training. Even those few who have received training (sometimes minimal) are not well equipped to deal with the needs of their students who, most often facing a lack of textbooks and other learning resources, have no access to adequate teaching materials.

So, while one sees the well-meant, optimistic meaning behind Professor JoAnn Crandall's statement about countries south of the Sahara during the 2005 Dakar Symposium co-organised by TESOL and ATEs: 'Resource-challenged? Yes. Under-resourced? Not really. Because teachers and students can be used as best resources despite the lack of adequate materials', it remains the case that only teachers with good training have the ability to use themselves and their students as resources in order to fill the gap left by the lack of materials.

However, as far as long-serving, burned-out teachers are concerned, they simply ignore the curriculum and proceed with their former lesson plans in order not to break the routine of their work.

### Large classes and assessment

Over the past ten years, the government of Senegal has decided to make access to middle schools easier by accepting many more students as having passed the entrance exam. In addition, the government has opened many more schools in remote areas in order to enable students not to have to travel too far to school. The direct consequence is that classes that previously did not exceed 50 students are nowadays crowded with over 100 students per class.

Whether in rural areas or in cities, class sizes are very important and impact directly on the quality of the teaching/learning process, as most of our classrooms were not conceived to welcome such great numbers of students. More specifically, the structure of our classrooms, designed for a maximum of 60 students, cannot be made to accommodate over 90 students satisfactorily simply by having them share desks in threes instead of twos.

One major consequence of this overcrowding is that many teachers are reluctant to assess their students, or, if they do, they mostly avoid using communicative tests, as these would increase their workloads. Thus, mechanical tests are often organised once or twice per semester and, usually, the production components (writing or speaking) are neglected, while listening can be totally ignored.

### **Exam failures and repeated classes**

It is becoming increasingly clear that in our system we are developing what could be called a 'pedagogy of failure,' meaning that our teaching/evaluation process fails large numbers of students. Even if classes repeated by students sometimes amount to over 35 per cent (students dismissed by the system are included here), a great question has remained unanswered:

*Who should be held accountable for all these failures?*

Students? Probably not, because they are more victims than anything else. Teachers? How many teachers in our educational system are 'testwise' in the sense of having any familiarity with such basic principles as validity, reliability, practicality, washback, transparency and authenticity? I would say, few of them. Because of the scarcity of initial training, in-service training and regular workshops or seminars, most teachers are not sufficiently well trained to design tests that comply with acceptable standards. Do those that master the mechanics of testing comply with the regulations? I have my doubts.

It is urgent to reverse these trends somehow in order to save the coming generations of learners. The area of testing, for reasons identified above, seemed to offer one way forward.

## **Developing a response**

### **First exposure to modern testing techniques and concepts**

My first real exposure to assessment and testing took place in September 1998, thanks to the partnership between the British Council and the Senegalese Ministry of Education. That opportunity enabled all participants to familiarise themselves with concepts and better understand testing techniques that had remained vague for most of us and were new for some. The facilitators shed light on the use of the four skills and the necessity to integrate and implement them through language. It was all the more enriching as we were exposed to badly designed tests and we had to edit them, applying the concepts of reliability, validity, washback, practicality and discrimination. That session not only helped me design better tests and adjust my teaching (I wasn't a teacher adviser then), but it also raised a great sense of awareness. The two facilitators from the UK did a tremendous job by shedding additional light on CLT through exposure to the new approaches and various ways of learning/teaching/testing techniques. That 15-day seminar helped change the behaviour of many teachers who, after unconsciously failing many students on the grounds of uncommunicative and ill-constructed tests, now felt the need to deepen their knowledge of testing.

Several years later, in May 2010 (when I was a newly appointed itinerant teacher adviser), we teacher advisers organised a two-day seminar to discuss how to implement new techniques that we had learned about and which might have a great impact on learning and teaching strategies. Following a series of debates, analyses and exchanges among teacher advisers under the supervision of the National Teacher Adviser, it emerged that a key solution to our concerns could be formative assessment (FA). Consequently, teacher advisers themselves developed the tools and resources necessary to prepare a three-day workshop in that area. All trainers reflected on the inputs, concepts, principles and methods relating to FA in order to enable us to have a smooth workshop. I discuss the most important of these below.

## **Concepts, principles and methods**

### **Definition and need**

The trainer module workshop on FA attended by all trainers nationwide and co-organised by the Ministry of Education and CNA, was held at the American Center on 7–9 March 2011. We defined formative assessment as assessment ‘used during the course of instruction to provide feedback to the teacher and learner about the learner’s progress toward desired educational outcomes’ (Trainer’s Manual 2010: 6). In the same vein, Davidson and Mandalios (2029: 49) assert that, ‘formative assessment, which is conducted during a course, is more likely to have a positive washback effect than summative assessment’. To back this up, I do believe we have experimented with various ways and strategies in our system, mostly related to summative assessment, and they have proved in general to be unsuccessful. Currently, in our system, the requirement is two tests per semester plus an exam. So, to wait for the result of tests that may happen once every two months can penalise the learner and the teacher who may need to adjust at every level of the process. So, formative assessment appeared to be a concept that could change sustainably the attitudes toward teaching, learning and testing. Not that formative assessment should be viewed as a ‘miracle recipe’ but rather as a trustworthy indicator signalling performance as well as lack of performance.

### **Continuous process**

At present, students who fail one test in the semester might be made to repeat the whole class, as they have only one opportunity left to reverse the trend and get a pass grade. That process can be more than challenging for students. So, giving just one or two tests for the whole semester is far from being enough. The new approach to assessment involves a continuous process in classroom activities, with new and regular assessment tools needing to be devised and implemented. Hence the necessity for teachers to use alternative ways of testing, despite the large size of classes that could demotivate some teachers because of the grading involved. From regular homework tasks that could be peer-graded to class projects in pairs or groups, there can be a wide range of activities liable to give students opportunities to be assessed on a multi-level basis.

## **Integrated skills**

All specialists in ELT agree that skills should not be taught separately. As Thiam (2011: 161) puts it, 'Integration rules the world.' Moreover, as Coleman (2011: 277) states, 'The heart of improvement lies in the classroom and this requires focused and sustained effort by all parts of the education system and its partners.' Therefore, to be in compliance with our curriculum, skills integration was greatly encouraged with a contextualisation of all situations to enable students to understand better. It follows from all this that, just as our teaching should be communicative, so should our assessments be. In fact, as mentioned earlier, reading comprehension activities and mechanical tests pervaded the system and did not offer a wide range of activities to the learners, to an extent that change was greatly needed. As we learned from Baker (1989: 68):

*The first feature of psychometric approach which Oller challenged was the neglect of context. He noted the isolation of language elements for testing purposes inevitably resulted in the testee being asked to process samples of decontextualised language.*

Formative assessment offered us a chance to respond to such problems that we recognised with techniques that we were learning.

## **Changes in practice**

Reports compiled by government bodies echo the sentiments of many ESOL teachers that it is high time to adopt new behaviours and practices. As Gottlieb, cited in Chapelle and Stoyanoff, (2005: 2) states:

*Rich descriptive information about the processes and products of learning cannot be gathered by conventional teaching and testing methods.*

Consequently, teachers need to implement many ways of assessing their students with a view to targeting the learner-centredness goal that is key in any CLT class. Besides, continuous assessment provides students with a wide range of possibilities, including self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, interviews, essays and group projects. These last can be really innovative as they can be carried on outside the classroom environment, can be stress-free and can favour co-operation, interaction and increased enthusiasm.

## **Learning from general education**

Formative assessment is being introduced across our education system, from primary to high school levels, and many subjects have been implementing it. When done well, as it occurs during a course, it enables learners to get both detailed and comprehensive feedback. Davidson and Mandalios (2009: 49) recommend that, 'as a general rule, one formative assessment each week should be sufficient.' Using it once a week can really help both the teacher and learner. Formative assessment is also based on the fact that it is always student-centred, as it tries to incorporate learners' concerns in the teaching/learning process. Therefore, planning has a very important role involving a lot of preparation from the teacher, who works to provide authentic tasks, in line with the curriculum, that foster students' learning and enable the monitoring of both their performances and pace of progression.

## Implementation

The following section makes clear some of the procedures that help teachers become more aware of options for implementing formative assessment. It makes clear some of the activities that teachers can take into their classrooms and also provides comment on handling the training sessions themselves.

In order to fully implement the formative assessment module, the trainer can organise a pre-test in order to 'test' basic testing concepts (for example testing, evaluation, assessment, formative assessment and summative assessment). This helps establish teachers' current level of understanding and also gives the trainer the option of drawing on and developing the teachers' understanding of key testing concepts. It works well if you move from individual definitions to group definitions and then finally to the whole class agreeing on a definition.

Over a period of time, I have found that there are four key activities that can usefully be introduced to the teachers in the sessions. The teachers then go and implement the activities in their own classes before coming to the next cell meeting to share their feedback with their peers. This feedback includes their students' reactions. This is not a one-off event and works best if teachers can go and try out the activities and then come back and share their experience with the whole group.

### Activity one: two stars and a wish

- Students are given a card on which there are *two stars* (where learners jot down two aspects of a peer's performance that they appreciated most) and a section with a *wish* (where the learner identifies improvements his/her peer needs to make).
- It is advisable to provide a sheet so that there is a record of the two stars and one wish. This gives the teacher the option of collecting the copies and looking for examples to share with the whole class.
- After asking volunteers to tell the whole class examples of their stars and wishes, it is a good idea to put up the sheets around the classroom and encourage a mingling task where students read and talk about the others' stars and wishes.
- Not only does this encourage co-operation, interaction, reflection and confidence, it also helps learners assess their own work as well as the work of their partners without hurting anyone's feelings.
- It is also student-centred, helps learners give constructive views and enables the teacher to share the grading part of the job with students.

### Activity two: 'one-minute paper'

- The main idea here is providing students with an open-ended question (for example, what sequence of the lesson did you find most difficult? What did you like most/least in the class today?). The questions need to be open-ended ones so that they promote reflection and discussion.
- This question needs to be answered within a minute (although in reality this can be anything from one to three minutes). It is usually conducted at the end of a lesson.

- Students are asked to fill in a sheet with their answer to the open-ended question. It is best for these to be anonymous, as this gives learners free rein to express their own views.
- After collecting all the sheets, the teacher uses examples to open discussions.

**Activity three: ‘comment only marking’:**

- The main point here is that using ‘comment only marking’ can help build learners’ confidence.
- Once the students have completed the task, they receive only comments on the work they carried out (i.e. no grade is given to the student).
- In feeding back to the students, the teacher concentrates on identifying areas for improvement and how these improvements can be achieved.

**Activity four: ‘traffic lights’:**

- This activity is used to revise the content of the class. It is a visual means to show understanding and encourages self and peer assessment. It enables the teacher to double-check whether a concept is understood or not.
- Traffic light cards (red, amber and green) can be used so that they raise a green card if they understand a point, an amber one if they aren’t quite sure and a red one if they don’t.
- You can encourage students to draw smiley/unhappy faces to show how they feel about aspects of the session.

These four activities can be modelled in the initial training sessions. For each of the four activities above, time needs to be allowed to discuss whether these activities are likely to be effective. It is a good idea to ask teachers to predict possible implementational challenges using the following prompts:

- procedure to follow
- duration of the activity
- advantages and drawbacks
- resources used to achieve it
- feasibility in your context and possible challenges.

Once teachers have had a chance to try them out with their classes, the trainer can provide further opportunities for the teachers to reflect as groups on both the handling of the four activities and more general assessment issues (for example when to use formative assessment, its frequency and the outcomes expected from it or assessment issues faced in teachers’ context). This gives them a chance to reveal aspects of their context before moving to diagnosis of the problem and possible action points.

**Experimenting with formative assessment: passing it on**

Following our training on the formative assessment module, all teacher advisers were asked to cascade these ideas in their cells, which involve more than 15 schools in a given area that the trainer covers. As indicated previously, the members of

these professional groups may have had no prior professional training and may be complete novices with regard to experience. With the two cells for which I am responsible, my first focus was to check who was testwise and to clarify some key guiding principles before tackling formative assessment. We also went through the characteristics of good tests and went on to raise awareness of the necessity of incorporating formative assessment into our learning activities ranging across grammar, writing and vocabulary.

After my presentation, I used the ‘traffic lights’ and ‘one-minute paper’ techniques to check understanding. This greatly impressed the participants, who realised how in the course of a lesson they could assess the message being delivered. I do believe that never before had I received such enthusiasm from my cell members, who not only interacted a lot but also yearned to experiment in this way in their classrooms. I assigned them a technique to try out in each school and come back to the next cell meeting with feedback on their uses. The results of those who experimented with them proved to be extremely impressive, as some stated that they had noticed a greater interest from students and they also felt less exhausted as most activities were run by students. They also acknowledged that this approach offered another way for them to vary their assessments and give better opportunities to all students, who thereby can perform better on a more regular basis.

### **My own classes**

Formative assessment has reshaped my own way of working. As a matter of fact, my only regret is that I no longer teach in high schools, which could have benefited a lot from this new approach. Still, I have the relief of seeing that other teachers in my school are trained and can validly implement these ideas for the good of the whole school system. Moreover, I teach in an institute where I experiment with such techniques as ‘two stars and a wish’ and ‘traffic lights’ and they are really popular. I notice from students’ reactions that they are not familiar with these instruments and that they are warmly welcomed. In the same way, I am able to readjust my teaching after the feedback received from students. I can then change my lesson plans for the future accordingly. In addition, at the university where I teach translation (French into English) as a part-timer, the implementation of formative assessment has improved the group atmosphere and many more students initially supposed to be working in other groups come to join mine.

### **Transferability**

As Bolitho (2012: 34) points out: ‘... the key starting points for change initiatives in education remain largely the same as ever: the curriculum, methodology, assessment, and materials.’ My view on the transferability of formative assessment is clearly that it can be achieved anywhere. It requires, undoubtedly, a lot of planning, but makes the work of the teacher much easier as it enables her/him to know what students can and can’t do. Therefore, in any teaching/learning process, formative assessment can be implemented, provided that it is aligned to the curriculum of the country or region. In addition, students get more involved as interaction increases with its implementation, so that the learning process is learner-centred and thereby reinforced. Formative assessment paves the way for a pedagogy of success by giving students a say in their learning and, equally importantly, training them to conduct

self-assessment. So, in all levels of education and in all parts of the world where these principles of learner involvement and autonomy are thought to be important, formative assessment can be successful, as it facilitates a learning/teaching process that can be co-shared between students and the teacher.

### **The effect on my own development**

Personally, bearing in mind all criteria relating to assessment, I have grown more critical and yet become more lenient with my grading. So now, whenever I design a test or an evaluation, all my focus is on learners trying to apply all the strategies and techniques acquired through my training. At an earlier time, when I was in the US, I could not understand why after some weeks, many students started dropping my French classes. Eventually, I had to readjust my grading and test format to keep my students. I understood then that if students failed, it was partly the teacher's fault, while in Senegal, we would rather solely blame our students. Now I try as much as possible to 'spread the good word' in order to empower many more teachers, of current and future generations, in the use of tests and evaluations.

### **Conclusion**

Change and growth are correlated in some way and my perception is that, thanks to the formative assessment module, many more teachers in all areas of Senegal can be given tremendous opportunities. My main regret is that I know a lot needs to be done to raise awareness nationwide about assessment. Therefore, to cover the whole country and cascade all assessment techniques, it is vital to train those who have not yet been trained in order to minimise failure rates. Our 'ELT Republic' has been endangered for a number of years now by its citizens, who keep relying a lot on an excessive use of grammar through lack of context, discrete items and isolated sentences (Thiam 2011: 159f). Thereby, a pedagogy of failure has pervaded the system for ages. Now, with the introduction of formative assessment, all stakeholders can help build a real pedagogy of success that can be echoed by remedial projects that have been recently initiated as a follow-up to what we sometimes call 'the pioneer module' on formative assessment. We proceed hopefully.

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## Mawa Samb

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# 3

## IMMERSE: an institutional approach to pre- and early-service teacher development

Leonardo A Mercado

### Introduction

In view of the English language's continuous expansion, there is an ever greater need for highly qualified English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers. Yet, finding fully trained, qualified professionals can be a daunting task. In fact, it is quite common to find many ESL/EFL teachers around the world who did not originally pursue formal studies in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), but rather migrated from other fields and learned their practice 'on the go'. This definitely holds true in Latin America, where the lack of qualified professionals in the job market often obliges language teaching institutions to hire and work with persons who are eager to enter the field but who do not have the formal education and extensive pre-service training that we read about in UK and US sources (Crandall, Ingersoll and Lopez 2010; TESOL 2011; British Council 2012; Cambridge ESOL 2011).

Certainly this represents an enormous challenge and even a potential problem, but it also sets standards towards which we can aspire. Therefore, how do former lawyers, accountants, business managers, and others who did not originally consider TESOL as their main career track get qualified without investing the same amount of time required of those who did? How are they provided with the knowledge and tools needed to succeed once they have opted to enter the profession? In this context, *IMMERSE* is a multi-tiered, comprehensive professional development model that allows such persons to become highly competent language teaching professionals in a relatively short period of time while immersing them in an environment that promotes success, thus creating the conditions under which they are likely to stay in the field.

Located in Lima, Peru, the Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano (ICPNA) is the largest bi-national centre in Latin America, with tens of thousands of student enrolments per month and a teaching faculty of close to 600 full-time teachers. Most of those entrusted with implementing ICPNA's academic study programmes originally came from other fields but decided to 'give English teaching a shot' because they felt they at least had the language proficiency to try. In response, *IMMERSE* represents a powerful professional development alternative that brings out the best in such

teachers and sustains the Institute's ability to fulfil its enormous social responsibility. It should also be noted that it provides an essential foundation by which ICPNA is able to maintain high academic standards for its faculty as it currently pursues international accreditation. As a prelude to its application, the Institute has all prospective teacher candidates go through a rigorous pre-selection process. Once it has been determined which candidates have the potential and are motivated enough to assume the challenge, they begin their participation in *IMMERSE*.

## ***IMMERSE*: from 'background X' to English language teacher (ELT) professional**

The *IMMERSE* experience begins with a super-intensive 45-hour New Teacher's Seminar that engages prospective teachers of various backgrounds and degrees of experience. According to institutional statistics, for example, approximately 73 per cent of the new teachers who reach the seminar have very little or no previous teaching experience. Moreover, recent data shows that up to 65 per cent of any particular cohort of prospective teachers is made up of Peruvians who are returning from the US after many years in view of the recent economic downturn, with excellent language proficiency but no teaching experience whatsoever.

At this stage, the challenge for the Institute is to effectively teach the bare essentials so prospective teachers can succeed regardless of how much they may or may not already know. The seminar should also establish the general framework to which these ICPNA teachers-to-be will adhere once they are hired. As such, the seminar represents a microcosm of ICPNA's official professional development and teacher training programme. A strictly pragmatic perspective on teaching concerns itself with the actions and activities carried out by teachers as they do their work in the classroom (Freeman 1998). In this regard, the pre-service New Teacher's Seminar seeks to provide participants with a basic understanding of the types of learning events they will participate in and facilitate most frequently. A considerable amount of time is spent on the 'what' and 'how' to teach as they relate to the four main language skills (i.e. reading, listening, speaking, and writing) as well as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and communication strategies. Yet we also keep in mind that beliefs and thinking processes generally underlie how a teacher actually goes about promoting language learning in the classroom and that often teaching can and should involve a process of exploration and discovery (Richards 1994, Freeman 1998, Gebhard and Oprandy 1999). Therefore, even at this very early stage, we try to instil in new teachers the need to reflect on the 'why' and 'why not' along with their general beliefs about teaching. As a result, the pre-service New Teacher's Seminar provides a learning experience that encompasses a myriad of needs, as the following chart illustrates:

**Figure 1:** Summary of pre-service New Teacher’s Seminar activities and tasks

Practice	Purpose	Teacher’s role	Assessment/Delivery
Lesson planning/ decision making chart	Thinking about decisions we make	Planner; assessor; self-learner	Lesson plans and post-lesson decision chart; report on outcomes/ presentation
Presentations on content (e.g. teaching the language skills, assessment, corrective feedback) and demos	Conceptual understanding of ‘what’ and ‘how’ to teach	Learner	Comprehension assessment/technology (i.e. PowerPoint), videos
Microteaching	Hands-on, experiential learning	Co-learner	Performance assessment, feedback from peers/class demos
Class observation/ practice teaching	Learning by example	Apprentice/mentee	Mentor report; feedback from real students
Trainee handbook	Knowledge enrichment; practical help for seminar demos	Learner	Comprehension assessment; demo classes/book (e.g. Harmer, J, 2010, How to Teach, Pearson)
Discussion circles	Exchanging ideas	Peer	Oral grade/group work
Reflective writing	Exploring practices, beliefs and previous experiences	Thinker/self-learner	Reflection papers (non-evaluative, only formative)

As we can see above, much takes place during the 45-hour pre-service seminar. Lesson planning, for example, is introduced as an essential practice by way of presentation, models, and templates. It is then expected from each of the participants for every microteaching class carried out during the seminar. Whenever a prospective teacher performs, everyone else has an opportunity to compare what their peer did with what they would have done themselves. The performing prospective teacher must later complete a decision-making chart as well as a report on outcomes in order to compare what actually happened with what was originally intended in the lesson plan. This is meant to promote reflection, self-learning and learning from others within Richards’ (1994) framework of teacher decision-making: planning decisions as they prepare lessons, interactive decisions on-the-spot during an actual lesson, and evaluative decisions to assess outcomes.

New teachers also have much to learn from the other seminar activities and tasks. Content presentations and lesson demos help them understand the ‘what’ and ‘how’ to teach. They engage in apprenticeship by being assigned a mentor teacher as they observe a real class throughout the month they participate in the seminar; this allows them to see how the concepts, principles and strategies that are discussed in the training are actually put into practice in a real classroom while they are also being given the chance to try them out with real students. Professional reading at a manageable, introductory level helps prospective teachers prepare for their microteaching sessions and learn more about teaching and learning in general. Discussion circles consolidate their understandings by providing the means through

which they can converse with their peers about key topics and issues. In addition, they are asked to engage in reflective writing by submitting short essays that describe their previous learning experiences with teachers as well as the kind of teaching professional they would eventually like to become. The pre-service seminar concludes with feedback from the participants, including a survey that ascertains how comfortable they are now with the essential aspects of teaching as opposed to when they began the pre-service seminar experience.

Once new teachers are hired, they begin *IMMERSE*'s next level: New Teacher's Transition to Success. The first month is crucial because the academic branch manager must make certain that the new teacher engages in various forms of professional development from the outset in a way that does not seem overwhelming, a task that requires careful timing and an appropriate sequencing of events. The Academic Department initially prioritises those initiatives that most represent instructional support systems as well as those that promote the new teacher's induction into ICPNA's existing community of ESL/EFL professionals. This is because the prospect of finally entering the 'real' world of English language teaching can be overwhelming. It fulfils a similar purpose for more accomplished teachers who come to find ICPNA quite unique from any previous institutional experience they may have had.

As their first professional development initiative, new ICPNA teachers are assigned two official mentors to work with throughout their first six months. They are seasoned ESL/EFL professionals, each of whom partakes in the Mentoring Programme for New Teachers on a voluntary basis for three months. The lessons learned from observing mentor classes, discussing reflective teaching practices, reviewing decisions and lesson plans, and establishing a professional relationship that is almost always long-lasting all provide new teachers with a source of invaluable support that is much needed at this very early stage in their careers. As a pre-requisite, potential mentors are first screened to determine how willing and able they are to fulfil such an important role and then they are trained for the task (Diaz-Maggioli 2004).

After their first three months, new teachers begin their participation in their respective academic focus groups, a professional development alternative and teacher support system that can have as many as 15 members at any one time. These groups meet once a month to address issues and challenges that may arise in the classroom, the 'research topic of the month' (Pella-Schwartz 2012), and other academic concerns. For communication, there is a simple protocol – the first of many to be used throughout *IMMERSE* – in order to promote what Brown Easton (2009: 8) refers to as true professional discussion rather than the kind of common, informal talk you may find in a faculty lounge. New teachers are grouped together with peers who have been at the Institute for less than a year. The sessions are flexible, so they can be divided into two when it is not possible to meet on a single occasion for one hour and 45 minutes. An academic supervisor serves as a 'focus group facilitator', playing the role of a concerned, supportive promoter of professional development rather than a stringent evaluator or overzealous monitor; this does much to increase teacher 'buy-in' and creates the conditions for a trusting relationship between

teacher and supervisor. The academic supervisor also works with group members extensively in a coaching role outside of these meetings. The following is a breakdown of a typical session:

**Figure 2:** Breakdown of a typical *academic focus group* session.

Activity/section	Description	Intended outcome	Time
Reports	Up to two teachers report on the results of the action plans from the previous session.	A sense of shared accomplishment as a result of collaboratively crafted solutions.	15 min.
Issues and challenges	Up to two teachers cite an issue or challenge that is relevant to them. The other <i>academic focus group</i> members listen quietly first and then ask questions in order to obtain as much information as possible. This section concludes with an agreement on a collaborative action plan for these teachers whose results will be reported at the following session.	A sense of community is built over the course of the year. Real solution alternatives are proposed based on collaborative discussion and experience-sharing. Follow-up provides closure.	45 min.
Research topic of the month	Teachers engage in academic discussion on a topic that was chosen the month before. Teachers come prepared after reading articles and book excerpts that were either provided by the <i>focus group facilitator</i> or found on their own.	Teachers expand knowledge of a key issue or topic that is pertinent to the work they do every day. It also serves to promote professional reading as teachers explore these issues and topics on their own.	30 min.
General information	Teachers receive general information as well as academic recommendations from the <i>focus group</i> facilitator that are related to instructional practice. These pointers are generally based on focus-group specific class observations and student survey results.	Teachers are informed about new developments. They also receive practical advice from the academic supervisor that is most familiar with their work and performance.	15 min.

In general, the academic focus group at ICPNA is a forum for collaborative enquiry and support among teachers regardless of their experience. It serves the role of what Richards and Farrell (2005: 51) call a ‘teacher support group’ where they ‘get to know their colleagues better and begin to function as a community of professionals rather than individuals working in isolation from each other’.

As additional support, new teacher peer observation is introduced after new teachers have completed their six-month mentorship. The concept is adapted so that it takes place only among new teachers at this stage in their development, which creates a special opportunity for empathy, mutual support, and collegial bonding. The academic department provides guidance on how to engage in peer observation through the academic focus group supervisors, who suggest articles, books, and videos. New teachers are trained to work with a simplified procedure, document template, and protocol for communication.

Collaborative Action Plans come as a result of formative class observations or peer observations. Their sole purpose is to provide support without the pressure of undergoing an evaluation. Needs and concerns are identified, sample lesson plans are provided and discussed, 'exploratory' lesson plans are devised, and results are tracked to determine progress and further action.

Thus far, we have seen opportunities for professional development whose main focus is teacher support, but other initiatives are more geared towards enhancing knowledge and skills. For example, new teachers participate in a year-long series of New Teacher Workshops that are designed to consolidate the essential concepts, principles, strategies and techniques that were introduced at the pre-service seminar. These sessions are standardised and offered on a continuous basis throughout the year at all of our branches, usually at the end of each calendar month. Eventually, all new teachers at ICPNA complete the series regardless of when their employment began. The workshops follow a basic but highly effective training format (Mercado 2012): lead-in or presentation that provides the rationale; 'how to', which is what they are expected to do to reach a certain learning goal; modelling or demonstrating the strategy or technique; practice or having the trainees do it themselves; assessment or checking comprehension during or immediately after the session; and application, which is making certain afterwards that the new teacher can apply what was learned to a real classroom setting. Other important competency-based initiatives include:

1. *Self Observation*: new teachers are encouraged to video record at least one of the classes they are assigned each month during their first year. They are provided with a self-assessment checklist, which is later used during their individual, personalised sessions with their academic focus group supervisor to review and discuss.
2. *Introductory Online Training Course*: new teachers are asked to take an online course that provides them with a comprehensive walk-through of the course book series they use in the classroom. They have six months to complete the course, and it is non-evaluative. This helps them become thoroughly familiar with the main teaching tool at their disposal.
3. *Professional Reading*: new teachers are asked to work with *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory 2nd Edition*. (Ur 2012). The contents are linked to the new teacher workshops that are held throughout the year. They still hold on to the book they received at the pre-service seminar as a complementary reference book. Rather than adopt an entirely prescriptive approach, discussions are more focused on how the new teacher understands the content's meaning and applies it to classroom praxis, taking into account what Edge (2011: 71) calls the 'meaning-creation of the exploitive reader'. This ensures a high degree of relevance and a closer tie to what is actually taking place in the classroom.

4. *Teacher Development (TD) Meetings*: These are composed of international speaker conferences, 'ICPNA TESOL Events', or local training initiatives for the entire staff of teachers, depending on the calendar. ICPNA makes an enormous investment each year to bring in world-renowned speakers. It is hoped that they will learn from practical ideas and apply them, acquire new knowledge about key issues and topics, recycle understandings of what they may already be familiar with, and get food for thought that encourages them to explore content on their own. ICPNA TESOL events are conferences in which fellow teachers and supervisors present in a concurrent session format throughout the day. Teachers are free to choose the sessions they wish to attend.
5. *Methodology for EFL Teachers Course (MET)*: Although this six-month, 160-hour blended learning course is normally offered on a paying basis to the general public, new teachers with no experience can take it at no cost.

Needless to say, these activities, in sum, can come to represent a powerful conglomeration of professional development opportunities that cater to a diverse set of new teacher needs and preferences, which can be summarised in the table below:

**Figure 3:** Summary of initiatives that comprise *IMMERSE* during first year

Initiative	Benefit	Length of Commitment
Academic focus group	Community-building	Permanent, ongoing
Mentoring	Apprenticeship	Six months
Self observation	Autonomy	One year; ongoing option afterwards
Peer observation	Community-building	Three to six months; ongoing option afterwards
Professional reading	Knowledge-building	One year with specific titles; ongoing at the teacher's discretion afterwards
Online learning	Knowledge-building	Six months
New teacher workshops	Knowledge- and competency-building	One year with specific series; ongoing based on needs afterwards
Formative class observations	Mentoring, coaching and apprenticeship	Permanent, ongoing
Collaborative action planning	Apprenticeship, mentee, co-learner	Permanent, ongoing
TD meetings	Knowledge- and competency-building, professionalisation	Permanent, ongoing
Methodology for EFL Teachers (MET) Course	Knowledge- and competency-building, professionalisation	Six months (can be completed during their second year depending on workload and teacher's decision)

At the end of their first year, it is hoped that new teachers will come to the conclusion that the field of English language teaching is a professional pursuit in which they wish to remain. Beginning their second year, *IMMERSE* expands its offerings, making it possible for teachers, at no cost to themselves, to take Cengage Learning's ELT Advantage online courses, which are endorsed by the TESOL International Association. Also, they are expected to choose from a Professional Development Menu, a unique ICPNA compilation which offers a total of 35 alternatives, including action research, teaching portfolios and journals, academic presentations, writing articles, and 'co-operative development' partnering (Edge 1992; Edge 2011).

As teachers gain experience and tenure over the years, *IMMERSE* expands in scope to meet their expectations while maintaining a reasonable work-load. More novice-oriented initiatives are dropped, and new options are offered in accordance with the teacher's expectations. This ensures that all of the teachers at the Institute maintain a clearly defined standard.

According to Gebhard and Oprandy (1999), the ultimate goal of professional development is for teachers to gain a true awareness of who they are as ELT professionals by exploring their beliefs and practices. Then development is more likely to occur if they are offered multiple opportunities to process their teaching. *IMMERSE* does just that from the very beginning of a new teacher's experience at ICPNA. Then it is hoped that after their first year, ICPNA teachers will be well on their way to establishing their own sense of identity as language teaching professionals. Certainly, *IMMERSE* offers innumerable opportunities for teachers to benefit from over the course of their careers.

### **Metamorphosis? Assessing outcomes**

As we can see, *IMMERSE* is comprehensive and highly diverse in its offerings for professional development. The initiatives are gradually phased in and carefully sequenced so as to avoid the possibility of overwhelming new teachers and thus contributing to their leaving the field before they can get a full sense of what a professional career in English language teaching has to offer. However, no matter how carefully designed and well-executed a model or programme may be, success is measured by results. Therefore, how can we determine whether *IMMERSE* actually leads to a transformational process by which former managers, real estate agents, lawyers, social workers and others become true English language teaching professionals?

All professional development should ultimately lead to improved teaching and learning (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001). Observing classes and measuring student satisfaction are a couple of ways to determine whether the process has been successful. Consequently, language programme administrators should ask questions like, 'Are new teachers applying effective strategies to facilitate student learning and performance? If so, can they do it systematically and consistently?' As well as other questions that are more focused on the learners, such as, 'Are students satisfied with the learning experience? Is it in line with what they expect?' Equally important, however, is whether new teachers actually make it to the end of their first year of employment, how they actually feel about the work they do and the working environment, and whether they are still willing at that point in time to commit

to a long-term process of becoming a true ELT professional. In the end, we will corroborate that *IMMERSE* has been a very successful model in addressing these concerns.

As stated earlier, ICPNA holds an enormous social responsibility in Peru because of the number of students who study English at the Institute. Although new teachers are generally assigned two groups or classes during their first three months, they may actually be asked to teach three or four straightaway, depending on the time of year. The registration fee, although reasonable, is considered much higher than other alternatives on the market. Thus, students have very high expectations with regard to the quality of the learning experience at ICPNA. With this point in mind, surveys play an all-important role in ascertaining student satisfaction. Question items focus on aspects of instruction, the learning environment, and perception of service quality. There are a total of ten items, and the responses are converted to a zero per cent to 100 per cent scale. According to statistics for the last two years, new teachers who complete their first year of employment have an average score of 85.75 per cent, which is based on multiple surveys held throughout that period of time. This is significant when one considers that top performing teachers who have been at the Institute for more than five years average 94.12 per cent in their appraisals, a difference of only eight percentage points. Thus, to many thousands of our students, it would seem that our new teachers – most of who did not pursue a formal education or receive adequate training before coming to the Institute – meet their expectations quite well. This clearly reflects *IMMERSE*'s ability to prepare our teachers to deliver quality instruction.

As stated earlier, however, what is perhaps equally, if not much more, important is the new teachers' willingness to stay in the field. Performance takes a backseat when one considers that becoming a fully competent ESL/EFL professional takes time. Therefore, it does not mean much for new teachers to be performing well if they are not happy with what they are doing and do not wish to continue. Fortunately, in ICPNA's case, it would seem that most new teachers do want to stay on and maintain TESOL as a long-term line of work. In a recent survey, teachers who had recently completed their first month, first year and third year of service selected the following responses on items relevant to our topic:

**Figure 4**

Question	Response	%	%	%
		First month	First year	Third year
How helpful was the New Teacher's Seminar in getting you started in this profession?	It provided me with the knowledge and skills I needed to get off to a good start.	94.0	89.2	64.7
How do you feel at this point about continuing in the field?	I am convinced this is what I want to do and will continue to work as a teacher of English.	89.7	92.7	77.8
How do you feel about being an English teacher in general?	I feel happy as a result of the work that I do.	100	100	100

As further evidence of the great degree of acceptance, here are some testimonials from new ICPNA teachers about *IMMERSE* and what it has offered them:

*My first experience as an English teacher was terrible and quite disheartening. I almost gave up on it altogether. But I tried once more at ICPNA, and it's been completely different. They gave me the training I needed to succeed in the classroom from the very beginning. Now I am really happy with what I do.*

Gabriel Dawling, one year

*Before ICPNA, I had never received any formal training or professional development. The pre-service New Teacher's Seminar was my first such experience. It was excellent and got me off to a solid start. I am about to complete my first year at ICPNA with the firm conviction that this is what I want to do from now on. I look forward to growing professionally and even having the chance of becoming a supervisor one day so I can help other teachers just like I was helped.*

Javier Martinez, one year

*My first mentor told me 'you're not only going to observe me. You're also going to observe other teachers. You're going to take a little piece from each one and form your own character'. I feel like I've accomplished just that! Now, I look forward to waking up and teaching every day.*

Lucero Villar, one year

*At ICPNA, there's no way you can't be helped or get advice. The programme is demanding, but it's better that way because you learn more.*

Franco Cook, one month

*IMMERSE has helped me gain a lot of confidence, and my students can see it. I love what I do, and I want to stay in this field! If I didn't have all of this support, I probably wouldn't feel this way.*

Ana Lucia Cardenas, eight months

*I had never received training like this before. Now, I know how to learn on my own. Video recording my classes, for example, has helped me enormously.*

Juan Carlos Sanchez, one year

In terms of actual statistics, a recent institutional study determined that 89 per cent of new teachers will still be working with us after their first year. The same study found that an average of 69 per cent will continue through their third year. This contrasts strikingly with figures in other countries. In South Korea, for example, the attrition rate can be as high as 50 per cent among ESL/EFL teachers after working for just one year (Kang 2008); when compared to turnover for general education in the United States, which can reach 15 to 20 per cent per year (Ingersoll 2003: 15), ICPNA's figures are still convincingly positive. What could explain the difference? A commonly held view is that teachers often leave the field for lack of support and professional development opportunities, while published studies seem to indicate that effective mentoring alone can do much to stem turnover rates among beginning teachers (*National Center for Education Statistics* 2011; Asención Delaney 2012). *IMMERSE* provides that and much more, offering new teachers the opportunity to receive ongoing support, training, and the means to learn through reflective practice. This represents an effective way of retaining them, allowing the Institute to have enough teachers at hand to meet ever-rising student enrolments and the consequent need for new branch openings.

### **An adaptable, versatile model**

*IMMERSE* has many components that can be applied in their entirety or partially, depending on the needs of a particular organisation and its faculty of teachers. The initiatives can be instituted or phased out as circumstances and expectations change over time, making it a highly versatile model that can be adapted to any setting. It should be applied gradually, giving new teachers the time to learn at their own pace and adapt to ever more demanding requirements. Its target is new teachers initially, but it eventually expands to include all faculty. The model aligns itself with the needs and conditions that characterise many language teaching institutions around the world, so it is certainly possible to use it outside of ICPNA. Yet, there are certain key principles and issues academic programme administrators and teacher educators should keep in mind before they consider it for their own institutions.

The very first step before applying *IMMERSE* to your own setting is to conduct a needs analysis. As Richards and Farrell (2005: 17–18) point out, a professional development programme should be tailored to reflect the needs of the organisation as well as teachers, with goals and objectives that have been set in as horizontal a fashion as possible; at ICPNA, for example, this is done collaboratively on an individual basis and shared on an institutional level each year. Once needs have been identified, *IMMERSE* should be made to attend to them completely. In the end, there should be elements that reflect all of what Wallace (1991) calls the 'craft', 'applied science', and 'reflective' models of professional learning. In other words, teachers should be provided with the means to learn from more experienced others, a body of knowledge, or from themselves, respectively. In relation, the alternatives offered by *IMMERSE* cover all of these learning foci.

When applying *IMMERSE*, autonomy for teachers is an important factor to consider. They should receive extensive assistance from the very first moment they begin their participation at the pre-service stage, but this should diminish gradually as they develop their ability to learn from themselves through reflective practice, especially after their first year. Eventually, they should assume primary responsibility for, and an active role in, their own learning and professional growth, a stance that is consistent with commonly held views on ESL/EFL teacher development (Mann 2005: 104).

A professional development model should also provide variety and choice in the kinds of initiative teachers can partake in. The alternatives should reflect teacher needs and expectations as closely as possible. At some point, teachers should be allowed to enrich their possible selections with their own ideas, which can be discussed through a collaborative work plan with their mentors and academic supervisors. There should also be mandatory elements with which all teachers should comply but that are open enough to allow for individuality and personalisation, such as professional goal statements, teaching philosophies and portfolio work. All of this should be accomplished with efficiency in mind; that is, the model should be applied in such a way that teachers make the most of the limited time they have available. Considering the importance of teacher ‘buy-in’, these factors are essential. For example, after their first year, ICPNA teachers engage in professional development initiatives that are almost exclusively of their own choosing.

There should be a culture for empathetic professional discourse and interaction. Thus, it is important for any language programme administrator or trainer to apply a series of macrostrategies that can be highly conducive to the successful professional development of teachers. According to Salas and Mercado (2010: 18), these are ‘big ideas about teaching and big ideas about working for and with teachers’ that serve to guide principled practice on the part of academic supervisors or teacher educators in order to make their work more effective and professional development sustainable in the long term. They can be summarised as follows:

**Figure 5**

Macrostrategy	Description
Examining subjectivities	Becoming aware of one’s own assumptions and biases and how they may affect our work with teachers.
Articulating institutional values	Articulating and discussing openly views on teaching and learning so that everyone ‘speaks one language’ and can provide more helpful feedback and guidance to teachers.
Understanding teachers as individuals	Recognising that not all the teachers are the same, it refers to the need to understand and promote each person’s strengths in a more personalised manner.
Looking at the big picture	Recognising larger patterns across observations as teacher and supervisor engage in collaborative efforts toward the achievement of current and long-term goals.
Talking across the data	Supporting dialogic interaction with objective data.
Providing alternatives and resources	Demonstrating knowledge and having credibility in our role as supervisors so that we may guide teachers effectively towards effective professional development alternatives.

Finally, two major factors that determine the success or failure of a professional development programme. First, how it is implemented. The ICPNA *IMMERSE* model was introduced gradually, allowing teachers time to get accustomed to their increasing responsibilities. Over a period of five years, the programme went from an average commitment outside of working hours from 30 hours a year to what is now more than 130. Second, the notion of commitment itself. ICPNA is a private-sector organisation that sees itself fulfilling an important educational role in Peruvian society. We are committed to driving standards up and we do so by providing massive support for professional development. In return for this, we ask for what we acknowledge to be extraordinary commitment from our teachers. Based on what I have seen and heard over the years, although it is a lot of work, they end up developing a great sense of professional pride and shared purpose. A lot of the new job applicants I interview mention the PD programme as one of the reasons they want to work at ICPNA, because they know they will not get that anywhere else.

### **A self reflection on success**

I look back to January 1997, which is when I began my career at the Institute. I was an ‘expat’ from another field who had just started working as an English teacher less than a year and half before, with no formal education or previous training in the field worth mentioning. I found several initiatives that are still in place today: the pre-service seminar, teacher development (TD) meetings, and teacher–supervisor orientation sessions. When I began, I immediately noticed the enormous difference compared to my previous work experiences. Even before my first month, I had already been invited to a previously arranged TD meeting, where we celebrated the arrival of Christmas with carols, hot chocolate, and much cheer. Needless to say, this alone was enough to make me feel like I had become a part of something very special. Once I actually began working at the Institute, I met with the academic supervisors, much as a new teacher still does today. They gave me the guidance I needed to make it through that first month, which was a trial period that could have just as easily resulted in a quick farewell. Over the next few months, I began to look forward to the TD meetings, especially when an international speaker would arrive to give a presentation. By the time I finished my first year, I realised – unlike any other time before it – that English language teaching was the field in which I wanted to stay. That end result was something I would seek to replicate years later with new teachers in the various positions to which I would be promoted: academic supervisor, academic branch manager, assistant academic director, and finally academic director.

As an academic supervisor, I would have the opportunity to travel to Vancouver, Canada to attend my very first TESOL convention in 2000. Even then, the Institute would invest to take members of its academic staff and a small group of teachers to the TESOL convention each year. That first experience was a memorable one that would allow me to learn a great many lessons. It was then that I learned about professional development practices such as self-observation and peer observation. When I became an academic branch manager one year later, I immediately instituted these initiatives at my centre and put them under the charge of two exceptional supervisors who would enrich their application with ideas of their own. Ultimately, the peer observation and self-observation initiatives were so successful that I decided

to replicate the experience on an institutional level once I became academic director in 2005. In addition, attending the TESOL convention would convince me that similar conferences should be offered to all of our teachers.

Today, there are four such conferences at ICPNA each year: three ICPNA TESOL events, as described above, and ELT Horizons. This is held once a year and represents an important source of professional development for the ICPNA teacher. World-renowned keynote speakers as well as numerous special guest and international concurrent presenters offer a wide variety of academic sessions to the teaching faculty. Since it is an open event, ICPNA teachers have the opportunity to experience an international conference along with hundreds of ELT professionals from other organisations and countries without having to leave Peru.

One of the most important lessons I have learned from my experience as a new teacher, my first TESOL convention, and everything else that has come over the years is that professional development has the power to transform people like me into proud, bona fide English language teaching professionals who cannot think of anything else they would like to do. However, as the recent testimonials from new teachers have reminded me, this can only happen if the Institute creates the conditions under which you can succeed and find fulfilment through teaching. Today, I would not dream of going back to the retail, banking, real estate, or hotel industries I came from. On the contrary, I look forward to the next 24 years of professional learning and fulfilment that only this beloved field can offer, and to seeing new generations of ELT teachers succeed like I did.

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# 4

## Borrowing the use of ethnographic notes from the social sciences for classroom observation in central Mexico

Martha Lengeling

### Context

Social scientists, such as anthropologists or sociologists, go out into the field and observe people. These observations are documented in field notes that are also known as ethnographic notes. I suggest that ethnographic notes can be integrated into educational observations as a way for future or practising teachers and teacher trainers to understand the complexities of both observation and the micro-culture of the classroom (see Holliday 1994).

My initial interest in using ethnographic notes began when I became an observer in the In-service Certificate of English Language Teaching (ICELT) from the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate with teachers in central Mexico. Later I used them with other teachers who I trained as observers in the ICELT and BA teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) programme. After this, I began to implement the use of ethnographic notes with my BA TESOL students in the observation class.

This chapter presents how I have promoted ethnographic notes as a teacher educator with my BA TESOL students in a required introductory class of observation at the University of Guanajuato, a large public university in central Mexico. These students are a mix of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers. In order to introduce the BA students to the theme of observation I first show some ethnographic notes, then have the students put the approach into practice, then guide them with formative feedback. The class also reviews how observation is used for purposes of evaluation, reflection, teacher development and research (Bailey 2001, Malderez 2003). This chapter will detail how I have introduced them to the BA class, how my students have employed them, and how they perceive their use. Finally, I will conclude by listing various ways in which ethnographic notes have been beneficial.

## **Ethnographic perspectives**

Many of us have general associations of what ethnography is about – mine came initially from reading such authors as Mead (1975, 2001), Lévi-Strauss (1992, 1995) and Lewis (1961). All were immersed in fieldwork while observing another group of people. Ethnographers, then, try to understand another culture, its behaviour and thoughts, usually starting as an outsider. Ethnography, according to Denscombe (2007: 61):

*Literally means a description of peoples or cultures. It has its origin as a research strategy in the works of the early social anthropologists, whose aim was to provide a detailed and permanent account of the cultures and lives of small, isolated tribes.*

He also mentions that: *'In doing so, ethnography tends to emphasise the importance of understanding things from the point of view of those involved'* (pp. 62–63). Other authors such as Johnson (2000) and Richards (2003) also helped me understand the use of words such as description, social and culture when explaining ethnography.

However, it is now 25 years since Watson-Gegeo (1988) warned TESOL professionals about over-simplistic reference to the field and concepts of ethnography and that warning is still very relevant. In this section, therefore, I want to clarify two specific aspects of an ethnographic perspective that I find particularly useful for classroom observation.

### **Moving towards 'objectivity'**

Of course, we observe as human beings, not recorders. This is essential because, in the end, it is only as human beings that we can understand. The point of this particular ethnographic perspective, however, is not to assume from the outset that we already understand what we see, but to describe it as best we can. So, we try to make notes on what we observe without making too many assumptions about the purpose, or motivation, or significance of what we have seen. We keep our inferencing and our tendency to evaluate to a minimum. Our notes are then meant to provide as detailed a record as possible of what was seen, so that more meaningful description, plausible interpretation and in-depth understanding can be worked out later (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

It is easy to see how important this perspective is if one thinks about my own situation in Guanajuato, Mexico. I am a tall, blond, middle-aged American observing teachers in small, rural, Mexican communities of which I am not a member. Although I have lived a great part of my adult life in Mexico and raised a family here, I still have to be careful not to assume that something I see a teacher doing in class means the same thing to her and her students as it would if I did the same thing with my students.

### **Making strange**

If that first ethnographic perspective concerns difficulties of observation for the cultural outsider, the second perspective I want to focus on concerns difficulties for the insider. That is to say, when a context is very familiar to the observer, it is easy to think that nothing is happening, because everything is so ordinary. Once again, the ethnographic imperative is to put aside our evaluation of what is, or is

not, significant, and to make a simple record of what we see. 'Simple' in this context, means extensive, detailed and uninterpreted. It certainly does not mean easy. This process of making the ordinary noticeable is sometimes referred to in ethnography as 'making strange', or 'estrangement' (Coffey 1999).

### **Borrowing the use of ethnographic notes**

Having clarified these ethnographic perspectives, I will now try to tie together ethnography and classroom observation. Frank (1999: 1) makes the connection when using ethnography with her student teachers as a way for them to 'observe classrooms more effectively, without making quick, critical evaluation or 'leaps of judgment'. She (1999: 29) also mentions that 'the role of the ethnographer is not that of a student, but rather that of an anthropologist trying to gather information about a different way of living' and the student teachers were to 'enter into the classroom as "outsiders"' (p. 42).

This provides a way of distancing oneself in order to see differently things that we perhaps see every day. As Frank (1999: 3) points out: 'an ethnographic perspective provides a lens to understand these particular patterns of classroom life which often become invisible because they become so regular, patterned, and ordinary'. This ethnographic lens opens up what can be seen and analysed in a classroom.

Taking into consideration Frank's points of view, I incorporated this use of ethnographic notes for my own use when I was first trained to observe teachers in the ICELT course for evaluative observations. This training was brief (approximately 20 hours) and I was required to observe teachers using a check-list from the above-mentioned course.

I was somewhat nervous and daunted at the check-list that I had to fill out for these evaluative observations. At times, I did not feel that I understood enough about the various educational contexts of my students to be able either to trust the appropriateness of the boxes that I was obliged to tick, or to make reasonable judgements about the competence of the teachers involved.

One way to overcome these insecurities and nerves was through the use of ethnographic field notes. First of all, these notes helped me to struggle through the process of observation. They helped me better understand the complex nature of the classroom, to cope with how to record my observations, and to give formative feedback to the observed teachers. Eventually, with the use of these private notes as a complement to the checklist, I was able to fill out the official form and carry out the evaluative feedback session after the observation. The notes helped me organise my thoughts for feedback. I became more at ease with filling out the forms and the task became less time consuming.

Having observed teachers for a number of years, we opened our BA in TESOL and I was given the observation class (in the last year of their studies). There were few teachers who had the experience I had started to gain in our institution. Little by little, I then had to train other teachers to observe in our school. For some reason I then became known as the observation specialist.

### **Innovation: Introducing ethnographic notes in the BA TESOL**

In this section, I will explain how I used ethnographic notes with my students in the BA TESOL. Expanding the use of these private notes, I began to use them as a more public document for teaching. In the observation class we explored how ethnographic notes have been used in the social sciences for the participant observer to document his or her observations, perspectives and reflections in the field. This was done first with a short period of elicitation of questions from the students tapping into what they knew of ethnography (for example What is it? Who are famous ethnographers? What does an ethnographer do? What are ethnographic notes?). After this, I gave a short presentation of what ethnography is about and next I showed my students a number of my examples of ethnographic notes that I used in classroom observation (see Appendix 1). I had compiled a number of notebooks throughout the years with the notes that I could choose from for examples to be used in class. Initially the notes were read and students were to imagine what I might have seen as an observer. Also a set of my ethnographic notes and the observed teacher's lesson plan were explored.

From here we carried out a number of exercises where the students would watch a video of a teacher or a short movie clip (for example *Stand and Deliver*, *To Sir with Love*, *Freedom Writers*). During the class I tried to show at least four clips from movies and observed videos of teachers who had given me their permission to use them. At this stage I chose clips of ten minutes so as not to overwhelm the students. The students would practise making their own notes and then share their notes with their classmates as to what they saw and did not see. We followed up by exploring our interpretations and understandings, finally moving on to what the positive aspects of the teaching were, what areas the teacher could improve in, and compliments or suggestions that students might give the teacher.

During these above-mentioned clips, a great number of issues were pointed out as possible themes for the students to consider when writing their notes and when observing. The normal list of class features involved in how a class is carried out were explored – features that are often found in observation checklists. These include error correction, achievement of aims, lesson planning, teacher and students' use of the language, movement, rapport, grouping and management, teaching techniques, use of didactic materials, and the giving of instructions.

However, other features explored were the physicality of the learning space (classroom and institution) and interactions between the students and the observed teacher within this space. Specifics were focused on such as time, date, the class observation site, the number of students (gender, age, description of the students, etc.), sensory impressions, and parts of conversations heard in the observation, and possible perceptions of the observer. The notes on such features encouraged my students to observe things that might go unnoticed or be taken for granted. These can perhaps be seen as going beyond a checklist for observation and even as a change in the observation process.

Regarding my instructions on how to write up their notes, they were quite simple. Based upon my collected examples, I asked the students to use a sheet of paper

which had three vertical columns of three themes: time, description and reflection. The first column was provided to document periods of time during the observation while the middle column gave space for a descriptive account of what the students saw, trying to avoid any judgement of what they saw if possible. The last column dealt with any questions or suggestions that the observer had for the observee. This column was considered the reflective part of the ethnographic notes and was meant to provide a space where the observer might question his or her own judgements of the observed class and even ask the observee these questions in order to analyse the different aspects observed in the class. Appendix 2 includes an example of a student's first try with ethnographic notes and my written feedback. In this example, one can see how simple actions which happen in a classroom are noticed by the student along with his reaction to these actions. This is an example of making the ordinary noticeable. In this observation the student comments on how the observed teacher responds to a question concerning what a word in Spanish is and the teacher goes online right in the class and projects it to the rest of the class.

After this, they were required to carry out peer observations during a two-month period at the beginning of the semester. Through the peer observations the students also had to gain entry into an educational setting that was not usually theirs and they had to carry out the observation. I also asked the students to observe a variety of teachers of levels and contexts in order to gather a number of perspectives.

They were asked to hand in their notes at different intervals so that I could look at their notes and add suggestions or ask questions as to why they wrote what they did. Appendix 2 illustrates some of these questions that I wrote to the students. I give an example in the following taken from my bank of ethnographic notes. A student wrote in the third column: 'The teacher always spoke in English. Great!' and I replied: 'What do you think of the use of L1 in the classroom? Are there times when the use of L1 is effective?' In this small extract I wanted the student to think about how she sees the use of L1 and also to reflect on how the use of L1 may be beneficial. Another example was when a student wrote that clear instructions were given and I asked the student if he could remember the exact words that were used and why he thought they were clear. At times I also meant to push the students on in their observation process and to encourage the ability for them to put themselves in the shoes of their observees – to empathise with them. One example that I remember is a student using quite strong language that seemed to be evaluative and even harsh in nature and with no suggestions for the observee. On the student's notes I wrote comments such as:

- What could have been done instead of this?
- Do you have any suggestions as to how this could have been done differently?
- Is there anything you do not know about this class that might help you to understand what happened?
- Why do you think the teacher did this?

My students would also share their notes with other students to see how others carried out the note-taking process.

Finally, the students were encouraged, if possible, to give some feedback to the observee, either in person or in writing. I included this element because feedback was another theme covered in class and it is an important part of the observation. Also, some of these teachers have to carry out observations in their contexts or some may be future observers in their schools.

Giving feedback also gave my students the opportunity to verbalise their observations directly to the observee which in itself is a delicate topic. In order to sensitise my students to giving feedback, I would have them carry out role plays with different scenarios of observers. Such observer types were observer with no experience, 'pussyfooting observer' (Randall and Thornton 2001), 'clobbering observer' (Randall and Thornton 2001), fair and direct observer, and reflective observer. In addition they worked with different scenarios as observees (for example non-accepting of feedback observee or accepting everything observee).

I felt that the use of ethnographic notes as part of the observation process was a welcome addition for many reasons. The students began to understand the observation process before they themselves were observed by me for evaluative purposes. The ethnographic note exercises provided them with activities which were more peer dialogues and provided space for scaffolding among the classmates.

To conclude this section, the following is offered as a possible guide for trainers to implement the use of ethnographic notes with trainees. These steps can be adapted depending on the context and trainees:

1. Exploration of how ethnographic notes have been used in social sciences and elicitation of questions from the trainees tapping into what they know of ethnography and its association for them.
2. Short presentation of what ethnography is about and its relationship to observation (PowerPoint or oral presentation).
3. Demonstration of how to write up ethnographic notes using a number of examples and followed with group discussion.
4. Exercises using ethnographic notes with a short video of a teacher or a movie clip. Trainees watch the clips and practise writing the notes. Group discussion of the possible aspects one can observe, positive aspects of the teacher, areas for improvement, compliments or suggestions they might give to the observed teacher (feedback) and sharing of their notes in small groups can be carried out.
5. Peer observations with the use of ethnographic notes: students gain access to a school and ask for permission to observe a peer, write up notes of the observation and offer any feedback if possible.
6. Trainer provides written comments and suggestions to the students concerning the use of ethnographic notes.
7. Trainers can ask for feedback from their trainees about observation and the use of ethnographic notes.

## Evaluation

### BA TESOL student perspectives

The following data was collected from a group of 12 BA TESOL students at the end of the observation class. I asked the students to give me their opinions (pros and cons) on the use of ethnographic notes and to be as open as possible in this regard. These opinions did not play any part in calculating the students' class grade and I was given their permission to use the data for educational purposes. Students' names have been changed to protect their identity.

Virna uses the word difficult to describe her first time putting into practice the use of ethnographic notes. She uses the words related to the reflective process and mentions how she feels more and more comfortable with the reflective activity:

*The first time I used ethnographic notes was not so difficult to describe what I saw, but I was not as reflective as I could have been. Once I did it for a first time, the following times were better. The short sentences and reflections I wrote during the observation helped me to remember information that if I had not written it, very probably I would have forgotten to mention it. After I looked again at my ethnographic notes, I started writing a deeper reflection of what I saw in that specific class. Without these ethnographic notes I think I could not have remembered all what had happened ... with specific details and time.*

Virna

The use of notes appears to have helped her with the process of reflection after a number of attempts. They served as the basis for more reflection and analysis which could be a deeper level of reflection after the observation is over. This 'after the event' reflection refers to 'reflection-on-action' (Schön 1983). Virna is able to reflect more after she has written and read her notes and even after she has carried out the writing of ethnographic notes a number of times. On the other hand, reflection-in-action corresponds to when a teacher deals with a problem in the moment something is happening and the teacher makes a change in her or his practice based upon the reflection at that moment (Schön 1983). What is interesting here is that Virna is not a teacher reflecting on her teaching practice, but an observer who is developing the depth of her reflective ability.

Another student, Julieta, also uses the word difficult but she seemed determined to persist in using the approach. She writes about the mechanics of these notes and how at times she did not know how to use them:

*At the beginning, it was really difficult for me to find a purpose of taking rapid notes of what happened in a class. Despite this, I made an attempt to develop this procedure during the peer observations. What I found out was that it was not easy to record events: I was wondering if I should take notes of EVERYTHING or what should be left out and also how to write notes in a precise way.*

Julieta

The next student, Cristina, describes how she first saw the use of these notes and comments:

*...a little difficult ... I tried to write every single detail ... I consider ethnographic notes might be an objective way to get information and also to know what the teacher does during class. If we reread them, we may observe many aspects... Sometimes we are not aware of all of these aspects and they can give us a clear idea of what we did. Actually I consider we need to see our teaching as a screen when we read ethnographic notes trying to be objective, analysing our steps and thinking about ways to improve.*

Cristina

The student feels that rereading of the notes is helpful for the observer when they are being critical of the feature found in the class. Cristina uses the phrase 'to see our teaching as a screen' and this could be interpreted that she sees the notes as evidence of what happened in the observation process. This evidence is valuable in that a teacher can analyse different aspects of teaching and reflect upon the teaching act. As teachers we perhaps do not have the time or space to do this regularly for many reasons and with ethnographic notes we are given the opportunity for dialogue between the observer and observee.

Another student, Jose, offers his opinion on the use of ethnographic notes in the following:

*Ethnographic notes allow the observer to make a description that portrays what is being observed, and later on this information can be used to write interpretations and to draw conclusions... It also provides a safe backup in case the observer does not remember something of what was observed ... they help us keep a record... which helps the observer when giving feedback ... the teacher who I observed enjoyed reading them and seeing how I perceived and described her class...*

Jose

These notes provide time and space to analyse and eventually 'draw conclusions' on the observed class. The observed teacher appears to have appreciated reading the observer's notes. The teacher could see her teaching through the eyes of another and this gave her information about her class or herself as a teacher that she may never have known or information that she wanted to be confirmed. This information may give the teacher valuable information that will help her in her teacher development. Often my EFL teachers/trainees in Mexico do not have the opportunity to be observed or if they are observed by a co-ordinator, boss or fellow teacher, they mention they do not receive any feedback concerning their class. Having feedback from an observation in the form of notes lets the observed teacher gain a snapshot of who he/she is as a teacher.

Roberto makes reference to how he at times debated his use of the notes but it seems that in the end he progressed in becoming more reflective and analytical in the observation process.

*Another problem was related to the things you record: how could I be sure I was not only taking notes of the good things. Looking at my notes, sometimes I would add a small praise between events when needed... Now that I think of these comments they were made in my case to help me remember a specific event although in a more analytical way this can be seen as judgemental rather than descriptive ... it has really helped me to realise or confirm certain problems I have perceived from students ... problems I would not be able to see in my teacher role.*

Roberto

He also mentions how he could begin to distance himself as an observer and almost put aside his 'teacher self'. We can see Roberto's thought process during the observation and writing up of the notes when he mentions that he 'would add a small praise between events when needed'. What is not clear is why he feels he needs to add these positive phrases. It could be that he wants to 'soften' any threats or negative observation he sees as an observer or perhaps he wants to give a balance of both the positive and negative aspects he has found in his notes.

From the above quotes we can see how the use of ethnographic notes was not an easy task for the students to carry out but with this difficult task they also seemed to become more reflective and perhaps even better observers. The notes could be seen as a catalyst for their reflection and awareness. They are a document that can be used to remember what was observed for reflection or for the feedback session.

Concerning the disadvantages of using ethnographic notes, one of the problems is the difficulty of understanding how to carry out this note-taking. When one is writing ethnographic notes and observing, there are multiple tasks being carried out. According to the students, knowing how to write the notes during the observation and also how to process this task can be seen as a chaotic activity which requires some skill. This is, however, a set of skills that can be learned: modelling, discussion, practice and feedback make up my approach to the teaching of these skills.

### **Other teachers' perspectives**

Having collected data from my BA TESOL students, I decided to take my investigation a step further by asking three teacher trainers who I had trained to be observers to give me their opinions of the use of ethnographic notes. This was done informally. They felt the notes served as a reminder of what they had observed and proved to be a document to look at later when doing a number of observations. The trainers could see that there was also an improvement in reflection on their part as to what was going on in the classroom, how they saw the observation process and what the observed teacher was doing in the classroom. They felt that their students seemed to have progressed in their level of reflection and to have become aware of themselves as teachers. They also mentioned that it takes time and expertise for the trainers to use these ethnographic notes. One trainer wondered if all trainers could use ethnographic notes and another teacher tended to have her own way of writing out notes which seemed a personal preference. Another trainer mentioned problems of focusing on observing, filling out a form and writing ethnographic notes, all at the same time. She mentioned that it required multiple tasks and concentration on her part which at times was difficult. It is difficult. Whether or not it is worthwhile

is a question that one can answer only if one has tried the approach and evaluated its benefits for oneself. For myself I have used ethnographic notes for my classes in research at the BA level, for thesis direction and for international (see Lengeling 2012) and national presentations concerning this theme.

### **Summarising the benefits**

After many years of using ethnographic notes as a teacher and observer, I have found a number of benefits of their use in the area of classroom observation. They are a document that can be used later for feedback and reflection. Because they are a physical document, this helps both the observer and the observee to remember what happened during the observation and to not have to rely solely on memory. As Frank (1999: 8) points out, they let the observer 'speak from evidence'. These notes help to create a dialogue of trust and understanding because they are visual evidence for both the observer and observee. An example of this is when I give feedback to the observee using the notes to make reference to positive aspects, and aspects to consider, of what was observed. With the notes, I use an approach similar to Edge's (1994: 3) 'feedback sandwich' where 'evaluative feedback should begin with positive comments and should end with positive comments'. During this part there should be an open dialogue where the observer tries to 'listen to teachers non-evaluatively' (p. 3). This approach has been helpful for me as an observer and teacher trainer. My students and observees seem to welcome a co-constructed dialogue, whereas for the most part they have mentioned that observations in their contexts are usually more evaluative in nature and they feel they are often not observed by qualified observers.

The use of notes with observation is not perhaps novel, but teaching my students how to write up notes for their peer observations, using the steps outlined above, is what I consider to be an innovation in my context. In my own case, I found the use of these notes to be a way to deal with my nervousness of being a novice observer and I saw that for students the use of ethnographic notes was seen as something unusual. Their responses to me as a teacher also showed me how the use of notes was new to them and they had not been exposed to the idea of their use previously. They would ask me for more information about ethnography and how these notes have been used. The use of notes was also a way to sensitise my students to observations.

Yet another reason why I consider the ethnographic notes with observations as an innovation is related to Roberts et al.'s (2001: 90, citing Clifford and Marcus, 1986) reference to a gap in the understanding of how to write up field notes in the area of anthropology. They suggest more needs to be explored concerning how these notes are written by taking care of the use and articulation of language. In my use of notes, this process of writing them up is what I was trying to get across to my students in the hope that this would also help them become more sensitive to the observation process.

One of the challenges of classroom observation is the subjectivity that is sometimes attached to observations and the use of ethnographic notes can be seen as an innovative technique to lower the level of subjectivity. This technique may also promote more objectivity on the part of the observer because the observer needs to write exactly what he or she saw while avoiding making a judgement. I found a

number of times that my students tended to be evaluative with observations. Edge (2002: 18) makes mention of a 'non-evaluative discourse' in order to promote co-operative development which is defined as 'the mixture of awareness raising and disciplined discourse'. In my use of the term, this non-evaluative discourse relates also to the observer taking on a more objective stance to the observation process and helps to reduce too much evaluation in the process.

The document provides time for the reader to visit and revisit the notes for interpretation and analysis. As well, with the use of these notes, the observer tries to describe what he or she saw which may help the observer to be more objective during this process. For teaching purposes, the notes acted as a way to socialise teachers to the ideas of peer observations and eventually their own evaluative observations. Many times my students were somewhat nervous with classroom observation and the use of notes helped the students to perceive observation in a different light, hopefully one not so nerve-racking.

Perhaps the students' notes do not resemble traditional ethnographic notes used in the social sciences, but the process the students go through when collecting them is related to how ethnographic notes are used in fieldwork. This being said, the notes represent an innovative way of approaching classroom observation and a way to help students or teachers become more sensitive to the intricacies of observation. They have helped me as an observer and also as a teacher educator of BA students and as a teacher trainer of future classroom observers.

Ethnographic notes have also been transferred to my students who have to carry out small-scale research projects at the same time they are taking my observation class. They finish their degree with a required research project which is often their thesis and we explore this technique as a possible way for them to collect data for their research. Often the students have ideas concerning their beliefs as teachers and ethnographic notes are a way to ground these beliefs for use in their research projects. Some of my students who have gone on to a master's level programme have included the use of ethnographic notes in their research and thesis.

## Conclusions

As a teacher and teacher trainer, I feel I have successfully introduced the use of ethnographic notes to help students and trainers appreciate the complexities of teaching and observing. Having used an ethnographic frame as a teaching technique for the observation class, I realise that its potential is often overlooked and could be more used in ELT. Perhaps more investigation needs to be carried out to understand fully the use of ethnographic notes and to explore the complex training required to further improve the accuracy and implementation of this practice.

For students, ethnographic notes are an instrument to help them understand, analyse and reflect on the observation process, and perhaps to overcome any subjectivity that is often associated with observation. For trainers it can be part of the process of becoming better observers. This technique lets one observe with 'ethnographic eyes' (Frank 1999, citing Jennings 1998) which provides richness and detail to the observation process.

Now an experienced classroom observer, I no longer have observation nerves as the person who needs to fill in a form for evaluation. It is also my belief that these notes go beyond the traditional, 'Fill in the observation form or checklist,' and let students appreciate the 'situatedness of teaching and learning' (Frank, 1999: 7). They represent an innovative technique borrowed from areas such as sociology and anthropology for teaching. Specifically for me, they represent a unique technique that has been pivotal in my growth as a teacher observer and teacher educator. The notes were initially employed as a survival strategy, but throughout the years I have appreciated their usefulness as a reflective aid for myself and for my students.

## Acknowledgement

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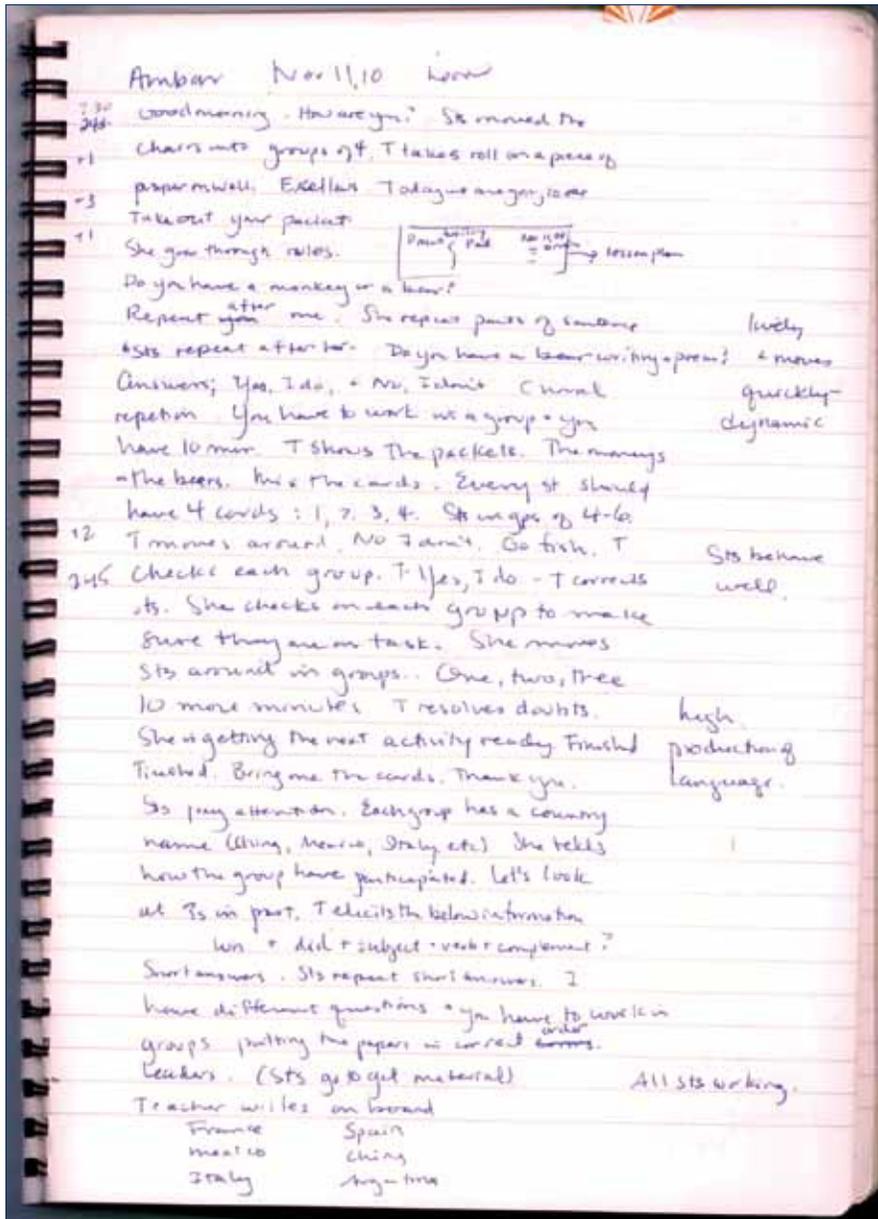
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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Example of ethnographic notes in classroom observation (photographs from author)



T corrects each group their questions  
+ then marks which teams got a point.

Choral repetition of question. Come on. Number } Active  
two. 1,2,3,4 Each team reads ? T tallies  
up points. What is this sentence in Spanish?

807 Translation Another? Choral repetition. What is  
your? in Spanish? Leaders. 1,2,3,4 The T follows  
the above order. Where are you go to the - personalization

846 Concert Now the last activity - Bingo.  
T reads the instructions. Tells 2 s/s to  
be quiet. T gives a ~~st~~ <sup>participation</sup> for participation. T gives out  
One finished, two bingo, three, four, five <sup>instructions +</sup> checks understanding  
These 10 people get a participation <sup>As</sup>.  
See you next class.

more personalization, set context, + possible  
peer work

Appendix 2: Example of students' ethnographic notes

CHRISTOP THOMAS SULZER 07.09.12		09.09.2012
Time	What I saw	Reflection
11:10	T greets STs that are dropping in, has a chit chat with them, connects his computer	Only <u>four (4)</u> students come to class,
11:11	T hands out an article, reads the title, asks what the article could be about - one ST immediately answers, then a small discussion starts	
11:15	STs read the article together out loud. After reading the first paragraph, another discussion starts.	T corrects STs immediately when an error occurs.
11:20	STs read the 2nd paragraph STs discuss it very briefly	1 ST asks what "lujuria" in English is - T is not sure, looks it up online on his computer connected to the canon
11:25	STs read the 3rd paragraph. T asks STs a question related to the <u>information</u> not related to specific words.	so STs can see it - great! <u>Why do you think it was great?</u>
	1 ST wants to know an expression, T writes it down on the whiteboard	There are words in the 2nd paragraph that seem difficult but they are not explained <u>Why do you think they were not explained? How would you have done it? Why?</u>
11:31	STs read fourth paragraph that mentions two paintings (Zurbaran and Crivelli) and puts the 2 paintings on the projector. The 2 paintings are being discussed. T asks which of the two paintings was an act of faith - STs discuss all together.	T highlights relevant vocabulary that ST see in the paintings

Time	What I saw	04.09.2012 Reflection
11:35	STS finish reading tea article	The article itself is not discussed + Any suggestions?
11:38	T puts on a video, tells sts that it's related to the topic tea saw in the article. During the video, T writes down some topics/ vocab from the video on the whiteboard (only two expr.)	T could have written down more vocab seen in the video on the whiteboard
11:46	T asks if video was interesting. STS: "Yes!" T: "Why?" - a small discussion starts, every ST gives his/her opinion	The 4 students sit at the back of the classroom. T could do a smaller 1/2 circle because lots of discussion:
11:50	T now draws attention to the 2 expressions on the whiteboard, asks STS what they mean. → STS discuss, discussion expands to films, other paintings, things STS have drawn previously	CLASSROOM REALITY: 
11:55	T now asks for more specific experiences STS have had with paintings. * What would you say to this teacher? How did you feel about this first peer observation? How did you feel about writing up these notes? Thanks Martha	POSTERITY:  very little T interference, lets STS discuss, only error correction (immediate), STS really seem to be engaged with tea topic

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# 5

## Fostering collaborative conversations between pre-service trainees and serving teachers through supervisory role plays

Bob Oprandy with Robyn Addington, Chris Brown and Michelle Rutter

### Introduction

Included in the curriculum of our California Teacher Education Credential Masters Degree Programme is an elective seminar course, *Supervision of Instruction*, during which participants are required to play the role of ‘instructional supervisor’ in observing and conducting post-observation discussions with California public school teachers. The innovation on which we focus in this chapter concerns an assignment set for this seminar course, as viewed from the perspectives of three pre-service trainees and their course instructor.

### Rationale

There are several reasons for pre-service teacher candidates to role play ‘instructional supervisors.’ First is getting them used to structuring talks in collaborative ways with future colleagues and supervisors. Arcario’s research (1994) revealed how much post-observation discussions are dominated by ‘canonical’ conversational structures of evaluation, justification and rationalising of classroom behaviour. Teachers are thus caught in a self-defensive trap, one in which many supervisors also feel uncomfortable. By trying less conventional structures, teachers can realise that discussions about teaching can be more co-operative endeavours. Analysis of conversational openers, of how to promote description instead of prescription, and the effect of empathetic ‘understanding responses’ leads course participants to discover how to open up more experienced teachers to reveal more of their thinking and feelings about what they and their students do. Such strategies also reveal parallels that may serve them in their future interactions with students in their own classrooms.

Another reason for playing the supervisory role is to pay increased attention to observable details in classes, making use of self- or ready-made observation tools and schemes (Gebhard and Oprandy 1999, Wajnryb 1992). By moving participants beyond the vague, subjective language so often used to discuss teaching (for example ‘good rapport,’ ‘teacher enthusiasm’), they practise being more descriptive in the way professionals and experts in any field discuss their work or anything about which they become highly informed. This raises the bar for pre-service trainees to not only think specifically about lessons but also to feel they are on a more level plane with in-service teachers when talking about specific aspects of the teaching-learning dynamic, such as ‘wait time,’ ‘distribution of talk,’ and ‘question types and sequencing.’

Though it is unusual for pre-service trainees to play supervisory roles, the assignment on which this report focuses affords them:

1. a different perspective on classroom behaviour, that of an ‘instructional supervisor,’ in effect upping the ante in responsibly facilitating a conversation about teaching-learning
2. a chance to develop a ‘toolkit’ of skills they would not otherwise consider at this stage of their career
3. a first-hand experience of how to collaboratively ‘talk shop’ about their craft, rather than succumbing to the usually evaluative lure of post-observation discussions.

The assignment requires participants to record, transcribe and analyse segments of their post-observation discussions with experienced teachers. Analyses of the discussions focus on the nature of communication between the participants and those they observe. In the initial stage of the assignment participants ‘audio- or videotape a discussion with a teacher ... about a class they have recently taught’ (see Appendix for more details). This stage precedes course work on using classroom observation tools and practising non-judgemental, non-directive talk with fellow teachers (Oprandy 1999, Edge 2002). By practising understanding responses in the second and especially the third stage of the assignment, those playing the supervisor role attempt to be more active listeners, putting ‘aside their own ideas, opinions and experiences in order to accept and empathise with what the speaker has to say’ (Edge, 2011: 91).

Thus, participants are able to contrast transcribed extracts from the initial stage with those from later post-observation discussions that reflect practice on the above-mentioned skills. For the pre-service participants, their tendency in Stage 1 to ask many curiosity questions of the teachers they observed was eventually given up for more collaborative understanding responses. This allowed the teachers that they observed to have more control of topics during their discussions and for the novice observers to enter more fully into the thinking and feelings of the experienced teachers.

At the heart of the above-mentioned rationale for the innovative assignment described below is the fostering of an attentiveness to the lessons observed

and to the teachers with whom pre-service participants have discussions. Such attending is akin to the Zen practice of ‘mindfulness,’ which ‘in its simplest terms means to pay attention to “right here, right now” and to invest the present moment with full awareness and concentration’ (Tremmel, 1993:443). According to Bocchino (1999: 57–58):

*The emotionally literate listener recognises that his or her beliefs, emotions, and assumptions can filter and distort what the other person is saying. Good listening takes great discipline and self-control; it is an active, conscious, humbling process of managing ourselves.*

## **Innovation**

The major assignment for the course, an ‘Investigation of Supervisory Behaviour,’ has three stages interspersed with feedback from peer participants and the instructor (see Appendix). In Stage 1, class participants record and transcribe a few minutes of their discussion in the role of supervisor with a teacher about a lesson the latter had recently taught but that the course participant had not seen. This is followed by small group analyses during a seminar session on the nature of communication and any dominant discourse features seen in the transcribed extracts. Depending on the group, topics ranged, for example, from relative amounts of supervisor and teacher talk time and questioning habits of supervisors, to supervisor versus teacher discussion control and how many times a supervisor used non-lexical vocalisations such as ‘hmm’ or ‘uh huh.’

The second stage requires participants to observe the same or another teacher’s class and record and transcribe extracts, including the opening, from a post-observation discussion with the teacher about the class. Participants then write an analysis of features noted in the post-observation talk related to course content (see Appendix for details), which is followed by written and oral feedback exchanged among three to four participants. The transcribed extracts from Stages 1 and 2, including the written analysis in Stage 2, are also carefully read and commented on in writing by the course instructor.

Stage 3, like Stage 2, requires observing the same teacher but additionally requires a pre- as well as post-observation discussion with the teacher. Again, participants record the post-observation talk and transcribe the openings of their discussions and extracts they find meaningful and insightful regarding their supervisory styles and other concepts being worked on in the course (see Appendix). The final paper requires an in-depth analysis of discourse features in the transcribed data that are linked to the readings, activities and lessons from the course.

What made the assignment particularly innovative for the pre-service participants was that it enabled them to see the teaching–learning dynamic through the use of the observation tools and skills worked on during the course and from the challenging perspective of an instructional supervisor charged with having pre- and post-observation discussions sandwiched around the observation experience. Facilitating such discussions by virtue of role playing an experienced teacher’s supervisor, the pre-service trainees were given a level of responsibility beyond their years and experience.

### **As observers they had to...**

- a. note specific aspects of teaching, focusing especially on what the observed teachers asked them to pay particular attention to
- b. use self- or ready-made observation tools
- c. organise observation notes, making sense of what they observed.

### **As discussion facilitators they learned to...**

- a. structure discussions with an experienced teacher
- b. try more co-operative, non-directive discourse styles than the usual 'canonical' pattern Arcario (*ibid.*) found in post-observation discussions (that is, an initial evaluative statement by either the observer or observee followed mostly by justification and rationalisation of evaluative judgements about the observed teacher's behaviours).

As an observer, Robyn, for example, found her observation notes much better organised in Stage 3 as a result of conducting a pre-observation discussion:

*I was able to refer back to my notes, which specifically focused on his [expressed] area of need. This helped us have a common goal, which was centred around him understanding on a deeper level what happened during the lesson so he can decide where he wants to make changes and keep things the same.*

Consider this example from her data:

1. **Robyn** So, um in regards to you asking me to look at your
2. wait time ... you do this thing where you ask a
3. question and then rephrase it right away. You don't
4. necessarily answer it.
5. **Teacher** Really?

She continues with an example from her observation notes of a question the teacher asked that was followed immediately by a second question with little or no wait time in between:

1. **Robyn** 'What kind of Math would that be?' you
2. almost answer yourself with 'Can you do 47
3. divided by 7 and you...'
4. **Teacher** Yea, I remember saying that. Yea 'cause I
5. remember saying, basically giving them the
6. answer.
7. **Robyn** And then there were very, I mean, it was
8. something that you repeated and so that...
9. **Teacher** Doesn't give them time to answer because
10. I'm still talking.
11. **Robyn** Mmmhmm

Later she wrote:

*By helping him learn more about his own teaching, I learned about my own teaching as well ... Getting to see how discussing his teaching helped him learn more about his own style, his students and his teaching, I can see the great benefit of talking with colleagues and plan to do so in the future.*

In complementary fashion, Chris learned how, during Stage 3, an observer might usefully diverge slightly from the focus suggested by the teacher so long as the attempt to be non-directive remains genuine. In their pre-observation discussion, the teacher had wondered how equitably she asked questions of male and female students. However, when it became clear during discussion that students were taking responsibility for asking questions themselves, Chris was flexible enough to shift attention in order to collect somewhat different data ‘through the gender lens’ the teacher had requested. He reports, ‘I decided to keep track of the students that were asking questions,’ and an extract from Chris’s data shows how his facility in creating an ad hoc observation tool roughly in line with what the teacher had asked him to focus on allowed him to be descriptive rather than evaluative in his effort to veer away from the natural tendency of supervisors to be judgemental during post-observation discussions:

1. **Chris** *As far as questions go, I thought it was kind of*
2. *interesting because you ended up with four to five*
3. *students that were essentially taking care of*
4. *questions for you.*
5. **Teacher** *Uh huh.*
6. **Chris** *And so I put check marks and ended up looking*
7. *through the gender lens; there were 29 questions*
8. *from males and 13 questions from females.*
9. **Teacher** *Nice.*

Chris’s further comments record his sense of achievement as observer, while also moving us on to consider our second objective regarding the role of discussion facilitator:

*I asked (the teacher) what she thought about my findings. She responded, ‘I like that they are from all areas of the room. I notice that this front table does not ask many questions.’ This is a realisation she had because of the tally marks I recorded. I felt this was a completely successful use of an observation tool. It accomplished its purpose of providing insight into classroom ... behaviours without introducing judgement or bias into the discussion or findings.*

In terms of facilitating and structuring conversations with teachers, Michelle noticed the importance of the initial turn in a post-observation discussion as well as the power of ‘understanding responses.’ In Stage 3 she noted, ‘I began with a less evaluative question than in the first discussion.’ Her question, ‘So what did you notice during the lesson?’ led to a descriptive rather than evaluative response from the

teacher. Michelle also demonstrated her success in using more 'Reflecting' (Edge 2002) in Stage 3, giving the teacher a chance to hear again what he/she had said, as in the following exchange:

1. **Teacher** ...she's very quiet
2. **Michelle** Mhm...
3. **Teacher** ...but she's constantly leaning over and talking or
4.                   and I, I, she's not disruptive, but it's constant
5. **Michelle** Yeah.
6. **Teacher** It just...
7. **Michelle** A lot of little things.
8. **Teacher** Yeah, 'cause there's 30; they were all there
9.                   and
10.                  these two days have been very difficult because
11.                  they had to retake that algebra test.
12. **Michelle** Mhm, so their day was kind of thrown off.
13. **Teacher** Their day was thrown off.

Michelle explains, 'My understanding statement in line 7 was confirmed by the teacher with a "Yeah" (in line 8). Again, in line 12, the teacher confirms my understanding statement from line 11 by repeating it.'

Chris also found reflecting responses in his data:

1. **Teacher** And they still, they refer back to things I refer the
2.                   past year, or the first time I started to come out of
3.                   the teacher shell and be more the relaxed teacher
4.                   shell, they will go back to it and refer back to it.
5. **Chris** So they really recognise when you take that step out
6.                   of there.
7. **Teacher** Uh huh.

About such findings, he wrote:

*These understanding responses allowed Ms N to solidify her understanding of specific topics and hear her own words and thoughts.*

Robyn also had examples of understanding responses, but because the teacher she observed often spoke in 'large chunks,' she came to realise, 'I can see that a few understanding statements from me during these chunks might help focus him and even help him go deeper into concepts.' She added, 'This is still difficult for me because I am so focused on what he is saying that I do not always see where to break up the speech.'

Robyn's awareness of the roles she can play in teaching discussions emerged from her careful analysis of her recordings, as it also did for Michelle and Chris.

Pushing pre-service trainees beyond the roles they traditionally assume in teacher education programmes helps them assume a different perspective on their future work and on their efforts to continue to reflect on their teaching. The assignment allows them to consider alternative ways to work with colleagues and supervisors assigned to work with them during their careers. This effect is apparent in the following exchange concerning the relationship between observer and observed:

1. **Michelle** *The teachers we worked with discovered a lot.*
2. *Instead of us telling them 'You should be doing*
3. *this instead of this,' they saw the data and were*
4. *able to say, 'Oh, well maybe I could do it this way.'*
5. *They were able to interpret it themselves versus*
6. *us telling them.*
7. **Robyn** *It's so much more open. They're so much more*
8. *willing to change and to work toward things...*
9. *When you find it yourself, when you realise 'Oh*
10. *wait, maybe that wasn't what I wanted. That's not*
11. *what I thought I was doing.'*
12. **Chris** *You're there to **create** that discovery, but you're*
13. *not there to **have** that discovery. You're there to*
14. *prompt the discovery and kind of poke around the*
15. *edges so it is meaningful for them, so they are*
16. *willing to say 'Oh, I guess I do do that' instead of*
17. *being defensive.*
18. **Robyn** *There were things that he discovered that I wasn't*
19. *intending for him to find... It really is 'You were*
20. *going to discover this on your own through your*
21. *own discussion,' through talking with them.*
22. **Michelle** *And this can be applied to our students as well.*

Michelle's last point above resonated with Chris in the following way as they thought about lessons from the assignment that might transfer to their work with future students:

*I'll try to use less evaluative language with my students. So if you ask students, 'Did everyone think they did well or poorly?' on an assessment or a test, that gets them thinking about their grade as opposed to what they got out of that test. And using that non-judging language where you let that student's ideas come out more, where they aren't so burdened by evaluative terms that that's all they're thinking about, evaluation, instead of the actual material (seems more productive).*

Considering another implication of the supervisory role play for her work with future students, Robyn said:

*You know how kids love to be in that teacher role, what they could get out of that teacher role where we got so much out of role playing in the supervisor role, let them be the teacher, let them teach you, let them teach their classmates. They enjoy it so much they could get as much as we did from it.*

‘The principle of non-judgement and eliminating unnecessary evaluation in order to create a safe and explorative environment’ was, according to Chris, another application for him to consider: ‘Such an environment encourages and acknowledges risk-taking and gives everyone, including students, teachers or supervisors, the right to be wrong.’ Later he added:

*I was realising, parents (of students he’s working with as a substitute teacher), because I was just talking to parents today, and I was like ‘I’m not judging’ and I was trying to be real careful with what I was saying and I didn’t even think about how it was trying to be understanding: ‘Yes, I hear what you’re saying; you’re saying this to me,’ and I think it led to more of a discussion on both sides. And it’s really important not to judge a parent and never to use judgemental language because you don’t know where they’re coming from.*

The assignment requiring him to role play a supervisor had thus already carried over to his work as a substitute teacher, making him conscious of alternative ways to converse with students’ parents.

Chris’s example spurred Michelle to give a vivid example of the power of understanding responses in her personal life. Her sister had called her for advice about whether to take a course she had only attended once:

*She really didn’t want to because it was so late, and it was a long class and she was talking about ‘There were weird people in the class; I don’t have time to do the homework.’ And I responded, ‘Well it sounds like you’re coming up with a lot of excuses not to take the class,’ and she realised, ‘You’re right, so I’m not going to take it.’*

Michelle’s response, ‘reflecting’ back to her sister a summary of what she had heard her say, created space for her sister to hear herself again, and then to decide what action to take to solve her dilemma.

It is evident from the examples above that pre-service trainees internalised what emerged from their practice in using non-judgemental responses in both the professional and personal realms of their lives. Robyn points to how challenging this is:

*I just have to get better at actually using it and recognising situations when it can be most useful. Because the situations that it would be most useful in are the most quick to snap judge... Now that we’ve gone through this, it’s kind of at the back of our heads, so we might not get it all the time but every now and then, ‘Wait, I’m gonna try this’.*

Further evidence from the pre-service trainees' perspective in the evaluation section below highlights other lessons gleaned from being observers and discussion facilitators in their supervisory role-play experiences.

### **Evaluation: participant perspectives**

Evaluating our role as discussion facilitators, we are mostly struck by what we learned about non-judgemental understanding. Over the course of this assignment we found that this important responding skill provided the foundation for positive and productive discussions with the experienced teachers we observed. We define 'productive' as opening up the discussions in an exploratory, open-ended way in line with what the experienced teachers wished to discuss, while also providing a secure space for them to gain clearer and deeper insights into their work. As 'instructional supervisors' we set the tone for these discussions through our opening questions. It became apparent early on that the teachers we were working with had expectations for the evaluative canon most commonly found in supervisory discussions. There was a tendency to begin with their evaluation of the lesson, just as Arcario's research predicted. This tendency rarely led to greater awareness of their teaching.

As we gained skills from the course, we directed the discussions to be more descriptive than judgemental, learning to use more open-ended questions to elicit more description from the teachers. Opening questions such as 'What did you notice during the lesson?' sparked deeper conversations than 'How did you feel about the lesson?', which is a catalyst for the discussion to focus on evaluation and then justification and rationalisation of teacher behaviours.

As we began using 'understanding responses,' we were able to listen attentively to the teachers and reflect back what we understood from what they were telling us. This allowed the teachers to hear their thinking again from another person rather than someone else's opinion or judgement. It was at this point that the teachers were able to really dig deeply into their teaching awareness and get something productive out of our 'supervision.' This contrasted sharply with what we did in the initial two stages of the assignment, when we were all over the place with our curiosity questions and not really focused on what the teachers themselves wished to explore. Once the teachers realised they would be listened to and sensitively understood, they were able to let their guard down and work on their growth as teachers.

By setting up this non-judgemental environment and sensitively listening to the teachers, we shifted control of the discussion into their hands. Rather than there being a higher status for the 'supervisor', or in our case for the experienced teacher over the pre-service trainee, we put ourselves on an equal plane and worked with the teachers on their self-expressed needs, issues, fears, etc. By shifting our goal of 'supervision' from the evaluative information-gathering role to a more exploratory or problem solving self-development growth space, we (as listeners) then learned more about teaching and entered into the inner discussions that every reflective teacher has with her/himself. Instead of getting the usual answers that every teacher candidate has heard so many times, such as 'I chose groups because I really wanted them to interact,' we got to hear practising teachers work through their thought process of what happened when students were in groups and how to deal with issues that arose during group work.

Across the span of the assignment we saw a shift in our own behaviours as discussion facilitators. We moved away from asking ‘curiosity’ questions, which focused on what **we** could learn, toward open-ended prompting questions and reflecting/understanding responses, which allowed the teachers to focus on what **they** could learn. By making the teachers’ needs central to the process, they learned about their own teaching and, in the overhear position (i.e. as active listeners), we also learned a great deal about teaching as a by-product. We were privileged to see how experienced teachers were able to reflect on their own teaching and look for areas to change, improve or merely explore.

We also discovered the power of pre-observation discussions in allowing the teachers to focus the observations and discussions around their interests and current needs. These sessions allowed us to create tailored observation tools that would shed light on and document the teachers’ areas of interest or concern. The observation tools we designed led to more descriptive and less evaluative discussions that in turn resulted in more powerful discoveries by the teachers and, vicariously, ourselves.

In summary, we started out diving into the deep end, talking to a teacher as if we were their supervisor, often judging and questioning their decisions. As we went through the stages of the assignment, we began to learn how to swim in the deep end, replacing the judgements with understanding statements. Having to start not really knowing how to lead a conversation allowed us to make mistakes and learn from them. This helped us grow as discussion facilitators and gave us the confidence to feel more like equals with these experienced teachers. In the end, most participants in the course became secure with our roles as ‘supervisors’ and even more secure with our actual roles as teachers with all the concerns and insecurities of those already in the profession. We gained confidence and knowledge necessary to take initiative that may lead to more productive discussions later on with our own supervisors, colleagues, families, and friends.

### **Evaluation: the course instructor perspective**

Upon reading the course participants’ projects, as their instructor, I was struck by how much they learned by first splashing around and later swimming in the deep water. As this innovative assignment proceeded, I realised how much I had to trust pre-service participants to both take on and then learn from a perspective/role considered above their status as novices, that of ‘instructional supervisor’ of experienced teachers. Of course I grew anxious as they became nervous about playing this role and floundered during the first stage of the assignment. As Robyn explained:

*As pre-service teachers, we were used to observing, interviewing and working with teachers (in fieldwork experiences built into the teacher education programme). However we were not used to playing the role of ‘supervisor’ to a teacher that obviously has way more experience than we do. This proved very difficult and frightening in the beginning... We immediately reverted back to the interviewing style we had used so often in fieldwork we did in other classes, asking questions about why they did this and that. We rarely paid any attention to what they wanted to talk about, mostly because that was uncomfortable and new territory for us.*

I purposely left them to their own natural inclinations, trusting their data from the early stages would contrast with their Stage 3 findings as they refined the skills being highlighted during the course.

I liken this experience to treating novice English students as speakers of their target language from their very first entry into my English classes. Even if they speak only a few English words or phrases, if they are truly invited to be ‘members of the club’ of English users, such expectations can propel them forward, to feel a sense of belonging. Why would the same not be true of novice teachers, especially given their thousands of hours of apprenticeship as classroom learners? Levelling the playing field between them and their more experienced counterparts by assuming a role seemingly beyond their novice status can hasten their critical thinking about their new craft.

Robyn mentioned ‘the power we got working as a “supervisor”’.

1. **Robyn** *Now we’ll have more power with another*
2. *supervisor. I’m not afraid of going into that*
3. *situation as much... I feel like I have that power*
4. *now to have some control.*
5. **Bob** *It’s demystified in a way.*
6. **Robyn** *Yeah, it really is.*
7. **Chris** *If you take a walk in someone else’s shoes, you*
8. *have their perspective. Taking that walk, and now*
9. *it’s not ‘You’re this weird, mysterious entity.’*
10. **Robyn** *And you have to be out to get me. You don’t have*
11. *to. Well, it might be, but here’s how you can*
12. *structure (a post-observation discussion). It*
13. *(doing the assignment) was really working with*
14. *in-service teachers and helping us realise they had*
15. *the same questions as we do. They had the same*
16. *fears that we do... Even if you’ve been teaching ten*
17. *years, you have some of the same feelings as a new*
18. *teacher, the same worries.*

Being more at ease with the pre-service teachers’ anxieties, especially during the first two stages, and trusting the process they needed to navigate during each stage of the assignment, was an important lesson for me. I also learned that I could incorporate into this course more structured time to actively listen to their concerns at the critical junctures following the first two stages, which would also create more opportunities for me to model the reflecting responses the assignment expects of them.

The participants also struggled with how to organise their observation notes from Stage 2 of the assignment, their first actual observation. Perhaps I can model how I look at my own observation notes and use them to organise my thoughts about potential points to follow up on during post-observation discussions. This is an important realisation, the power of modelling and of having trainees ‘peer over my shoulder’ at what I do and why. Just as participants gained so much from their collaborative discussions with experienced teachers, getting inside their heads and hearts, why not afford them more opportunities to do the same with their teacher educators?

I am also considering ways to reframe the Supervision of Instruction course. I feel participants will gain a great deal by more actively working on co-operative development response-style skills (Edge 2002) by recording pair work on being both listeners and speakers and playing back their recordings to examine the skills they use and could use during such practice. They could also consider alternative wording of responses as listeners that miss the mark in terms of truly understanding the speaker.

There were also several insights for me, some rediscovered and others freshly learned, about the nature of post-observation discussions. I have re-learned, for example, a great deal about the importance of opening statements during post-observation discussions that can lead teachers and ‘instructional supervisors’ to be more descriptive and non-judgemental instead of falling into the usual prescriptive and evaluative discourse mode. I have also rediscovered the power of the reflecting response style by listeners in helping speakers gain more clarity about their practice. What was fresh for me was how much congruence there was in several key findings among the three pre-service trainees whose work was focused on in this chapter. Also, as the course unfolded I was aware of the initial attraction of the directive and alternative supervision models (Gebhard 1984) for the pre-service trainees, who increasingly realised that non-directive supervision may have as much, if not more, to offer them, even as novice teachers.

Finally, to avoid confusion about my feeling about the role of critique and the more usual kinds of discussions about teaching, I concur with Edge (2011: 91) who clarifies his stance on this issue:

*Let me be clear: this work presents no argument against the usefulness of discussions, critiques and ideas-exchange. Indeed I believe that it is fundamentally important that people learn how to construct and to conduct an argument, how to defend their beliefs and how to stand up for their rights. Co-operative development, however, is meant to provide something different... It offers a challenge/opportunity to extend one’s repertoire for those motivated to learn the discipline of working with non-judgemental discourse.*

Arranging for pre- as well as in-service teachers to realise the power of expanding their repertoire of possibilities as they ‘talk shop’ about their craft was the main goal of the supervisory role play assignment described and analysed in this chapter.

My challenge in my own self-development as a teacher educator is to model and incorporate into my courses more of the response types teacher-listeners can make use of in discussions with colleagues. For example, I can use and have participants practice:

*Thematising*, when the understander asks the speaker if he/she sees any common theme between points that he/she has separately made; *Challenging*, when the understander asks the speaker if he/she sees any inconsistency between points that he/she has separately made; and *Focusing*, when the understander asks the speaker if he/she wants to choose any specific point that he/she has made in order to go into it in more depth. (*ibid.*)

My hope is to expand my own repertoire of response types as understander of the teachers I work with because I have experienced time and again how central such skills are to opening up practitioners to reflect more deeply on the issues that arise in their work. It is only then that they seem to gain clarity about how theories and research connect with the art and craft of teaching.

## Transferability

While a course on supervision of instruction is unusual for pre-service teachers to enrol in, the kinds of activity required of the participants in this assignment could certainly be incorporated into any teacher education programme. The following characteristics of the assignment can take a form that need not include a supervisory role play.

1. Peer observation (or the observation of experienced teachers) and the use of ready-made, self-made and co-constructed observation tools to collect data on specific aspects of teaching.
2. Pre-observation discussions to organise oneself for observing teachers and working from the teachers' lead.
3. Practice using 'reflecting' and other response types (see Edge 1992) when listening to others.
4. Investigations of teaching discussions, noting contrasts between description and prescription, exploratory and evaluative talk, and open-ended and restrictive discourse – and the implications of all these for the professional and personal realms of participants' lives.
5. Arrangements for pre-service trainees to be on a more equal footing with experienced teachers, when feasible, during teacher education programmes so they can feel more like 'members of the club' and not outsiders to the profession they have chosen.

Distilling this list down to the two major themes highlighted in this chapter, we feel the following may be of most relevance to any teacher education programme or course:

- exposure to, and use of, focused observation tools to increase awareness of specific aspects of teaching and learning
- awareness of the usually evaluative language used as well as non-judgemental alternatives when discussing our work with future colleagues, or instructional supervisors, or in any communicative setting.

Peers in teacher education programmes can accomplish the first goal by doing live observations or viewing videos of themselves and of experienced teachers. Guided practice in observing classroom behaviours helps practitioners expand their vision of what they and others do. Consider, for example, how much more precisely present-day athletes examine their own and their opponents' tendencies in their sport as coaches find more effective ways to use videos. Deciding together what observation tools make the most sense in aligning a specific aspect of teaching with how to observe it levels the playing field between more and less experienced practitioners. Theories and research related to practice come alive in the context of viewing visually accessible behaviour that can be replayed and re-examined in great detail.

The second goal is also accomplished by levelling the conversational playing field. By heightening awareness of the structures of conversations about teaching, novice and experienced teachers alike realise how much initiative they can take in structuring their time together and how collaboratively they can work on each other's self-development. Pre-service teachers playing the roles of supervisors learned how to take more initiative in structuring, or at least proposing alternative formats for, their future discussions of teaching. How to truly allow for listening while others speak, fostering cleaner understanding of others' perspectives on their work so they can decide what most resonates for them in such collaborations, is at the core of this second goal. Incorporating programmatic opportunities that enable teachers to work on collaborative conversations (Oprandy 1999), co-operative development skills (Edge 1992, 2002), and empathetic understanding (Curran 1978, Rogers 1980) may prove to be more facilitative of self-awareness of what teachers choose to work on and of how to proceed with such awareness as any other avenue on the route to self-development.

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## Appendix

### Investigation of supervisory behaviour

**Stage 1:** Record a discussion with a teacher, not necessarily the one you will work with on your investigation, about a class they have recently taught. Transcribe what you consider a ‘representative’ one-to-two page excerpt from your discussion, bring four copies of the transcription to class, and be ready to discuss your reflections on that sample of talk. How would you describe the nature of communication during the transcribed excerpt? What patterns did you discover in the discussion? What role(s) did you play in facilitating and/or blocking communication with or by the teacher?

**Stage 2:** Record one post-observation discussion with a teacher whose class you have observed. (The discussion should take place as soon after the observation as possible. Save your notes of the observation also.) Transcribe the verbal communication of a couple of ‘representative’ samples as well as one or two of most interest to you. Attempt to capture the openings of your conversation in addition to a couple of one-to-two page transcribed segments during the heart of each session. Write up an initial analysis of the data you have transcribed 1) in terms of what is of interest to you as you listen back several times to the tapes and re-read the transcriptions and 2) in light of what we are working on in EDUC 214. You may want to consider the supervisory roles you tend to play (for example, in Gebhard’s *Models of Supervision*) and *ideas from Language teaching awareness* (especially Chapter 6), Edge’s *Continuing co-operative development* and other readings in the course, the extent to which you actively listen to the teacher you work with, patterns of communication in the data, etc. At this stage, focus on the data and what it is revealing to you, but also begin to connect your insights with ideas from readings and experiences in the course. Bring two copies and your original of this initial draft of your investigation to class on 20 March. The two copies will be distributed to classmates I will assign to review your work by the following week.

**Feedback on stage 2:** You will give feedback to and receive feedback from two classmates on your initial drafts of the investigation that were distributed on 20 March. This feedback will be given on a form that I will also pass out to you on 20 March. The two reviewers of your draft will spend about ten minutes on 27 March sharing their feedback orally and will give you their written feedback forms as well. You, of course, will reciprocate the favour.

**Stage 3:** This expansion on Stage 2 will necessitate your doing one full cycle of a pre-observation chat, an observation (complete with observation notes), and a post-observation discussion. Your analysis will include the discussion you analysed in Stage 2, but you will reanalyse it in light of all the data you have before you. In Stage 3, you will focus on both post-observation discussions, though if anything of particular importance emerges from the pre-observation discussion, feel free to report on that as well. Write a seven-to-nine page double spaced, typewritten paper on your analysis of the talk, what you learned from the investigation, and what implications there are for your future work as a supervisor. As you did in Stage 2, you will primarily focus on the data and what it reveals to you, but this time you will also make more substantial and explicit connections between your analysis of the data and ideas from readings and experiences in the course.

**Presentation of findings:** You will give an oral and visual (for example, a handout, transparencies, PowerPoint slides) presentation (of not more than 20 minutes) on what you learned from your investigation. Transcribed excerpts should be presented to highlight some of the important points you discovered in analysing your talks with the teacher you worked with for this investigation. Share at least one implication of your investigation for your (possible) future work as a supervisor of instruction.



## **Bob Oprandy**

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# 6

## Cultivating expertise in materials design in pre-service English teacher education

Xiaotang Cheng

### The context

This chapter outlines an innovation in one of the modules of a pre-service English teacher education programme at a tertiary institution in China. It is located in a nationwide context where there is a phenomenal proliferation of English textbooks and a widely perceived need for teachers to be able to evaluate, select and make best use of English language teaching (ELT) materials. English textbooks, which are often regarded as the core of ELT materials in China, play a vital role in classroom teaching. Being able to use textbooks flexibly and creatively is considered an important aspect of the expertise expected of graduates from pre-service English teacher education programmes.

### The role of ELT textbooks in China

Textbooks often play a very important role in language teaching, which is especially the case in the Chinese context of ELT. In China, textbooks are not only a teaching tool; they represent aims, values, methods and philosophy in English teaching and learning. There is a common analogy of textbooks to the 'Bible' (Liu 2004) and a mythical belief that everything in the textbook is correct and everything in the textbook is supposed to be taught, learned and tested (Cheng 2011).

For a very long time, English textbooks in China were 'unified', that is, almost all school students were using the same set of textbooks published by People's Education Press, though the textbooks had had many editions. Most of these books were grammar-oriented. First, grammatical items were selected and sequenced. Then dialogues and texts that contained the targeted grammatical and lexical items were chosen. If it was difficult to find appropriate dialogues or texts that would serve the purpose, the textbook writers would rewrite existing dialogues and texts by inserting certain grammatical items into them, or contrive materials for this purpose.

The situation regarding variety of textbooks began to change when China started a new round of curriculum reform in 2001. By 2012, there were about 50 sets of English textbooks officially approved and listed by China's Ministry of Education for primary and secondary school students (eight- to 18-year olds). Many textbooks currently in use are no longer a single student's book accompanied by a teacher's book.

Rather they consist of a whole set of materials, including the student's book, workbook, the teacher's book, cassettes, CD-ROMs, evaluation (test) book, the readers, etc.

Generally speaking, the proliferation of English textbooks in China has been considered a change for the better, because not only are there more choices for the selection and adoption of textbooks but also the textbooks have multiple components in different media (for example CD and DVD). In addition, ideas and ways of materials development in the UK, US and other countries have been introduced to China through joint textbook publishing projects.

### **A need to develop textbook evaluation skills**

Although there are more textbooks available on the market, classroom teachers still do not have the freedom to choose textbooks for their own classroom teaching. Usually the educational authorities at the city or provincial level make the decision on which textbooks are to be used throughout the city or province. Therefore, textbooks are still often imposed on English teachers. In these circumstances, being able to evaluate and make good use of imposed textbooks has become a vital component of English teachers' professional competence.

Although teachers can to some extent develop such competence during their practical teaching experience, they do need special training in order to obtain real expertise in evaluating and using textbooks. Unfortunately, materials evaluation and development has not always been given enough weight in teacher training programmes. As Richards (2010: IX) put it:

*... teachers sometimes graduate from (teacher-education) programmes with limited experience in materials design, evaluation, adaptation, and implementation ... the status of materials design is sometimes undervalued in graduate education, where it is regarded as a relatively trivial and theory-free activity.*

Many teacher training programmes in China, especially the pre-service teacher training programmes at tertiary institutions, do not provide a separate module on this area. When a programme does have a module on materials evaluation, it is often delivered in a lecture-based format and the focus is usually on how to use textbooks in classroom teaching. As a result, the trainees have very little understanding of the principles behind the design of the books, their merits and potential drawbacks. In other words, they have very little knowledge about why ELT materials are the way they are. Therefore, pre-service teacher education programmes should not only try to help the trainees to develop materials evaluation skills, but also try to do it innovatively.

## **The innovation**

The School of Foreign Languages and Literature of Beijing Normal University, where the author has been working for 20 years, has a long history of training English teachers for primary and secondary schools in China. Currently there are three teacher-training programmes: the Master of Arts programme, the Master of Education programme and the Bachelor of Arts programme. Most students enrolled

in these programmes are pre-service English teacher trainees (some students in the Master of Education programme are in-service English teachers). In all of these three programmes, in addition to the ELT methodology and teaching skills modules, there is a separate module called *Analysing and Designing English Teaching Materials* (modified to cater for the different needs of the three programmes).

The course covers both theoretical and practical issues related to materials development. The formats of the course instruction include lectures, classroom discussion, hands-on activities, and practical assignments and presentations. The major innovation lies in the change of the module content and the way it is delivered. Rather than focusing on the practical skills of how to use textbooks per se, I want the trainees to develop a critical awareness of textbooks, to acquire sound knowledge about why textbooks (good and bad) are designed as they are, to experiment with alternative designs, and to learn ways of adapting materials to cater for the needs of different contexts.

### **Developing a critical awareness of ELT materials**

Years of teacher training experience (both pre-service and in-service) have taught me that teachers will not be able to make the best use of textbooks until they have developed a critical awareness of how and why textbooks have the design features that they do, especially with regard to potential deficiencies. Many classroom teachers have a mythical belief in the textbook they are using, even though it is often imposed on them by educational authorities. These teachers teach to the book, by the book and for the book. As some teachers often say, if they do not teach everything in the book, students will have poor grades in examinations. They believe everything in the book can be chosen as a test item.

My first attempt is to make the trainee teachers question this myth, so in the introductory talk, I throw these questions to the students:

*Do students really need a textbook in order to learn English?*

*Can we (teachers) teach without a textbook?*

I am not surprised to hear students saying 'Yes, both students and teachers need a textbook.' The reasons they often list are as follows: textbooks provide the standardised content, which helps to guarantee the quality of the teaching; textbooks are written by experts and inspected by educational authorities, hence they must be of good quality; textbooks provide convenience for teaching so that teachers do not need to spend a lot of time looking for their own materials; a class without a textbook is no class at all.

After the trainees have voiced their views, I tell them that what they have said could be absolutely right, but then I draw their attention to a fact that in many classrooms in other parts of the world, especially the Western countries, there are no such standardised textbooks as those in China. Many teachers do not even use any textbook at all. Then I introduce the students to some literature on the role and value of ELT materials, such as the merits and drawbacks of using textbooks listed by Richards (2001).

In order to convince the students of the importance of a critical awareness of ELT materials, I often use examples (sample pages from textbooks) to demonstrate the possible deficiencies of commercial ELT materials. One of these deficiencies is the discrepancy between what the textbooks say about English (for example structure, meaning and use) and the English actually used in the real world (data from corpora). For example, model conversations like the one below are common in English textbooks in China:

*A: Hello, how are you?*

*B: I'm fine. Thank you, and you?*

*A: I'm fine too, thank you!*

I often ask the trainees if they have ever greeted or been greeted by someone in English like this. Of course, most of the time, the answer is, 'No'. From examples like this, I move on to a discussion on the use of authentic and contrived texts in materials development, which is one of the recursively debated issues among materials developers. To follow up the discussion, I ask the students to scrutinise the model conversations and reading texts in some textbooks to find more examples of unnatural language.

My major intention is not to shake the trainees' trust in textbooks in use. Rather, I want them to develop a critical awareness of the merits and drawbacks of commercial textbooks. I want them to realise there are no perfect textbooks. At the same time, I remind them that textbooks have drawbacks not always because the textbook writers are not qualified or they do not work hard. Both theoretical controversies and problems of practicality may have handcuffed textbook writers.

Traditional textbook analysis tends to focus on the textbooks per se, i.e. what is presented, what is the design (exercises and activities), and how the exercises and activities are to be conducted in the classroom. Trained like this, teachers would have little knowledge about why the textbooks are the way they are. Thus when they use or adapt these materials for classroom teaching, they are likely to do so blindly. However, if teachers have developed a critical awareness of textbooks, they are likely to make informed choices as to which parts of the textbooks they should use and which they can either omit or adapt, thus making the best use of the textbook.

### **Using language corpora in materials evaluation**

For many years, ELT researchers have wondered how closely the language textbooks teach matches the language speakers and writers use (Harwood, 2010). Recent research has shown that, 'much of the language taught in commercial materials differs markedly from the language that is actually used in spoken and written discourse' (*ibid.*: 9). In the past two or three decades, there have been abundant discussions on how to use language corpora in ELT materials evaluation and design (for example Willis 2011, Carter et al. 2011). Language corpora make it possible for material developers to select authentic, natural and typical language. Improved descriptions of the language made possible by corpus-based research provide a basis for improved pedagogy, both by providing better reference tools (for example grammar books and dictionaries), and by enabling better decisions as to which lexical items, senses, and grammatical structures should be included in ELT materials.

Prior to enrolment in the module, the trainee teachers have very little knowledge about language corpora. Therefore, to start with, I normally introduce them to the basic concepts of language corpus, the major English corpora available, the areas where a language corpus can be used, and the tools needed when using language corpora. We can then start to look at how useful corpora can be.

For example, many ELT materials in use draw heavily on traditional grammar references. However, teachers often complain that there are discrepancies between some rules that textbooks present and actual language use. As they see the textbook as the ultimate authority, they become confused and frustrated.

A case in point is the traditional Chinese textbook presentation of ‘the conditionals’ as follows:

*If it rains tomorrow, we will stay at home. (First conditional.)*

*If I were a millionaire, I would travel around the world. (Second conditional.)*

*If you hadn't overslept this morning, you wouldn't have missed your flight. (Third conditional.)*

Textbooks tend to be rigid on the structures (especially the verb forms) in the two parts of the conditional sentence complex. However, information from corpora shows that the structures of conditionals have much more variety than this. Below are two examples:

*If I feel like it, I eat with my fingers, or out of a can.*

*I'm on my own here, if you don't count the cat.*

As trainees come to understand *why* some of their textbooks contain the weaknesses they do, and as they learn that there are other authoritative sources to which they can refer, their frustration decreases. Then, as they come to see their own role as more active agents in improving and adapting the materials that they are given to teach, a positive transformation takes place in trainees' views of their own potential and responsibility.

Similar work is possible with regard to lexical issues once I have introduced the students to the use of concordances. In order to make my input talk and illustration accessible and convincing, I often start with in-class discussion of items that teachers and students often find puzzling. For example, many ELT materials tend to attach much importance to the differences in meaning and use between verbal phrases such as *die of* and *die from*. I often ask students to work in groups or pairs to share what they were taught about the use and usage of these language items. Surprisingly (perhaps not), students from different parts of the country often have the same or very similar ideas (knowledge). For example, about *die of* and *die from*, very often the students unanimously say that *die of* means someone dies because of internal reasons, such as disease or hunger; whereas *die from* means someone dies because of external factors, such as traffic accidents or natural disasters. Then using the university network, I log onto the internet and open the web page of British National Corpus (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Homepage of British National Corpus



To find evidence, I simply enter *die of* and *die from* in the search box. The students are very much surprised to find the rules they have mastered so well are not really true. The examples retrieved from British National Corpus show that *die of* and *die from* are interchangeable in most contexts.

Given that it is not feasible for the students to do online corpus search activities in the class, an important part of the extension activities I do with students to reinforce this perspective are out-of-class tasks. I ask students to visit some websites where free access to corpus search is available and use one of them to search some puzzling language items as I have done in class. Below is an example of the tasks:

*Use Cobuild Bank of English (or other corpora) to concordance some grammatical or lexical items that Chinese learners of English often have trouble with or items that you have found confusing. Compare your search results with what is said in the English textbooks you have used or you are familiar with. Prepare a 10-minute presentation of your findings.*

Generally speaking, the students find assignments like these motivating and challenging. They are eager to have a try with this new but unfamiliar tool and interested in testifying to what they have learned (or been taught) before. A by-product of this introduction to language corpora in materials design is that many students have been brought very close to another area of linguistic inquiry, that is, corpus linguistics, which many students have become seriously interested in.

### **Hands-on activities in the classroom**

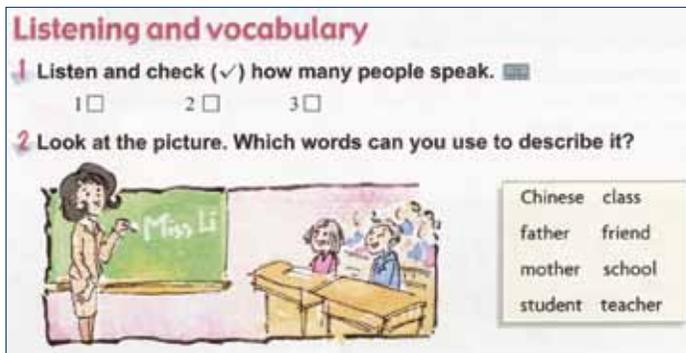
Modules such as *Analysing and Designing ELT Materials* are bound to have a lot of theory-based practical work. On the one hand, ELT materials ‘draw on a wide variety of theoretical foundations, since they reflect particular assumptions about the nature of language, of second language learning, and of second language teaching’ (Richards 2010: IV). Therefore, the pre-service trainees do need theoretical input, such as principles in materials development and implications from second language acquisition research for materials design. On the other hand, analysing and designing materials involves real practical work. Only when we examine in detail how an activity, a page,

a unit or a whole volume is designed do we have an opportunity to see how and why materials are designed as they are. This is especially the case for pre-service trainees who have little existing experience of using textbooks in the language classroom.

In this module, the trainees are often asked to analyse sample pages or activities from textbooks in groups. Normally I photocopy sample pages from textbooks and distribute them to the students, who are divided into groups of three or four. Sometimes all the groups work on the same sample activities, sometimes they work on different activities. Specific questions are provided to guide their discussion, such as: Are the instructions clear enough? Does learning actually take place when students do the exercise or activity? If yes, what is being learned? Is the exercise or activity motivating enough? In what ways can the design be improved? What problems may arise when the activity or exercise is actually used in the classroom? When they finish, a representative from each group goes to the front of the classroom and reports their discussion to the whole class.

Here is an example of the hands-on activities: the trainees were given part of a page (Figure 2) from a textbook widely used in China and asked to discuss and comment on the design, focusing on three questions: (1) What are the students supposed to do? (2) What language knowledge is learned and what language skills are practised? (3) How effective are the activities?

**Figure 2:** Sample activities from New Standard English



It was surprising (and rewarding) that the trainees had very different views. Some said just asking students to tell how many people are speaking is a silly exercise because no comprehension is involved. Others disagree strongly saying that identifying the (number and roles) of speakers is an important communication skill, which needs to be practised. Some trainees said asking the learners which words can be used to describe the picture is not effective because they probably do not know what to say, while others said this can be a very good opportunity for students to observe the situation (the classroom) and tell what is happening and the possible relationship between the people in the picture. By doing this, the students learn the words in an implicit way because the primary focus is on meaning.

## Mini projects in analysing and designing materials

Asking the trainees to do mini-projects is another major innovation for the module. In addition to the hands-on activities in class, I often ask the trainees to work in groups of three or four and conduct mini-projects. The purpose is to provide the trainees with opportunities to apply what they have learned in the class in more independent practical work of analysing or designing ELT materials. Below are some of the mini-projects the trainees have done:

1. *Compare two versions of the English Syllabus (Standards) for secondary school students. Identify the major differences and discuss whether the changes are justifiable.*
2. *Compare two sample units from Junior English for China (an English textbook used from the 1990s) and Go for it (a Chinese edition of Go for it published by Thomas Learning, which is widely used in China now).*
3. *Design a 20-minute lesson to teach one of the following grammar items:*
  - a. *the past simple tense*
  - b. *can; can't; may; may not;*
  - c. *the relative clause.*

The trainees are usually given one week to do these projects in groups of three or four, depending on the workload of the projects. In class, the groups make presentations of what they have done followed by class discussion. Many of the presentations have statistical analysis of empirical data collected from questionnaire surveys, interviews with learners, teachers and materials writers.

To help the trainees understand what they are expected to do, I sometimes briefly show them the presentation slides that previous groups of students have done and remind them of the possible pitfalls. I also insist that each group of students find a time and a place to meet and discuss rather than simply divide the work among them and finish their work individually. I even ask them to take photos of the 'discussion scene'.

When the students present their work in class, I (and other students) ask questions and give comments. I am more concerned with how they have done the work than with what they have found. Grades are given to each presentation, which are converted to form part of the final grades.

## Evaluation and reflection

Timely and appropriate evaluation of teaching practice provides important and useful information for reflection and improvement. The module *Analysing and Designing English Teaching Materials* is evaluated in two ways.

As standard course evaluation, all students are required by the university to provide feedback on the modules they have taken. Feedback from the students shows that the course has made them think about things that are very important but they have never thought about. One of the assignments asked students to investigate some of the grammatical and lexical problems that have puzzled them in their past English learning experiences. By doing this assignment, many of the students found that

much of what they had learned from middle school English textbooks is wrong; for example, the rules about the use of passive voice and the differences between confusing idiomatic expressions such as *be made of* and *be made from*.

Besides the evaluation administered by the university system, the trainees fill out an evaluation form especially designed for this module. The form has different versions to cater for the different groups of trainees. The results are usually very encouraging. On most of the 5-point Likert scale items, the average score is close to or above 4, suggesting the trainees have very positive feedback for the module.

In order to find out how useful the module is for the trainees' actual work, I asked about 50 graduated trainees (trainees who have graduated from the programme, most of whom were teachers at the time of the survey) to fill out an evaluation sheet adapted from the one that is used at the end of the module. An open question (Question 6) was added to elicit the teachers' comments on how beneficial the module was for their practical work. See Appendix for the evaluation form used.

Not surprisingly, the results of most of the questions are very close to the results obtained at the end of the module (when the trainees had just finished the module). Responses to the last question provide interesting and useful feedback and 43 respondents said the course was helpful. In the comments below, names used are pseudonyms:

*After the course, I have a better knowledge of adapting materials in my teaching. And I know how to avoid some weak points of the book and change certain content to make it better suit the students.*

Zhang

*In my practical teaching, I think I benefited a lot from the part of 'Need Analysis'. Because taking learner's need into consideration enables my teaching to be more meaningful and caters to the students' practical requirement for their future.*

Zhao

Only three respondents said the course was not so practical or not as useful as expected. Below are two comments:

*The course has expanded my related knowledge, but my colleagues almost have no such knowledge. Therefore sometimes in the practical teaching I feel aidless.*

Tian

*I continue to be a teacher in senior high school and find the subject beneficial to me, but it is not as useful as I expected.*

Luo

Among the students' feedback on the module, I'm particularly concerned with the students' reaction to the assignments and presentations, which take a lot of time and effort on their part. Every term, for about six or seven sessions, the students present the results of their assignment. I'm concerned with this because most Chinese students expect the teacher to teach them knowledge in class rather than

the students to teach each other. Feedback from the students' evaluation shows that some students do have some resistance to the assignments and presentations in the beginning but realise the value as the module moves on.

## Relevance

Although the development, adoption and classroom use of English textbooks in China might be different from other parts of the world, what is reported in this chapter has relevance to other ELT contexts around the world. Many researchers have argued for the need for both pre- and in-service teacher education programmes to include a component of materials development. In contexts where teachers have more freedom in choosing and using textbooks, the expertise in evaluating, selecting and designing materials will enable them to make full use of this freedom. Otherwise, this freedom would only mean freedom to do nothing. In contexts where teachers have no or little freedom in selecting materials (for example a textbook is imposed on them), teachers also need expertise in evaluating textbooks. If teachers have a better understanding of why the textbooks are the way they are, they will be better informed on how to adapt the materials more effectively.

It should be pointed out that what and how the trainees have learned in this module has relevance to other areas of learning. For example, developing a critical awareness is necessary for all areas of academic inquiry and practical work. Getting students to be actively engaged in materials selection and adaptation (and the insights and development that happen) are transferable to the teaching and learning of other modules and courses. Learning the basics of language corpora has not only armed the trainees with a new tool but introduced them to new territories of linguistic and educational explorations. Some of the students have used corpora and corpus search in their thesis writing.

## Self-development

In Chinese there is a saying that teachers and students learn together, which means when teachers teach, they not only help students to learn but also learn a lot of new things themselves. By teaching this module I have learned a lot about how the pre-service teacher trainees perceive the textbooks they used when they were in primary and secondary schools. Some students said they thought the books they used were very boring and some of the stories and conversations were very silly.

As a textbook writer myself, I have found that very often textbook writers' understanding of what and how students (would like to) learn is somewhat different to what and how students actually learn. For example, in China, many textbook writers, curriculum designers and educational officials insist that English textbooks should select materials (texts) about China, such as Chinese history, culture and modernity so that students will be able to talk about these things in English. However, when I asked the trainees to discuss this issue in class, most of them disagreed. They argued that general texts about present and past China will not be motivating enough because these texts are very likely to be about things that students are already familiar with. This argument was actually supported by the results of one of the mini-projects that the trainees did during

the course. In this mini-project, a questionnaire survey was done among some middle school students to find out what topics and subject matters middle school students are interested in. The results showed that topics related to China, such as the Great Wall and Chinese food, were not really favoured by students.

When teaching this module, I have also learned that there are discrepancies between what I preach about materials design and how my own textbooks are actually designed. During class lecture or hands-on activities, I have used many sample texts, exercises and activities from textbooks that I have authored or co-authored with other writers. When the trainees pointed out the problems with these samples, I realised that some of the exercises and activities should not be considered as well designed according to the principles that I have preached. For example, when the students analysed a sample page of a textbook that I wrote (they didn't know it was a page from my book), some of them said the model conversations were not authentic and natural enough. This often made me think either the principles that I have preached should be modified, or there are factors that have prevented me (maybe other writers as well) from producing ideal textbooks. This also made me have a better understanding of what is meant when textbook editors say authors are trying 'to please all the people all the time' (Young 1990, cited from Harwood 2010: 14).

Much of what I have taught in and learned from the module was put into the second edition of my own book *Analyzing and Designing English Language Teaching Materials*, which was published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in 2011. A lot of the theoretical input and examples that I have used in class come from the manuscript; the insights from classroom discussion have made their way into my book in various ways. Upon finishing the manuscript, I realised how my research and my teaching duties can be integrated and benefit each other.

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## Appendix

### Evaluation sheet for analysing and designing English teaching materials

1. How useful do you think the following course topics were?						
1	Examining syllabuses	1	2	3	4	5
2	Needs analysis	1	2	3	4	5
3	Features of good materials	1	2	3	4	5
4	Research issues on materials development	1	2	3	4	5
5	Language corpora in materials development	1	2	3	4	5
6	Evaluating and selecting materials	1	2	3	4	5
7	Adapting materials	1	2	3	4	5
8	Producing original materials	1	2	3	4	5

2. How useful do you think the following teaching formats were?						
1	The teacher talks most of the time	1	2	3	4	5
2	During the teacher's talk, students participate in discussion	1	2	3	4	5
3	The students talk most of the time	1	2	3	4	5
4	The student representatives do presentations	1	2	3	4	5

3. What do you think of the content of the course?						
1	The contents were up to date	1	2	3	4	5
2	The contents were well-organised	1	2	3	4	5
3	The contents were systematic	1	2	3	4	5
4	The contents were useful and practical	1	2	3	4	5

4. During the course, you were asked to do several assignments and presentations. What did you think of them?						
1	They were useful	1	2	3	4	5
2	They were too challenging	1	2	3	4	5
3	I enjoyed doing them	1	2	3	4	5
4	Every group member tried to contribute	1	2	3	4	5
Do you have any suggestions for the improvement of the assignments?						

5. What do you think of the course in general?						
1	It was useful	1	2	3	4	5
2	It was practical	1	2	3	4	5
3	The contents of the course were up to date	1	2	3	4	5
4	It was too challenging	1	2	3	4	5
5	It was well-organised and delivered	1	2	3	4	5
6	The teacher's teaching methods were suitable	1	2	3	4	5
7	I enjoyed the course	1	2	3	4	5

6. What line of work have you been involved in since you finished your MA/MEd studies at Beijing Normal University? In what ways and to what extent has the course been beneficial to your work? Please describe briefly.

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# 7

## Communication skills: a blended learning approach for pre-service teachers

Linda M Hanington and Mary Ellis

### Introduction

This chapter describes a project to transform a traditionally delivered course for pre-service teachers in Singapore into a blended-learning one. *Blended* refers to courses that combine online components with traditional face-to-face components (Garrison and Kanuka 2004, Graham 2006). Our course, however, differs from many blended learning courses in that participants choose their individual 'blend' according to their personal learning styles and needs.

In this chapter, we first set out the context for the innovation and explore how a desire to meet the needs of target participants is typically subject to a number of constraints. After outlining our response to these, we then reflect on insights from feedback collected from participants and tutors during the staged introduction of the re-developed course. In the section on transferability, we show how our experience is informing other courses for pre-service teachers and possibly also programmes for in-service teachers in Singapore. Hopefully, other teacher-educators may be able to draw on our insights when designing online or blended materials for their trainees.

### Context

In Singapore, all pre-service teachers entering the school system are recruited and employed by the Ministry of Education prior to their training. They receive a salary during their training and are required to serve a three-year bond – that is, to stay in service for at least three years – on completion. There are four broad categories of training programme: diploma, degree, and postgraduate diploma (PGDE) Secondary and Primary. Pre-service training, leading to qualified teacher status for all these teachers, is provided by the National Institute of Education (NIE) which is an institute of Nanyang Technological University (NTU). As the sole training provider for pre-service education and teacher training (PRESETT) for these teachers, NIE works closely with the Ministry of Education to ensure that beginning teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills relevant to education in Singapore today and for the future.

There are four official languages in Singapore (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) but all state school education is English-medium. It is therefore important that all

teachers can communicate well in English and this is something the Ministry of Education is very concerned to ensure. In 2010, Mr S Iswaran, then Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Trade and Industry and Ministry of Education, said:

*We must strengthen a commitment to English which embraces all aspects of school life through developing an English language environment which motivates and provides ample opportunities for all members of staff and students to further enhance and enrich their English.*

(Iswaran 2010)

To help pre-service teachers do this, NIE conducts a number of language-related courses, but the Communication Skills for Teachers (CST) course discussed in this chapter is currently the only one that is compulsory for all pre-service teachers regardless of their programme of study or their subject specialisation. This course broadly aims to increase the teachers' awareness of features of communication such as purpose, audience and context and to enhance their ability to communicate professionally and effectively in school-based contexts. The importance of being a good model of Standard Singapore English in speech and writing is emphasised and resources are introduced to help participants enhance their own language proficiency.

Feedback from both course participants and tutors on the version of the course for PDGE Secondary indicated that a 'one-size fits all approach' was not suitable for this group given the very diverse backgrounds of these pre-service teachers. While most have recently completed their first degrees in Singapore or overseas, many are mid-career professionals. Some have studied English language and linguistics as a first degree, whereas others have taken subjects such as engineering. Quite a number of them have done some 'contract teaching': a teaching stint prior to committing themselves to a more permanent position, training and the accompanying bond. This diversity adds richness to course discussions but also presents challenges, especially in terms of managing expectations and supporting skills development.

In addition to considering how best to meet the needs of a very diverse group, the course developers (the writers of this chapter and another colleague, Mark Wilkinson), also needed to align the initiatives with institutional imperatives. *A Teacher Education Model for the 21st Century* (NIE, 2009) highlights six key recommendations for improving teacher education in Singapore. Recommendation Four, *Programme Refinement and an Extended Pedagogical Repertoire*, includes NIE's proposals to increase blended learning and effective e-pedagogies:

*The exponential growth of knowledge and the advancement of technology have changed the needs of students in the 21st century. Teachers need to develop students to be knowledge-driven, collaborative and technologically savvy learners.*

(NIE, 2009: 26)

Re-developing the CST course was seen as an opportunity to encourage some of these qualities in future teachers. It was also seen as a way of helping pre-service teachers appreciate changes in modes of communication in today's world. Although not overtly a methodology course, it is hoped that the approaches and activities experienced by the participants will act as models for ones they may later use themselves with their own students. The importance of teacher-educators modelling target teaching behaviours is discussed by Lunenberg et al. (2007). Their article includes this salient comment that 'teachers teach as they are taught and not as they are taught to teach' (Blum cited in Lunenberg et al. 2007: 588).

### **Innovation**

Consideration of how best to meet course participants' diverse needs and deliver a useful learning experience, and of how, at the same time, to respond to institutional imperatives by familiarising teachers with advances in technology for learning, led us to re-develop and pilot a blended version of the CST course in the period September 2010 to December 2011. This is not the first time e-learning has been incorporated into NIE's courses, but it is probably the most comprehensive programme so far with all the materials available online and with participants being able to self-select components to make up a personalised blended course. The concept of personalisation in education has been researched and discussed for some 15 years and has found its way into wider arguments in the reform of all public services (Keamy et al. 2007). Information and communications technology (ICT) is seen as a key enabler in personalising learning. Giving our pre-service teachers the opportunity to personalise their own learning through a blended programme may encourage them to use similar approaches with their own students.

The project also provided us with an opportunity to review and revise the current materials so that the course remained pedagogically sound and relevant, and to introduce appropriate kinds of interactivity available through Web 2.0 platforms. The course materials have always focused on scenarios that the participants might encounter in their schools and, in re-developing the materials, we tried to include local examples as much as possible. So, for example, the presentations the participants analyse in the oral communication module are given by Singaporeans and the content is something we feel the participants as teachers can relate to.

One of the challenging but also interesting aspects of this project has been negotiating existing constraints or parameters. The issue of institutional imperatives has already been mentioned. Two further significant constraints were the need to innovate within the established framework of the pre-existent course and the choice of delivery platform. Each is explored in the following two sections.

### **Re-developing the CST course**

The original CST runs for 12 weeks with one two-hour tutorial a week. In re-developing the course, we could not change the overall length and the broad topic areas as they had been agreed for all four cohorts. The main aim was to make it possible for individual students in the PGDE Secondary cohort to be more self-directed in their study and to tailor some aspects of the course to suit their individual needs and preferred learning styles.

To facilitate individual tailoring of the course by participants, the content was divided into five discrete modules, each roughly equivalent to two tutorials with the associated tutorial preparation and follow-up. The five modules are as follows:

- Oral Communication Skills
- Written Communication Skills
- Pronunciation
- Classroom Interaction
- Voice and Vocal Health.

Participants are invited to use the materials in the modules in one of three ways based on their individual preferences and experience. They can:

1. come to tutorials and use the online materials as directed by the tutor in conjunction with discussions, practice activities and other class-based materials
2. choose to study the materials online, selecting those aspects most relevant to their needs. If they study online they are required to submit a reflective blog
3. choose to come to tutorials and then use the online materials for further studies or re-enforcement of the work done in class.

We decided to require each participant to choose to do a minimum of one and a maximum of three modules online. The minimum ensured all the participants experienced working online and the maximum allowed tutors to retain contact with them throughout the course and to ensure they had opportunities to participate in classroom discussions with their peers. In addition to the modules above, one compulsory face-to-face tutorial was conducted at the beginning of the course in order to provide a general overview and orientation to the materials and choices. The other compulsory face-to-face sessions were used for assessment and feedback.

The discrete modules followed the existing content areas for this course, so the changes in organisation were relatively minor; more a re-distribution of time allocations. For example, the previous time allocation for classroom interaction was one and a half tutorials starting directly after the written test. This never worked very well in practice as it was difficult to get the participants to focus on a new topic after a test. The new allocation is two tutorials.

The main changes related to content. The first change was to the introductory session, a compulsory face-to-face tutorial. This was because participants needed to be briefed on the course (as before) and on their study choices but, more importantly, key threads that pervade the course needed to be introduced upfront so that participants would see their application throughout the modules. Given that not all the participants would attend all subsequent tutorials, we could no longer rely on these threads emerging and being reinforced by tutors throughout the course. As a result, an early focus was given to the concepts of audience, purpose and context in communication, along with a discussion of differences and similarities in spoken and written communication. This change has actually improved the shape of the course

giving a much better overview from the start. In addition, materials for the first session were made available online to fit with the rest of the course and to act as a point of reference for participants later.

The most significant changes in content were in adapting and revising text book materials that had only previously been delivered face-to-face so that the new materials could stand alone as online materials. The new materials had to fulfill two sets of criteria. They had to perform the same role as previous print materials in helping participants prepare for, and participate in, face-to-face tutorial sessions, and they had effectively to support those who chose to study the complete module online without attending tutorials. Each of the new modules therefore started with a section called preparation, which all students were expected to complete. Figure 1 shows the activities in preparation for work on pronunciation.

**Figure 1:** Preparation tasks (Pronunciation module)

**1. Varieties of English in Singapore**

Make a note for yourself of some of the people and contexts in which you have used English over the past 24 hours.

Consider the following questions:

- What form of English did you use when you spoke to these people? English, Standard Singapore English or something else / in between? Why did you choose this form?
- If you were writing an email to some of the people with whom you spoke, would you use the same variety of English? Why / why not?
- What do you think are the main differences between English and Standard Singapore English?
- What form / forms of English will you use in school? When and why?

If possible complete these discussion questions in small groups.

**Pronunciation and the Teacher in Singapore**

Read the following text about varieties of English in Singapore and implications for the teacher. [Click here to access the text.](#)

If you come for to the tutorial for this module you will discuss your views in class.

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**2. Intelligibility**

Do you know of any examples of communication breakdown due to speakers' varieties of English? What caused the breakdown?

Here is an example:

I got on a crowded bus the other day behind an elderly lady. She suddenly shouted something that sounded like 'ms ha'. I looked around because I thought she had dropped her hat (my hat). She said it again and that was when I realised she was warning me to move my hand which was in the way of the door closing. She was saying 'mind (your) hand'!

In this case, because the lady did not pronounce the consonant sounds at the end of her words, it was virtually impossible for me to guess what the original words were. If the door had closed faster this kind attempt at communication would have had painful consequences.

 Think of two examples of your own. If you come to the tutorial for this module, be prepared to share your examples during the session.

A number of factors can lead to a breakdown in communication. Problems understanding a speaker's pronunciation is one major issue. In the next section, we look at some issues with pronunciation.

The other sections of the modules were primarily for participants who were working online. We therefore had to ensure the materials were clearly and logically organised and linked, that they encouraged reflection and application and provided enough variety to retain interest and motivation. Trying to maintain the task-based approach we tend to use in class and integrating various kinds of interactivity were felt to be effective ways to engage the participants and give them ideas they could apply to their own online materials later. Some of the items we included were:

- Videos with reflection questions – Figure 2 shows an example of participants being asked to apply some of the ideas in earlier sections to further video samples, and to consider the implications for their own performance.

**Figure 2:** Video analysis activities from Oral Communication module



**2. Video Analysis**

After working on either or both of the above sections, apply what you have learned by analysing one of the following videos. You can do this with some friends or on your own.

**Video 1 Adam Khoo**

This is the *Adam Khoo* video from Pronunciation module which you may have watched earlier. This time we are not looking at specific features of the language he uses but rather at how he gets his message across. Note the things that you feel make this an effective presentation for his target audience.

**Video 2 A Philanthropic Initiative**

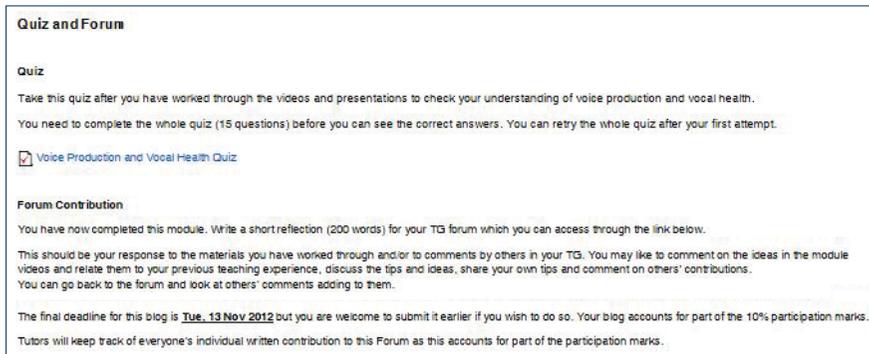
This is a short video presentation about a *philanthropic initiative involving schools*. The video will start as you open the page but it is actually embedded slightly further down.

Listen to and watch the woman presenting. Think about her pronunciation, the words she stresses and also how what she says is organised. Compare her section with the short section at the end where the man is speaking. Why is he so much more difficult to understand?

Consider one or two implications for your presentations.

- Quizzes – for example, interactive discrimination quizzes for pronunciation or to check the participants’ understanding of the concepts of audience, purpose and context.
- Discussion forums – for example, at the end of the Voice and Vocal Health module participants take a quiz to help them review what they have learned. They then contribute to a forum discussion on the ideas presented in the module, relating these to their previous experiences while teaching and/or contributing further tips and ideas of their own (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Quiz and forum at the end of Voice and Vocal Health module



**Quiz and Forum**

**Quiz**

Take this quiz after you have worked through the videos and presentations to check your understanding of voice production and vocal health.

You need to complete the whole quiz (15 questions) before you can see the correct answers. You can retry the whole quiz after your first attempt.

Voice Production and Vocal Health Quiz

**Forum Contribution**

You have now completed this module. Write a short reflection (200 words) for your TG forum which you can access through the link below.

This should be your response to the materials you have worked through and/or to comments by others in your TG. You may like to comment on the ideas in the module videos and relate them to your previous teaching experience, discuss the tips and ideas, share your own tips and comment on others’ contributions. You can go back to the forum and look at others’ comments adding to them.

The final deadline for this blog is Tue, 13 Nov 2012 but you are welcome to submit it earlier if you wish to do so. Your blog accounts for part of the 10% participation marks. Tutors will keep track of everyone’s individual written contribution to this Forum as this accounts for part of the participation marks.

- Opportunities for participants to record themselves and compare their version with models provided by speakers of Singapore English – for example, by reading aloud short sections from various school textbooks to practise rhythm, stress and pausing.

As the materials had to stand alone, we needed to provide suggested answers to tasks, in the form of points, notes or model answers/recordings so that participants could confirm that their ideas were generally in the right direction. Figure 4 shows an example from the Written Communication module. Participants open a link to the email document, complete the task and then compare their answers with the suggested answers provided.



and weaknesses of the presentation (paralleling the online reflection task) and then get students in groups to apply something they had noted to a mini-presentation of their own and give each other feedback (an in-class extension).

It was not expected that those coming to class would cover all the material available online, and indeed, as one person commented during focus group meetings, it was likely that if participants worked online they covered more content, but if they came to class they had more interaction. With this in mind, a factor in the choice of platform was the availability of the site post-course so that they could all refer to the materials when they started teaching. For example, we hoped that they would refer to a section on handling parent-teacher meetings before their first experience of these. In class we generally only had time to consider one or two scenarios on this topic, with more made available online.

Needless to say, trying to develop materials that would be able to support all these different requirements was quite challenging!

### **Choice of platform**

This was a third constraint and it remains an ongoing consideration. The institutional platform in use at the start of the project was Blackboard Version 8. Using Blackboard would have capitalised on the participants' familiarity with the platform, but did not meet other criteria linked to functionality and post-course access. The first pilot module was delivered using Google sites which worked quite well when dealing with a discrete module, but for the full programme a more integrated platform was required. Staff members at the Centre for e-learning (CeL), who provided the technical support for the re-development project, wanted to extend their experience of different platforms and together we chose Moodle as the delivery platform for the full course. Although Moodle had the functionality we required, it was not entirely satisfactory (at least in the way we set up the course) and a number of students found it difficult to locate materials, something Mary comments on in her reflection later in this paper. NIE is currently upgrading its version of Blackboard to Version 9, which has increased functionality, and we are planning to use this platform when the blended programme is extended to include another group of pre-service teachers. After trying out this option, we will compare the advantages of the two platforms to see whether sacrificing the introduction to a publicly available platform and having the materials available post-course is compensated for by ease of access and facility of use during the programme.

### **Piloting**

With up to 800 participants taking the PGDE Secondary in any one semester, the course developers and course chair were concerned about piloting the new materials with the whole cohort, particularly in terms of the stability of the technology. We therefore chose to pilot the programme with selected groups in stages and in parallel with other groups following the existing version.

The stages are outlined here:

- September 2010:** Piloting of initial module, Pronunciation, with seven tutorial groups (about 140 participants).
- January 2011:** Development of other further modules.
- September 2011:** Piloting of complete programme with seven tutorial groups.
- January 2012:** Introduction of programme for all tutorials groups in cohort.

Data was gathered systematically from the pilot groups taking the programme in September 2010 and 2011. These pilot groups were taught by full-time staff who were either involved in the materials development or familiar with the project. All data collection and reporting was cleared by the university's internal review board, which ensures the ethical collection and use of data, before piloting commenced. Feedback was obtained anonymously and fictitious names have been used for the quotes, all of which are from pre-service teachers from the PGDE Secondary cohort of September 2011.

## Evaluation of the innovation

Feedback from two phases of implementation (September 2010 and September 2011) is presented in this section. Feedback and implications from the initial pilot are summarised briefly followed by a discussion of specific aspects of the full pilot.

### Initial pilot

We piloted our first blended learning module (Pronunciation) in October 2010 with seven tutorial groups. We were especially interested in evaluation from the inaugural pilot which could help us in revising and improving future modules and we highlight here a few items.

The majority of students surveyed (96 per cent) found the site easy to navigate. In focus groups, some participants also mentioned that they liked the clarity and ease of navigation as well as links to other resources. Most (89 per cent) found the pilot module useful. They liked the local relevance and the useful practice materials. Students also commented positively on the flexibility of being able to do the module in their own time and on being able to record and listen to their voice repeatedly.

The students also identified some problematic issues. For example they felt the visual aspect needed improvement, the pages were too wordy, streaming of videos was slow and the site should be compatible with browsers other than *Firefox*, which was the one we advised them to use. They also requested more feedback from tutors.

As a result of participants' comments, we primarily made changes to the technical aspects of the course. Most significantly we moved from Google sites to Moodle for the full pilot. Partly this was because we needed a platform that would allow delivery

of a comprehensive course with several modules, but we also hoped it might increase compatibility with browsers and reduce the streaming problem. With Moodle, there was no negative feedback about streaming, (which might also have been because we changed from embedding videos to linking directly to external sites to avoid any copyright issues), but we still had an issue with applications only working with different browsers.

In addition, materials were modified and the wordiness of pages reduced with links to additional activities embedded to make each page more 'bite-sized'. We did not want to clutter these 'bite-sized' pages with pictures, so for the Moodle version we opted for a set of icons to help students locate types of exercises (see figures earlier) as a response to the criticism of the visual element. Moodle is intended as a learning management platform, so it was also possible for the participants to submit their blogs and comments through the site and get more tutor feedback.

### **Full pilot**

Evaluation of the full pilot was conducted using an online survey and focus group interviews at the end of the course in November 2011. The main issues are discussed here.

### **The importance of interaction**

Participants commented that the face-to-face sessions provided for more opportunities for interaction and co-operation but they could generally see less reason to interact online. Many participants chose to come to class because they valued the interaction with their peers and the instant feedback from their tutor. With our pre-service teachers recognising the value of interaction and collaboration in their own learning we could encourage them to consider how their methodology courses help them promote interaction and collaboration in their own classes. Communication skills play a role here too. Recent research in Singapore (Lwin et al. 2012) indicates that teachers may not set up and scaffold effectively the pair and group work that is integral to collaborative learning. On the CST course, we can raise awareness of the importance of clear and staged instructions, examples and indications of required outcomes in setting up such activities. For example, a demonstration of an effective and a poor approach to setting up a group discussion could be given followed by a discussion of the communication features of the better approach.

### **Activities**

The positive response rate for survey questions about the usefulness, interest value and relevance of activities ranged between 94 and 96 per cent. The comment below seems to indicate that the approaches we chose encouraged participants to engage with the materials and sustained their interest:

*I think this was more in-depth compared to other courses. Yeah – because other courses it's normally just one PowerPoint slide and a few links for you to click and probably a test to do – that kind of thing – yeah, but this one we had like readings and even PDFs that show us questions and let us think about it before giving us the answers and I think that this was quite interesting. It's the first time we had this kind of module – yeah.*

Cheryl

Generally we feel the re-development of the course has been successful in providing an engaging learning environment that encourages participants to think about issues and reflect on their learning. The same comment also points to how approaches to online learning on the CST model those the participants can use when developing their own online courses.

### **Feedback**

Our pre-service teachers clearly welcome individual attention and supportive feedback. Online feedback was integrated into the full pilot though tutors' responses to participants' blogs. In focus groups students commented on the feedback offered both online and face-to-face.

*But the thing is that Dr X did reply us after we submitted our reflective blog and he did share his own experiences which was very interesting... Yeah, so it was quite interactive.*

Yinli

*It was a pleasant surprise to have my tutor feedback my performance in the written and oral assignments. More personal and effective rather than just receiving a grade at the end of the course which doesn't explain how one can go about improving his shortfalls.*

Ravi

The second comment is an important recognition for our pre-service teachers because they will later also need to give appropriate feedback to their students. The CST course introduces the topic of giving feedback and encourages a 'show' rather than 'tell' approach to feedback. For the future, more links could be made to the feedback participants receive on the CST which they might be asked to critique.

### **Assessment**

Discussion of the assessment of spoken communication skills on the CST course resulted in the integration of a self-assessment task based on participants' reviews of their video recordings. The quote here refers to this and is a reflection not only of active learning, but of the role this course fulfils in modelling pedagogical approaches encouraged in Singapore schools (Tan 2011).

*Normally, assessment is done and it's always just a criteria of promotion, but this time assessment is really, really, really used for learning. So – wah – as a teacher even learning that as a pedagogical skill already makes this course good.*

Suhalia

### **Flexibility**

Our pre-service teachers were positive about the flexibility of the blended course. When asked if they felt this kind of blended course was a more effective study option than one which only offered face-to-face, 93 per cent said yes. All the survey respondents felt it was a good idea to make the content available online. The two comments below indicate that we achieved our aim of making our course individually customizable and of encouraging participants to be more self-directed in their learning.

*A blended course offers students with different learning styles and abilities to 'design' their course to meet their needs.*

Benjamin

*I am able to take ownership of my own learning and go beyond the walls of classroom teaching.*

Grace

Now we need to strengthen the link to the education psychology courses our pre-service teachers take. As they will later be working in secondary school or junior colleges where students need to be encouraged to be self-directed and responsible for their own learning, our participants need to understand this shift towards autonomy and how it can be supported through approaches such as ones on the blended course.

### **A timely reminder**

*It's not the way it's being taught, the problem lies with the content itself. I hope NIE recognises the fact that not everyone needs this module.*

Priya

The final comment included in this evaluation section is a timely reminder that mode is only one element in the mix. We need to continue to improve the course content and demonstrate to participants like the one above that actually this course *is* important for all those embarking on a teaching career. To this end, course chairs continue to review materials to ensure that we address communication issues relevant to Singapore schools. Learning how to set up pair and group work is one emerging communication need, for example. Another is writing student testimonials, a particularly challenging genre for beginning teachers. We are also collecting new and more realistic scenarios for the presentations and announcements section of the course, as we recognise that responsibility for some of the ones we currently use, for example a presentation to overseas visitors to the school, is unlikely to be given to new teachers.

### **Transferability**

The primary impetuses for the new course were the desire to better meet the needs of a large and diverse group of participants and to align our teaching approach with an institutional imperative to introduce pre-service teachers to technology-based course provision and learning. The experience has implications on three levels within the institution as well as implications within the wider school system in Singapore. It also provides a potential model for other institutions offering similar programmes.

Within the institution the most immediate example of transferability is the decision to adopt blended learning for a second large cohort of pre-service teachers: those doing their PGDE but training to be primary school teachers. In August 2012, the blended course will be extended to this group, but it will be delivered using Blackboard version 9 as a platform.

On a larger scale within the institution, staff members share their experience of integrating technology into their programmes, thus adding to the overall body of institutional knowledge. We shared our experiences formally through two seminars during the development period.

Still at an institutional level, a third example of transferability is the proposal to develop further modular online or blended courses for in-service teachers. Our experience in materials development for this programme and the feedback from participants has given us useful insights as to how to approach this for different audiences.

Along with other ICT specific courses at NIE, it is intended that this programme should act as a model for pre-service teachers as one way to integrate technology with teaching. Since the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, when widespread fear of a serious epidemic resulted in public schools being closed, some Singapore schools have introduced e-learning weeks into the school year and the CST Blended provides a possible model of how this could be done in contrast to the 'a Powerpoint and a few questions' approach cited earlier.

The course also provides a context for exploring aspects of communication related to e-mediated approaches, thus making it highly relevant to the CST. This aspect of the course was considered during its development but, as noted in the evaluation section, it has not yet been made explicit enough in delivery, although the following comment by a participant indicates that some are applying their experience to their own teaching.

*(The course) allows me to look at content presentation from different perspective and provides me with some insight in planning a good online learning activity.*

Zul

Mary, one of the authors of this chapter, is course chair for the PGDE primary version of the course and she plans to integrate discussion and reflection on this aspect of transferability into the course in the coming semester through the participants' e-portfolios.

Finally, through dissemination at conferences and through publications such as this one, we hope our experience will add to the body of knowledge about e-enabled teaching and learning.

## Reflections

### Linda:

Something that I have learned through this project is that the end result will never quite be what you envisaged. This is because there are many aspects of innovation that involve negotiation. This might be a negotiation with oneself as one tries to make ideas concrete, but it is also a negotiation with others, as no two people see things exactly the same, especially if they come from different areas of expertise. Trying to marry pedagogy and technology is a case in point. Also inevitable are constraints imposed by contextual factors. All this is not necessarily a negative, enriching insights arise from these interactions, but it is inevitable.

A second related insight is that you never really get to the end of project like this! We still have refinements to make and these materials will change over time. From writing this chapter, for example, I realise that I lost sight of an initial aim of encouraging the pre-service teachers to consider how online and blended

approaches like this might be applicable in their teaching and ask them to discuss the communicative demands they entail. It has reminded me we need to build opportunities to do this into the materials.

My tutorial groups were used for both pilots and, through discussions and feedback and through their blogs, I learned a lot about their background, views and learning styles which has had an impact on other materials I develop and approaches I use in class. For example, I expected more students to opt for online modules than did. The fact that generally they did not, helped me understand that even quite sophisticated learners appreciate face-to-face instruction and find interaction with their peers and immediate tutor feedback important. This has impacted on me as a teacher-educator as I have made more effort to integrate discussion into tutorials and also to give more comprehensive feedback. While the course does not deal directly with methodology, our teaching styles indirectly model approaches the pre-service teachers may use in their own classrooms, so if they find their tutor's approach beneficial, hopefully this impacts their teaching. I feel I should make this link more explicit during the course.

As an academic manager (also part of my role), teaching this course has helped me appreciate that moving material online does not equate to less work for the tutors involved! In fact it probably means more, because there is still a need to establish whether students are processing the materials, which tends to be done on an individual basis. There is also the 'monitoring' factor – are they actually doing the required online work? The main way we used to monitor both elements is through blogs. It is important that tutors respond to participants' blogs and we have discussed giving a common response or individual ones. Some participants in the focus groups commented how much they had enjoyed the interaction with tutors who responded comprehensively to individuals, which is also my preference. However, this requires more time than giving feedback in a two-hour tutorial, especially if a large number of participants choose to work online. In our case, this meant conducting both a tutorial and responding to online blogs. This has been a time-consuming impact of the desire to provide our pre-service teachers with a more personalised programme.

**Mary:**

I was responsible for the development of the writing module. Having no background in instructional design or experience in writing for an online environment, I was faced with several challenges. Though I had a course textbook and materials as guides, I had to make decisions as to what would interest students if they were working individually on a computer. As classroom teachers, we rely on student collaboration, student-teacher interaction and non-verbal feedback to gauge our effectiveness.

Eventually I adhered fairly closely to the original syllabus (this was necessary for preparation for assessment), but added more humorous elements when possible, as I felt this is an important part of face-to-face communication which may be missing from an online learning situation. A particularly funny video on writing aggressive emails in the workplace (*Email Boxing*) was mentioned frequently on course feedback as something students enjoyed.

Humour, an important part of classroom dynamics, can occur spontaneously in the face-to-face environment, but ensuring that it is part of the online environment is also an important consideration.

Teaching a blended course for the first time presented challenges that I had not anticipated. In a traditional face-to-face course, seeing the students regularly allows a rapport to be developed. It is easy to get to know our students by name and have casual conversations that strengthen the student-teacher relationship and in turn enhance classroom learning. With a class that changed composition weekly according to who had chosen to work online, this normal procedure was compromised.

Different numbers of students would appear, which affected the planned lesson (i.e. collaborative activities). I felt that the course (which I was teaching for the second time) did not run quite as smoothly as it had before. Mid-term evaluations revealed that some students had a similar feeling. They remarked that sometimes there weren't enough students for adequate discussions.

As I will be teaching the blended course again in September 2012, I plan to have a greater variety of activities ready for my face-to-face classes in anticipation of this issue. I also plan to have more individual communication with all students via email or SMS (both are provided by Blackboard). This will hopefully enable me to build the rapport that is so vital between teacher and students.

Another aspect of teaching the blended course which I did not expect was the lack of technological skills of many of the students. Much has been made of the *Digital Divide* (Prensky 2001) and the argument of the *digital native vs digital immigrant* which assumes that students will supposedly be more proficient in using technology than their teachers. Fairly simple tasks such as finding the correct online link for course information, schedules and blog posting were a challenge for several students, despite introductory instructions in class and follow-up emails from course tutors. To have assumed a uniform technological proficiency of all students was incorrect. Steps have been taken to address the issue such as clearer instructions posted online and more specific directions for tutors when introducing the course.

## Conclusion

The re-development of the CST seems to have gone a long way to meeting course participants' diverse needs and responding to institutional imperatives. It also seems to demonstrate the realisation of the internationally established principles of good practice reflected in the framework we chose to guide our evaluation, with some variation due to the combination of in-class and online delivery and the additional element of individual choice in our blended programme (we call it the Starbucks approach to blending!).

Those involved in the development and delivery of the new course feel that, in their roles as teacher-educators, they have learned as much if not more than the participants. We have come to appreciate the extent to which continued course development and the concomitant learning are integral to today's educational environment.

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# 8

## Top Tips: a model for participant-led, shared learning

Lesley Dick

### Overview of chapter

This chapter focuses on *Top Tips*, an innovation that grew out of the Uva Primary Teacher Training Project. First, the innovation is situated in its context in the hill country of Sri Lanka. Then the seeds of the innovation and its growth during the project are presented. Both the initial evaluation of the project and the later impact evaluation are discussed. Finally, I reflect on the wider potential of the innovation and its impact on me as a teacher educator.

### The context

The project, out of which the innovation grew, took place in Uva Province, situated in central Sri Lanka. Uva Province is known as ‘the hill country’, the hills traditionally producing some of the best tea in the world. A predominantly disadvantaged area, it is populated mainly by the hill country Tamils or ‘Indian Tamils’, descendants of workers brought over by the British from India in the 19th century to work on the tea, rubber and coffee estates, who make up approximately 5.5 per cent of the total population. The people here are distinctly different from the Sri Lanka Tamils from Jaffna. As Lo Bianco (2011: 43) explains in *English Language Education in South Asia*:

*Since Independence the poorer, less educated Indian Tamils have had an ambiguous and precarious state. Despite initial moves to repatriate them to India, most were eventually granted citizenship though mainly remained stateless until the mid-1980s. Represented by the Ceylon Workers’ Congress, Indian Tamils have generally not participated in the secessionist struggle, but have instead engaged in class politics aimed at ameliorating the abject poverty of plantation workers.*

In 2009 Uva Province, and its two administrative districts, Badulla and Monaragala, had about 1,500 teachers of English serving in schools in the eight zones. There was an acute shortage of 450 English teachers. The introduction of new English teachers from outstations such as Matara, Galle, Gampaha and Kandy had not solved the problem. Typically they arrived and tried to leave the province, using it as a stepping stone to find other jobs. The acute shortage of English teachers in the province over many years led to many pupils, especially in the rural sector, losing the opportunity to learn English. The areas such as Mahiyangana, Bibile, Monaragala and Wellawaya

and the plantation sectors were badly affected. In order to make up the shortfall the Province sought the assistance of the British Council to train up newly recruited graduates as primary teachers.

After carrying out a needs analysis in December 2009, the Uva Primary Teacher Training Project was conceived. It comprised a train-the-trainer course and a teacher training course. Twenty-five potential local trainers, working in Uva Province, attended a 30-hour train-the-trainer course which was conducted over a week in February at the Management and Training Institute at Pegahathenna, half an hour by road outside of Badulla. It was organised by the Uva Provincial Council in collaboration with the Provincial Department of Education and conducted by consultants from the British Council.

The participants attended input sessions on mentoring, training, observing and giving feedback. They worked with the British Council trainers to plan training sessions using the materials that were to be used in Block One of the subsequent training course. They then delivered peer micro-training sessions and were given feedback by British Council trainers. Out of these participants, 12 were selected to be the trainers on the teacher training programme and three others were selected as floaters on this programme. Their role was to provide back-up to the trainers when necessary and to cover when trainers were absent. The materials were also adapted according to the results of their piloting by the local trainers.

The training materials produced for the teacher training programme comprised the following:

- applied methodology based on *Let's Learn English Grades 3 to 5* – this was a methodology course for Sri Lankan primary teachers developed in the late 1980s as part of a DFID/MOE Primary English Language Teaching Project and based on the local curriculum
- teacher training methodology
- language development
- sessions based on Slattery and Willis (2001) *English for Primary Teachers* (EPT)
- portfolio tasks including a journal.

These formed the main threads running throughout the teacher training course. The combination of these materials produced a course which aimed to improve teachers' English to enable them to provide a good model in the classroom; to introduce them to, and practise, an appropriate language teaching methodology which would enable them to teach at primary level more effectively using materials from their current curriculum; and to increase teachers' confidence in using and teaching English, particularly in the areas of speaking and listening skills.

The teacher training programme was divided into five blocks of one week each from March to July 2010. Of the original 125 teachers selected by the province to participate in the training, 103 participated. They were divided into six groups and had two trainers each. The trainers delivered the programme of input sessions and peer micro-teaching under the supervision of British Council trainers.

The programme was evaluated by follow-up visits to the province to observe teachers teaching, by end-of-course questionnaires, by post-course questionnaires and focus groups. Evidence was found of increased teacher confidence in the use of English in the classroom and of child-centred, activity-based learning in the classroom.

It was out of this context that *Top Tips* grew.

### **The innovation: *Top Tips***

*Top Tips* evolved by accident and grew exponentially and rather bizarrely throughout the Uva Project. It took on a life of its own. Had any of the British Council consultants at the beginning of the project been asked about *Top Tips* and its role in the project, they would have looked at you askance and wondered what you were talking about. It was not a deliberate or conscious element of the training project. In retrospect however, its seeds can be found in four aspects of the train-the-trainer course:

1. Lists of 'teaching tips' were featured throughout *English for Primary Teachers*, the main source for primary teacher training inputs.
2. 'Tips' featured as input to a 'milling' activity type used to share a lot of information quickly.
3. British Council trainers giving feedback to local trainers during peer micro-training tended to summarise in a pithy, 'tip-like' format.
4. On the final day, British Council trainers also employed a 'tips' format to pull together learning outcomes for the participants.

On reflection, then, the use of 'tips' actually was an integral part of both the input sessions and the teaching practice from day one. That it was to become much more than that to the local trainers and teachers was a surprise to us all. In order to capture the evolution of the innovation, some more information on the five-day train-the-trainer course must be given.

### **The train-the-trainer course**

The first two days covered input sessions on teacher training skills and model teacher training sessions delivered by the British Council consultants. Input sessions comprised the following:

- terminology
- training tips
- mentoring and training
- portfolio and learning journal writing
- observation and feedback training.

Model training delivery sessions included two from the EPT materials and one methodology session. The next two days allowed the participants to do peer micro-training and receive individual, group and collective feedback on their delivery. Participants were put into groups of three and allocated either an *English for Primary Teachers* session or a methodology session from Block One.

The aim here was three-fold:

1. all participants led half an hour of training.
2. all participants were familiarised with the Block One materials, as 16 of them would teach Block One starting the following week.
3. the British Council consultants could observe, evaluate and ultimately select from the participants those who would deliver the five-block training course.

Tuesday evening ended with the participants planning for their peer micro-training, which occurred over the following two days. The peer micro-training consisted of four sessions of EPT and four methodology sessions. This was structured in the following way. Participants worked in their four groups of three. Each of the groups taught one EPT session and one methodology session over the two days. Each session was divided between the three participants equally. Two sessions took place in the morning and two in the afternoon. Two British Council consultants observed three 'trainers' who taught for 30 minutes each. In the ten minutes after the session, everyone involved had a specific observation and feedback role:

- the 'trainers' reflected on their delivery and noted their strengths and action points
- the trainees (i.e. members of the other three groups) were allocated one 'trainer' to give feedback to and they discussed and noted the strengths and action points for that 'trainer'
- the British Council consultants shared notes and compiled main strengths and action points for each 'trainer'.

Then in the next ten minutes, the 'trainers' sat with their allocated group and were given feedback supervised by the British Council consultants. Finally in the last ten minutes and in a whole-class setting, the group of three 'trainers' who had presented were given brief oral feedback and detailed written feedback by one of the British Council consultants. The oral feedback summarised the main strengths and action points for the three. Timing was strict and this acted as a model of good practice for the 'trainers' when it came to them doing teaching practice with their trainees. It also meant that the feedback evolved into short, snappy tips.

The usual subjectivity of trainer observation was counteracted by having two experienced consultants observing all of the participants, discussing each immediately after each micro-session and writing up joint feedback. The wash-back effect of the evaluation was that all participants received both immediate individual written and oral feedback from the British Council consultants, group feedback from their peers and collective feedback from the British Council consultants later. Participants commented positively on the value of all this feedback.

The final day of the course had been deliberately left open in order to be flexible enough to deal with any issues that had come up over the first four days. In the end, on the Friday, participants were introduced to the rest of the materials for Block One (i.e. language development, applied methodology, learning journal and portfolio sessions) so that those who were selected to teach the course on the following Monday would be familiar with the materials. Another aim of this was to check

the materials and ensure there were no issues with the teaching of them. During this session, clarification, corrections and issues concerning the materials were discussed. Another session on the Friday consisted of collective feedback on the peer micro-training. The consultants put together a poster to display the strengths of the local trainers and an activity to suggest action points or tips for them. This was done as a teaching tips activity in order to provide a role model for how to deliver the teaching tips tasks which run throughout the *English for Primary Teachers* materials. The week culminated in a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis of the project undertaken by the participants both as a form of feedback and a method of input. This was done in groups and ideas displayed on posters.

### **The seeds of Top Tips**

In retrospect, then, the first of the seeds from which *Top Tips* grew was in the thread running throughout EPT. Each unit could have three to five main sub-sections. For example, the unit on Writing in English is broken down into Practising the Alphabet, From Speaking to Writing, From Reading to Writing, Writing with Other Children, and Children Writing Freely. At the end of each sub-section, there is a feature called 'Teaching Tips'. The tips vary in number from six on miming, for example, 'Using real things can make the mime more realistic.' (Slattery and Willis 2001: 27) to one on word recognition, for example, 'Let the children play at being teachers to revise these words and phrases.' (*ibid.*: 76). They are inherently practical, short, simple, prescriptive and positive – the emphasis is on the dos not the don'ts.

The British Council consultant and materials developer who had amalgamated all the threads of the teacher training course had dealt with the tips sections in the units in EPT as an opportunity to get the participants milling and interacting with each other. The tips were not focused on in each sub-section but were added together and dealt with at one point at the end of each unit. Therefore, every time they were dealt with, about 15 to 20 tips were covered. These were then cut up into strips, each participant given one strip, told to read it and memorise it, then told to go and talk to every person in the class as quickly as possible and share information in order to decide on their favourite tip. At the end of this activity, groups were reformed to share their favourite tips. This activity was repeated at the end of each unit both to review the unit and consolidate learning. It also acted as a model of an interactive milling technique useful for sharing a large amount of information in an interesting and communicative way. By the end of the week the local trainers were very familiar with this simple technique and were already expanding on its application and use. The tips activity was so successful that it revealed the need for the actual teaching tips to be incorporated into the EPT trainee workbooks. Initially these had been only in the trainers' book as cut ups; they were added into the workbook for the teachers on the local trainers' recommendations.

The second seed was found in regular input sessions on methodology as a way of covering a lot of information. For example, if the trainers were practising delivering the teacher training sessions on reading, one of the shorter activities covered in that session was one on tips for teaching reading. This was done in the forms of a ranking activity as opposed to a milling activity. Therefore trainees would discuss and rank the following tips:

- grade the task not the material
- give them a chance to check their predictions
- always give them a task!
- make explicit what skill you are developing.

This was seen as a fairly normal task in any input session and the British Council consultants certainly paid it no special attention. However, the tip-like format was being further consolidated.

The third seed was the use of tips in the peer micro-training sessions. Because of time constraints, the disproportionate ratio of British Council trainers to local trainers, and the amount of input necessary in the course, individual feedback was a rarity. Group feedback was the norm with the British Council trainer typically, after group self-reflection, sharing the learning points through a summary of strengths and action points. The emphasis was, once again, on the positive not the negative. The British Council trainer picked out and exemplified good practice while eliciting action points for how to deal with areas of weakness. Typically the tips were a mix of whatever had come up in the teaching practice, for example:

- anchor during feedback
- a demonstration is better than an explanation
- mark the stress and make sure the students copy it down
- monitor the listening
- correct errors on the board.

Often, especially at the beginning, there were rather a lot of action points. Instead of writing them all down the British Council trainer invited the local trainers to read the points carefully, select the five that either applied particularly to them or they felt were especially important and to make a note of them. Despite encouragement from the British Council trainer not to do so, many local trainers insisted on taking down all the points raised, typically in the 'tip'-format. When asked why, they stated that whether or not the tips were relevant to them personally, they formed a useful list of dos and don'ts that they would use in future training and teaching. Persuasive though this may be, it actually risks undercutting the concept of *Top Tips* as an innovation. If everything is written down, the level of personal involvement by the learner, whether local trainer, teacher trainee, or indeed language student, is massively reduced. Local and personal evaluation, choice and commitment need to be kept as high as possible if *Top Tips* is not to degenerate into a basic copying activity.

The final seed appeared on the last day when the British Council consultant asked the local trainers in groups to come up with a list of training tips for themselves to follow during the delivery of the teacher training course. This was also meant to act as a bridge between the train-the-trainer course and the teacher-training course. Local trainers were asked to go through their observation and feedback notes and pick out the most important learning points from the action points. Posters were presented, groups shared information and added to each other's until the whole group had come up with a complete group's collective set of training tips for the course.

This amounted to 28 tips that were typed up, photocopied and distributed to everyone (see Appendix). It was also included in the report on the train-the-trainer course to the Provincial Department. There was nothing particularly unusual about any of the training tips; however, all the tips came from the particular experience of those trainers on the course, they emphasised their learning in their training room and they had been chosen by them as areas they felt were important. Although the British Council consultant had guided the action points in feedback, groups were selective in their choice of the tips. It was an immensely personal collection of training tips in the sense of belonging to a particular group.

### **The crystallisation of *Top Tips***

When it came to the teacher training course itself, there was already a buzz about ‘tips’ along different dimensions:

- as an expression of content
- as input to the favoured ‘milling’ activity-type
- as a way of giving advice
- as a technique for summarising.

It is the interaction of all these, along with a serious insistence on the here-and-now production and evaluation of local relevance that adds up to the nature of *Top Tips* as an innovation in its own right.

The trainers had latched onto the approach as a method of quickly summarising the essentials in any area. In the teacher training course it came to be used, as it had been in the train-the-trainer course, in both the input sessions and the peer micro-teaching practice. In the input sessions local trainers would cut out some of the sections of units because of time constraints but never the teaching tips milling activity. When trainers came to the end of a block of training they invariably added in a teaching tips milling activity. They loved the communicative nature of having to chat quickly to everyone, get the information and get it quickly. It even became fiercely competitive as to how quickly they could finish the task and get all the information. Likewise in peer micro-teaching, local trainers expanded on its frequency of use. Local trainers used *Top Tips* in observation and feedback as a method of dealing with large numbers of participants, a large amount of information and the time constraints of the course.

Trainers and teachers also began using the *Top Tips* retrospectively. One trainer (and others followed) started using the previous blocks’ main tips as a useful personal checklist for their performance. Here, once again, one can see the attraction of the approach threatening to undermine its own rationale. If the previous cohort’s *Top Tips* begin to become a yardstick, then there is at least a risk that we start to build bricks in another wall of conformity to the past. From this point, energy dissipates. Care is needed, therefore, to make sure that old habits do not reassert themselves to stifle new possibilities. The only real protection against this danger is to make sure that all concerned are aware of it and to insist on constant re-evaluation by each cohort.

The best techniques and activities are often the simplest. The innovation that grew out of this project was the collation and exploitation of *Top Tips* in different areas in both training and teaching. I used *Top Tips* as one activity in the training of the trainers and then expanded and developed on the idea of *Top Tips* throughout the training. The trainers then decided to adopt it as a method of clarifying points for the trainee teachers they were working with. Although the concept of *Top Tips* is hardly innovative, as it occurs in different formats in notes and sessions for training, the collation of the tips based completely on the performance of the trainees on the course and the exploitation of them in many differing formats during and post course, I believe was. *Top Tips* must be based on actual experience of the trainers or teachers and must illustrate their preferred practice in real teaching situations. It can be based on a week's or a course's teaching or just topics on the course (for example reading). It must be relevant and current to a particular group of trainees. I now use it regularly in any teacher training or train-the-trainer course.

### **Evaluation of the innovation**

What made it so successful? Why did the trainers and teachers adopt it and expand on its use? *Top Tips*, in its various incarnations, has a number of characteristics that adhere to the principles behind good practice in teaching and training. Inherent are these top ten principles:

1. Relevant and timely – in order that techniques, skills, information are taken on board they have to be relevant to the trainees. Even better, they need to be timely. *Top Tips*, whether in input or teaching/training practice, are immediately relevant to their classroom context and are given at just the right time to have maximum impact.
2. Concise – any trainer appreciates conciseness in input methods. Being concise maximises the use of time and the amount of information covered. It sifts through a lot of materials, information, skills and techniques and gets to the core.
3. Practical – important aspects of teaching and training involve passing on skills and knowledge to others and significant trainee learning takes place through practice. *Top Tips* in observation and feedback arise from the practice of teaching.
4. Personal and self-produced – if something is personally relevant, you are much more likely to take it on board. *Top Tips* is based on both personal and group classroom experience. Both as a method of summarising the important points in an input session and in teaching practice, *Top Tips* can either be self-produced or produced by the expert. I would argue that when it is self-produced its effectiveness as a learning aid is increased. It becomes a form of self-assessment. Scrivener (1994: 198) encourages the beginner teacher to self-assess by going through the following process: lesson recall, lesson reflection, drawing conclusions and making plans. In order to come up with *Top Tips*, a teacher has to go through precisely this process.

5. Learning from experience – in both language learning and teaching/training, participants need to be given the space to experiment; by definition this involves making mistakes. Often the most valuable lessons we learn are ones learned by making mistakes. *Top Tips*, based as it is on common mistakes and how to correct them, are invaluable.
6. Peer learning – learning from your peers as well as from ‘the expert’ is an important aspect of training both from the point of view of getting different perspectives on learning but also from the point of view of realising one’s own self-worth. *Top Tips* values the skills of its participants (including oneself) whether strong or weak as both can be turned to group advantage.
7. Positive – the power of the positive should never be underestimated. *Top Tips* focuses on the positive. It focuses on what ‘to do’, not what ‘not to do’. Therefore it is self-enhancing rather than destructively critical. The negative can still be dealt with. It is a question of style. Therefore a top tip might say, ‘Use teacher talking effectively,’ as opposed to, ‘Don’t talk so much in class.’
8. Low resource – *Top Tips* does not require any other resources (except for cut-ups, but this is minimal). In fact it revises the materials that have gone before and therefore maximises use of previous input or feedback notes.
9. Adaptable and applicable to any teaching/training situation – any trainer/teacher appreciates activity types that can be adapted to any trainees in any situation on any topic.
10. Self-explanatory, simple and straightforward – *Top Tips* is not an acronym or a piece of vaguely definable terminology. It is precisely what it says.

The above provides an explanation for why *Top Tips* was rated highly in the evaluation of the project. The initial evaluation was carried out on completion of the training for the provincial department and, after a period of three months, an impact evaluation was carried out. In both, *Top Tips* received praise. In the feedback questionnaires, which asked for the three best things on the course, *Top Tips* was mentioned in more than half of the responses. When asked to rate techniques used on the course, *Top Tips* came in the top quadrant for the majority of participants. In the final report on the project, the *Top Tips* from the training and the teaching which had been compiled and given out to the teachers and trainers were thought significant enough to be included as an appendix illustrating the strengths and areas of weaknesses in the two groups as a whole.

In the Uva Impact Evaluation, the trainer feedback collated in focus groups emphasised the effectiveness of the *Top Tips* technique in both input and feedback. The teacher trainees in their portfolios and in their learning journals mentioned *Top Tips* as one technique that they found very useful and very simple to use. Chaturika commented on the use of *Top Tips* as a method of summarising information in an input session: ‘Top Tips is fun activity. It is good to speak to all the teachers. We remember a lot of information.’ Diluki commented on the use of it in peer micro-teaching: ‘Top Tips is good way of not being critical. If one teacher does something

wrong in class, the trainer tells us it is wrong but does not tell that teacher she is wrong. So we learn but the teacher feels ok.' Somasiri commented on how effective it was as a method for integrating the week's learning: 'Every week we listed all the tips for the week on a poster. I wrote them in my learning journal. I will use them after the course as a reminder of the important things we learnt on the course.'

Classroom observation round the province revealed colourful posters of *Top Tips* for a variety of skills in the upper grades of primary classrooms. In one school which could not be reached by vehicle, Chandra, the Grade 5 teacher, had decorated her walls with, amongst other things, 'English Tips' and 'Classroom Tips.' What were they? English Tips included, for example, 'Use capitals for names. Check your spelling. Write on the line.' Classroom tips included, for example, 'Keep the classroom tidy. Keep bags at the back. Bring a pencil.' Here was evidence that *Top Tips* had trickled down from the trainers to the teachers and from the teachers to the pupils.

Support for *Top Tips* must be moderated, however. While *Top Tips* in input as a method of getting across a lot of information is independent really of the quality of the trainer, one thing that has to be taken into account when dealing with *Top Tips*, especially as a method of collating teaching practice feedback, is that the person overseeing the collation of it is experienced, fair, sensitive and diplomatic. If the person is not experienced, then the quality of the tips will be decreased. In addition, if groups are allowed to come up with their own selection without any quality control, it is conceivable that bad practice could be represented as good practice or vice versa. It is important, then, that the groups are allowed space and time to formulate tips on their own but with supervision. If the person is not seen to be fair, there is the danger that the *Top Tips* will not be taken on board. If the person is not sensitive, there is the danger of upsetting trainees. If the person is not diplomatic, there is the danger of initiating or not moderating arguments.

Another thing to be taken into account as a teaching practice tool is that not all the tips will be relevant to all of the teachers all of the time. For example, for a skilled teacher, *Top Tips* may be of little use as he or she already demonstrates good practice. Because *Top Tips* summarises the learning of a group, it often is aimed at the middle range of ability. However, even for the strong teacher, it can nevertheless be useful as it provides a future checklist for performance after the course. It also provides a structure for self-reflection. Despite the limitations mentioned above, I would argue that *Top Tips* should be a part of any training course both in input and in teaching practice.

### **Potential wider relevance of the innovation**

*Top Tips* has wider relevance as it can be used on any teaching or training course on any subject, at any level, and in any context. As such the tips are based on individual courses and will vary according to the performance of teachers on a course. One would expect and desire different cultural and teaching contexts to produce different *Top Tips* even though there will probably be a bank of core tips on each subject.

Since Uva, I have used this, and variations of it, in other projects, and it has become a standard technique integrated into any teaching practice or input block I deliver. For example last year in a World Bank-funded project for the Ministry of Higher Education

in Sri Lanka, we ran a nationwide university teacher training course for pre-service teachers to train them to teach a new pre-sessional course for students. We made use of the *Top Tips* technique in the teaching practice, which this time involved real students. Here the trainers encouraged the teachers at the end of every week to look back at their teaching practice notes and to compile on their own a list of personal *Top Tips*. This was then used as the basis of their weekly tutorial with their trainer. After this discussion the group of trainee teachers had to work together using their self-reflections to come up with a list of *Top Tips* to use as the basis of objectives to achieve for the teaching practice in the following week. This was displayed in the teaching practice classroom and used as a method of focusing the teaching practice feedback discussion.

I have also added this into Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) courses in a similar form. In addition, as a method of revising important information in a block of input as part of a revision class, I ask groups of trainees to write on pieces of paper their top tip for each input session we are revising. They then mix these up as a class, take one each (not their own) and mingle and share information. They can look for the best one or the most relevant one to them or identify which session they were from. Similarly, in a Content Language and Integrated Learning course that I taught to a group of secondary school teachers in the south of Sri Lanka recently, I used *Top Tips* at the end of each day for participants to both summarise the learning points of that day by having them in groups display their *Top Tips* on a flipchart and stick them round the room. They could then add to these when they looked at other groups' flipcharts and tick off the ones that they shared. This then formed an easy summary of learning for the next day and a task could be based on the information on the wall as a quick review. I am already planning on using it in the next two courses I teach in September: a teacher training course for lecturers at the Ministry of Tourism Institute and a pre-service course for teachers at a private language school.

### **My own development as teacher educator**

Writing about *Top Tips* has helped me to reflect on a number of areas, it has helped to crystallise my thinking and it has reinforced some of my firmly held beliefs about good practice in training. I first submitted a proposal to write about *Top Tips* because that was what had come to mind when I thought about pre-service teacher training. I could not have explained why except that it was a gut feeling. However, exploring it has shown me that gut feelings have a solid basis in reality, that trainers do learn both from their participants and from the experience of their participants, that sometimes good ideas acquire a life of their own, and that often we need to step back from a technique, an activity, a piece of material and ask 'What have I learned from this?'

I find myself ashamed to admit that during this exercise I have been guilty of exactly what irritates me about some trainees on pre-service teacher training courses. That is, trainees who, when introduced to a new activity or technique, can use it (because it has been modelled to them) but have no idea what it is actually doing or where it is appropriate to use it. In fact, they do not really understand what it is they are doing. Similarly here. I have used *Top Tips* in input sessions and in teaching practice feedback sessions for years but have never really taken a step back and queried why it worked and what it did.

I have always felt that the most important part of being a teacher educator is conducting proper teaching practice and providing feedback concisely and fairly so that it can be used as both a developmental and an evaluative tool. *Top Tips* combines both. As a developmental tool it provides a concise summary of the most important learning points from any observed teaching practice. As an evaluation tool it can be used to self-evaluate and as a checklist for trainers to evaluate trainees.

My most recent adaption of *Top Tips* is in collaborative working. If you are working with a group of new trainers or trainers that you have never worked with before, it is a quick method of evaluating whether or not you are all on the same track. Ask them for their top ten tips on different topics. It is always very important when teaching practice is part of a pre-service course that trainers give similar feedback and advice to trainees. It is similarly very important when doing input that trainers are on the same track. *Top Tips* is a quick-fire method of checking this.

I love flexible, low-resource activities that work in any context. Some would argue that this makes me a lazy trainer; I would argue it makes me a practical trainer. The beauty of *Top Tips* for me is that it is never the same, and I am not required to do anything extra to make it different. The differences come from the context and the participants. And it works.

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## Appendix

### The original Uva *Top Tips*

1. Find a spot at the front of the classroom for instructions and eliciting and stay there. Hovering is counterproductive.
2. Echoing discourages participants from listening to each other and it increases teacher talking time unnecessarily.
3. Accept appropriate participant responses even if they are not what you had planned or written down.
4. Praise good work. But don't overdo it!
5. Always let participants check answers in pairs before whole-class feedback.
6. Use instruction checking questions.
7. Use concept checking questions for both checking understanding of language and information and during feedback.
8. Allow participants time to answer checking questions. Don't answer them yourself.
9. When setting up a task, do a demonstration. Show, don't tell!
10. Be a good model. Always write correctly on the board, for example appropriate use of capitalisation, punctuation and short forms.
11. Always provide or try to elicit an example before tasks or activities, for example matching, brainstorming, giving examples, sorting.
12. Allow participants enough time to think and finish tasks. Teach the participants not the plan.
13. Avoid duplicating feedback. If you have planned for students to write it on the board, don't produce a poster. Work from their feedback and deal with problems.
14. Avoid reading answers aloud when checking keys. Participants should read it silently and you should concept check that they have understood the main points.
15. Choose your method of feedback carefully. It should be quick. Find a way of having them up at the board at the same time.
16. Participants writing long sentences on the board is an ineffective use of time and is counterproductive as it tends to produce errors which then need to be dealt with.
17. Monitor unobtrusively while participants are listening to make sure they are on task and to gauge how easy or difficult they are finding the task.
18. Only write the answers in a reading race, not the questions.

19. Make sure participants understand terminology, language in tips, and written instructions.
20. Participants should stand when role-playing a teacher.
21. Drill new or difficult language before role plays.
22. Model new language three times and then drill. Use gestures to help.
23. Exaggerate intonation and stress with gestures to highlight it. It's fun and much more memorable for participants!
24. Use monitors to help organise the classroom.
25. Be a good role model. Keep your classroom tidy!
26. Use primary methodology (e.g. chants and routines) when appropriate in training.
27. Make sure your chants, songs and rhymes are lively, fun and memorable.
28. Always get participants to fold their workbook. Remember that often the answer keys for the next task are in the workbook to check against.

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# 9

## A course on continuing professional development

Nikki Ashcraft and Sally Ali

Proposed standards for teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) teacher education programmes have conceptualised professionalism as being ‘at the heart of standards for teachers’ (TESOL 2010: 19). Included under professionalism is keeping ‘current with new instructional techniques, research results, advances in the ESL field, and education policy issues’ as well as using ‘such information to reflect on and improve their instruction and assessment practices’ (*ibid.*: 69). In other words, being actively involved in continuing professional development is a large part of being a TESOL professional.

One instance in the TESOL teacher education curriculum where continuing professional development may be covered is the language teaching methods course. However, methods courses are usually crammed with information, and continuing professional development may be relegated to the end, if there is time to cover it at all. Take, as examples, two textbooks which are commonly used in methods courses. In Brown (2007) teacher development appears as Chapter 25 of 26 chapters. In Celce-Murcia (2001), it is the final chapter out of 36 chapters.

Another moment in the teacher education curriculum where continuing professional development may be introduced is the teaching practice course. Textbooks designed for these courses, such as Crookes (2003) and Richards and Farrell (2011), discuss pre-service teachers forming relationships with their supervising teacher and with colleagues within the school, yet they make no mention of forming relationships within the larger professional field through participation in professional associations.

Given the importance of continuing professional development throughout a teacher’s career, it deserves a special place in the teacher education curriculum. This chapter describes a practicum course on continuing professional development that was designed for pre-service teachers in an undergraduate TESOL programme in the United Arab Emirates.

## The context

The United Arab Emirates is located on the Arabian Peninsula. A federation of seven emirates, the country was established in 1971. Today, the Emirates has a well-developed petroleum industry and is also known for its financial services and as a tourist hotspot. In 2009, the population of the UAE was estimated at 5.06 million. However, Emiratis only made up 18 per cent of the population; the other 82 per cent consisted of expatriates and their families. Replacing expatriate workers by building the capacity of local people and integrating them into the workforce (a process called Emiratisation) has been a primary concern of the government. Bodies such as the National Human Resource and Development Authority (TANMIA) are working to increase the number of Emiratis employed in both the private and public sectors, including the Ministry of Education (UAE National Media Council 2010).

Arabic is the official language in the UAE. However, given the number of expatriate workers in the country, English plays an important role as a lingua franca (Boyle 2011). Furthermore, English is increasingly being used in the educational domain as the primary medium of instruction, particularly in higher education (Findlow 2006). Therefore, being trained as English language teachers offers Emiratis entry into a field with growing career opportunities.

The United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) was established in 1976 to provide higher education for Emirati nationals. It consists of nine faculties and operates separate campuses for female and male students (UAE University 2012, *About the UAEU*). The Applied Linguistics/TESOL programme at the UAE University was established within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in 2004 and began accepting students and offering courses in 2005. Given the large number of female students enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences as compared to male students (2,269 females in contrast to 259 males during 2010–11; UAE University 2012, *Facts and figures*), and the perceived lack of interest in the Applied Linguistics/TESOL programme among male students, the programme has so far been limited to the female campus. In autumn 2007, the Applied Linguistics/TESOL programme was merged with the General Linguistics programme to form the Linguistics Department.

The goal of the Applied Linguistics/TESOL major is to prepare Emirati undergraduate students to become English language teachers at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Students begin taking coursework in their major during their third year at the university. The curriculum includes a mix of English language courses (e.g. writing, grammar, phonetics), theoretical courses (e.g. philosophy of language, second language acquisition), and practical courses (e.g. second language teaching methodology, teaching skills and strategies) as well as an integrated capstone in which students learn about research methods in the field and conduct a critical and evaluative literature review on a topic related to TESOL theory or practice. The curriculum also includes a teaching practicum which students conduct in their final semester.

During 2006, in an effort to enhance the employability of the graduates of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, it was determined that each programme within the faculty needed to offer a practicum course to give students more practical experience in their fields. Credit hours were allotted to each programme to develop such a course. Although the Applied Linguistics/TESOL programme already offered a teaching practicum, it was required to use these additional credit hours to offer a second practicum course. Rather than have students complete a second teaching practicum, it was decided to design a practicum course related to continuing professional development.

## **The Continuing Professional Development Practicum**

*The Continuing Professional Development Practicum* was first offered in spring 2007 and was taught by Nikki Ashcraft. The course has been offered each semester since then, taught by Sally Ali.

### ***The original course, spring 2007 (Instructor: Nikki Ashcraft)***

The objectives of the *Continuing Professional Development Practicum* included familiarising students with resources for continuing professional development, promoting students' involvement in professional associations, and facilitating opportunities for students to network with other language teaching professionals. The following were some of the topics covered during the course:

- what is a 'profession'?
- what is 'continuing professional development'?
- professional associations
- book publishers
- journals
- online resources (e.g. listservs and courses)
- professional examinations (e.g. the Cambridge Teaching Knowledge Test)
- professional conferences
- action research
- writing conference proposals
- creating a teaching portfolio
- ongoing language development.

The course met for one 16-week semester, a total of 48 hours. Among these, 16 hours, one hour per week, were spent in face-to-face class meetings. During the remaining 32 hours, students participated in professional development activities designed for English-language teachers. The 31 female students registered during the first semester included TESOL students as well students from other departments, such as Linguistics and English, who were taking the course as an elective. Students were assigned a course grade of either pass or fail.

## **In-class activities**

The beginning of each class was spent making announcements about upcoming professional development events and hearing reports from students who had recently participated in an event. Then, students engaged in a variety of activities, three of which are described here.

### **Book publishers**

The following activity was meant to familiarise students with the range of published materials available to assist them in their teaching and professional development. An international book publisher was asked to provide copies of its catalogue for all class members. Students worked in groups. Each group was given a scenario, such as:

- You are teaching a beginning grammar course for university students.
- You are teaching phonics and reading to primary students.
- You are teaching an intermediate level integrated-skills course for secondary students.
- You are teaching an intermediate level English for specific purposes (ESP) course for business students.
- You are teaching a test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) preparation course for advanced students.

Students searched the catalogue to identify an appropriate textbook. Each group explained which book they had chosen and why they had chosen it. Students were then given a more comprehensive list of publishers in our field with their website addresses.

### **Journals**

There is a large number of print and electronic journals in our field. One list compiled by the TESOL International Association identifies over 100 journals (TESOL 2005). Although these journals offer us a wealth of information for our professional development, pre-service and novice teachers may not be familiar with the titles of these journals, the type of content they contain, nor how they might access them.

In this activity, each student was asked to select a journal from a provided list, research the journal, and then present the journal to the class. During their presentations, students described the audience for their selected journal, the type of information it contained (for example teaching tips, book reviews, research articles), and how other students in the class might access the journal (i.e. how to find the journal in the library or on the internet and how to subscribe to the journal). Students completed a form with details about the journal which they photocopied and distributed to their classmates. Thus, at the end of the course, students had information about a number of different journals for future reference.

### **Writing conference proposals**

After students had had the experience of attending an international conference (see later in this chapter), we spent one class discussing the process of writing and submitting conference proposals. Students reviewed the call for participation for an upcoming conference. Usually, submission guidelines state word limits for the

presentation title, abstract, and summary. To get a sense of the challenges involved in meeting these limits, students were given the abstracts from a conference programme without their titles. Students worked in groups to read the abstract, understand the main idea that would be presented, and develop a seven-word title for the presentation. Students managed to create titles that were very similar to the titles given by the original authors.

### **Out-of-class activities**

To fulfil the practicum component of the course, students had to spend 32 hours outside of class participating in professional development activities designed for English language teachers. Fortunately, in the United Arab Emirates, there is much support for English language teaching, and there are many organisations providing professional development opportunities for teachers. Students were able to attend the meetings of the local TESOL Arabia affiliates, events hosted by the British Council, and workshops provided by publishing houses. They were also invited to participate in in-house professional development opportunities offered to teachers at other schools and universities. The culmination of the course was when students attended the three-day TESOL Arabia Conference in Dubai. I guided students through the process of joining TESOL Arabia and registering for the conference. In the classes prior to the conference, I explained how to read the conference programme and how to locate presentations they would like to attend. The students and I then attended the conference together as a group.

Students documented their participation in these professional development activities in two ways. First, students shared and discussed what they had learned in various events online via the Discussion Board on the Blackboard Course Management System. Second, they compiled a portfolio of their participation. This portfolio consisted of a log where students listed the events they had attended, the sponsor of the event, the date of the event, and its duration. Then, for each event attended, students included a flyer/announcement about the event, a description or summary of the event, and an evaluation of their experience. Specifically, what did they gain from the experience? How was it useful for them? Did they meet other TESOL professionals and what did they talk about with them? Did they receive any kind of materials? If so, they should describe them. In the case of large events with multiple presentations, like TESOL Arabia, students listed all of the events they attended on their logs, but chose three of the events to summarise. If students received a certificate for their participation in the event, a copy of that certificate was also included in the portfolio.

### **The development of the course, 2007–12 (Instructor: Sally Ali)**

The *Continuing Professional Development Practicum* has been offered continuously every autumn and spring semester. The course description is essentially the same, but over the years, the course objectives have been further developed. Current course objectives and outcomes are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Current course objectives and outcomes

Course objectives	Course outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Familiarise students with the resources and various professional organisations that are available to them as TESOL students and as practising teachers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be aware of the professional development (PD) opportunities available to English language teachers in the Arabian Gulf and how they can participate in various activities.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help students discover the benefits of continuing professional development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have opportunities to network with other language teaching professionals.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have students select and learn about research articles in applied linguistics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Select, interpret and evaluate research articles from different branches of applied linguistics.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have students explore the importance of communicative competence in the field of professional development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determine how communicative competence is necessary in the field of professional development and develop their own communicative competence.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage students to attend various conferences and professional development sessions and discover how to debrief the PD experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participate in professional development conferences/PD sessions or give PD presentations, and discover different ways for continuous professional development at present and after graduation.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Illustrate ways of doing action research.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start their research papers.</li> </ul>

Students now meet with their instructor as a group twice a week for a total of three hours in addition to attending conferences, workshops, and professional development sessions outside the classroom for a minimum of 32 hours. The range of activities that students have engaged in has also expanded. The following are some changes and additions to the course activities.

### **In-class activities**

In-class sessions involve many of the same topics that were included in the original course with more emphasis now given to understanding research articles and the research process.

### **Article presentations**

Students continue to become familiar with the journals in our field. Now students receive an orientation to the university libraries and learn how to search for journals as well as for articles on specific topics. After students examine various journals, they choose recently-published articles that interest them. The Smart Board is used to view the journals and articles online in class, with a focus on choosing research articles that clearly describe the data collection, participants, and results. Students have to understand and summarise these articles. Then, they give individual presentations before the class, discuss their reflections on the experience, and answer questions, too. Students also have to explain the findings, whether quantitative or qualitative. The students' presentations are assessed on delivery, language, organisation, content, and evidence of preparation. These criteria are explained and discussed before their individual presentation. Students benefit greatly from their article presentations because they learn to recognise data, participants, results and analysis and proceed to prepare to conduct their own field research.

### **Student field research**

Students learn to recognise and determine what is and what is not considered research. They also become familiar with the research process and varieties of research as well as identify the action research cycle. They form groups and choose their own topics with research questions. Students concurrently enrolled in the teaching practicum course may decide to conduct an action research project in their own class. Once their topic and questions are approved, students proceed to prepare their own survey and interview questions. In addition, they go to the university library to search for information to assist them in their research projects. They also attend extra classes, when available, on using software for statistical analysis to help them learn to analyse and interpret their results.

### **Individual and group presentations**

Both the article presentations and the field research involve speaking in front of the class, either individually or as a group. Students learn to assess themselves and their peers during their individual and group presentations, using the criteria mentioned earlier. Later, students who gave the best group presentations are given the opportunity to give talks in front of the linguistics faculty and other students in the department and discuss their field research with others.

### **Out-of-class activities**

Students also continue to participate in a variety of activities which allow them to engage with the larger professional field.

### **Interviewing presenters**

Students interview featured and plenary speakers at events they attend in order to develop their communicative competence. They prepare their own interview questions and exchange information with these speakers and others. For example, some students had the opportunity to interview Mohammed Al-Fahim, a well-known award-winning local author. In addition to helping them to develop their English skills, this activity also contributes to students' understanding of the field. They may receive expert help from the speakers when they are involved in their field research projects and are able to include this perspective when they formulate their interview and survey questions.

### **Student publications in newsletters**

In 2009, students from different universities in the Emirates had the opportunity to participate in a panel on learner autonomy at an ESP conference organised by TESOL Arabia. Afterwards, two of the students enrolled in the *Continuing Professional Development Practicum* who had participated on the panel were invited to submit a reflection for the Learner Independence Special Interest Group's newsletter describing what motivates them as language learners and giving advice for students and teachers (Hasan and Al-Khanbooli 2009).

### **Public presentations**

Students have given presentations related to linguistics and TESOL at various venues. Some students have presented their field research at the UAEU University General Requirements Unit (UGRU) Student Conference and received recognition for their

research and their oral presentation. This has given them the opportunity to share their findings with others. Other students have disseminated what they learned from attending the TESOL Arabia Conference at the department's Linguistics Open Day. They formed groups to display their summaries of various sessions and shared their reflections on the experience.

### **Attendance at student and teacher leadership conferences**

In addition to attending professional development sessions and annual conferences, students have been given the opportunity to attend special student and teacher leadership conferences organised in the UAE by TESOL Arabia's Leadership and Management Special Interest Group and hosted by the Higher Colleges of Technology, Dubai Men's College, in collaboration with the US Department of State. Participation in these conferences allowed the students to receive special training in areas of educational leadership such as public speaking, teacher evaluation, and leadership styles and strategies.

### **Evaluation**

At the end of each semester, students have been asked to share their perceptions of the course through completing a written course evaluation and reflection on their experience. Revisions to the course have been made accordingly. Given that the course has been offered now for five years, we have also sought feedback from some of our graduates who are now practising English language teachers. What follows are comments from four of our former students, submitted to us in 2012. Their names have been used with their permission.

These commentaries from course graduates provide evidence that our course objectives have been fulfilled. The students express their understanding of the importance of continuing professional development and recognise that graduating with an undergraduate degree in TESOL is just the beginning of their professional education. They realise that the field is extensive and ever-evolving and that they still have much to learn to become (and remain) competent professionals:

*During this course I attended many training workshops and seminars regarding teaching and learning inside and outside the university campus. I also attended the TESOL Arabia conference which was held in Dubai. I've learned that a degree in teaching is only the starting point in any successful teacher's life.*

*I believe that this course motivated me to keep studying and learning about the field of teaching. I have learned from this course that when we stop learning we start to hinder our ability to teach. The world of TESOL is changing every day and we need to be aware of these changes and be prepared for them.*

Aysha Al-Yahyaie (enrolled spring 2007)

The students' statements also highlight the opportunities the course provided them for networking with other professionals. Through interacting with other teachers, they learned about the reality of classroom teaching and were able to seek advice about their career trajectories:

*The course provided me with knowledge and confidence about my teaching, because I had the chance to hear about challenges of other teachers and how they overcome them. On the other hand, it also let me see how much work is required from me in order to become a competent teacher.*

Aysha Al-Yahyaei (enrolled spring 2007)

*The course that I took on continuing professional development introduced me to the real world of teaching as it drew in front of me a big picture about my role as a teacher. I think this course made me ready to get more involved in the teaching world.*

Ayeda Abdulla Al-Shebli (enrolled autumn 2007)

*I had the chance to learn networking which is very important for me as a student knowing nothing at that time about conferences and research. Networking helped me a lot in establishing contacts for the purpose of gathering information, communicating my career goals, and seeking advice, especially since I was about to graduate, and I was thinking to pursue my graduate studies.*

Badreyya Al-Khanbooli (enrolled spring 2009)

Participation in the course nourished the students' developing identities as English language teachers in the UAE and as members of the larger professional field:

*The course and the outside activities stimulated me to think about myself as a TESOL professional who deeply investigates, explores, and observes any particular phenomena or issue that captures my attention while studying or teaching a particular group, and try to provide an answer, or solution through engaging in various research processes.*

Badreyya Al-Khanbooli (enrolled spring 2009)

Finally, the students learned not only how to access professional knowledge, but also how to generate professional knowledge, and how to share that knowledge with others:

*During that course, I met different people with different visions and perspectives about teaching. I attended more than 20 sessions inside and outside the university... I learned a lot about teaching and learning strategies, differentiation, assessments, and lesson planning.*

Ayeda Abdulla Al-Shebli (enrolled autumn 2007)

*Attending such a conference (TESOL Arabia) was an important thing for me for several reasons. First, I learned some ideas to use in the classroom to change the mode of the class. Second, I got ideas related to the students' projects and how I can be creative about them. Third, I acquired some vocabulary by attending some sessions that talked about using some vocabulary in conversation. Besides that, this course pushed me to apply all that I learned with my students during the practicum course.*

Mariam Saif Al-Shamisi (enrolled spring 2010)

*Currently, I am enrolled in the MA TESOL programme at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Because of the skills and knowledge I have acquired from the course on continuing professional development, it made it easy for me to explore other conferences, send proposals, present my paper confidently, and answer the attendees' questions clearly. Therefore, it was clear for me how to act in such situations. I feel I am a professional and more confident gaining these experiences.*

Badreyya Al-Khanbooli (enrolled spring 2009)

In addition to meeting our course objectives, other positive outcomes have emerged from the course. First, the pre-service teachers enrolled in this course are also English language learners. The *Continuing Professional Development Practicum* provides the students with extensive opportunities to interact, not only with each other, but with professionals in the field, thus strengthening their language skills and communicative competence.

*This course ... encouraged me to improve my skills as a teacher and as a learner of a second language.*

Ayeda Abdulla Al-Shebli (enrolled autumn 2007)

*During this course I attended many professional development sessions either in UAEU or other universities... One of those conferences was the TESOL Arabia conference which was a great opportunity for me to develop my communication skills and teaching style. In this conference I met new people with great ideas about teaching. I learned from their way of presenting to be more confident and surer about myself.*

Mariam Saif Al-Shamisi (enrolled spring 2010)

As instructors, we have also noted that the course empowers students to develop their personal voices by participating in discussions and communicating effectively with other speakers and networking with other professionals. Students have met with other students from different universities and exchanged ideas while attending the student and teacher leadership conferences, where they not only received training but also used the information to develop as future teachers. Students also have the chance to voice their opinions using the BlackBoard discussion forums to discuss the sessions they attended as well as to recommend conferences and professional sessions to each other. This allows students to explore their own personal perspectives, arrive at ideas and share these with others. Students realise that they have the right to express their ideas, give their opinions, and share control of their learning.

The purpose of this course is to educate a particular group of students about professional development. However, the course has touched an even larger population of teachers indirectly. Students in Emirati culture often attend the professional development events with other family members who are practising teachers, and these family members also benefit from the professional development experience. In addition, students in the professional development course are often simultaneously engaged in their teaching practicum. One student commented how

she had told her supervising teacher about the TESOL Arabia association and some of the events that were being offered. Thus, we see how explicit instruction in the importance of professional development, the forms it can take, and how one can be involved can 'trickle up' from pre-service teachers to reach in-service teachers.

The UAEU Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences recognises the value of the *Continuing Professional Development Practicum* and has always supported the attendance of TESOL students enrolled in the course at professional events like the TESOL Arabia, Current Trends in English Language Testing (CTELT) and the Middle East-North Africa Writing Centers Alliance (MENAWCA) conferences. Since spring 2008, the faculty has provided funding for students enrolled in the course to attend TESOL Arabia, regardless of the number of students enrolled. In addition to paying conference registration costs, the UAEU has also provided transportation and housing facilities for the students attending. Recently, the Dean has also approved funding TESOL Arabia membership fees so that students have the opportunity to attend any professional development event throughout the Emirates organised by this association even after they finish the course.

## Relevance

Participation in activities to continue our professional development is important to all teachers in all teaching contexts at all stages of our careers. However, knowing about these activities and how to engage in them is especially important for novice teachers. Teachers at this stage in their careers are still being socialised into the profession and require more support in terms of teaching resources and mentoring (Farrell 2003). A course dedicated to involving pre-service teachers in continuing professional development equips them to access those resources and to come into contact with those people who can serve as mentors during those crucial first years of teaching.

Some cultural contexts, though, may be more or less supportive of implementing a course on continuing professional development. In its first semester, the biggest challenge in implementing the *Continuing Professional Development Practicum* was getting students to participate in the professional development activities off campus. Even though events were continuously being organised (sometimes there were two or three events offered in one week), UAE culture did not allow young women to attend these events on their own. Some of the students had female family members who were also English language teachers, and they were able to convince their relatives to accompany them to these events. However, other students did not have a family member who was able, or willing, to accompany them. Thus, they could only attend events that were either held on the UAEU campus or that the entire class attended together.

With the generosity of the English language teachers in the UAE University's foundation programme, we were able to resolve this problem. A number of teachers from the foundation programme offered to give special workshops on campus in the afternoons exclusively for the TESOL students. These workshops not only enabled the TESOL students to meet the required number of hours for their practicum, but

also allowed the foundation teachers to share their knowledge with these pre-service teachers and often to rehearse a presentation that they would later give to their colleagues. Students have also been welcomed at the Academic Talks sponsored by the Linguistics Department.

Another issue in offering such a course is access to professional development activities in the local context. The UAE is blessed with an abundance of professional development opportunities for English language teachers. In some countries, however, there are not any professional associations for English teachers, or even if there are, the university may be located too far away from the site of the associations' activities for pre-service teachers to be actively involved. In these cases, a *Continuing Professional Development Practicum* may need to focus more on activities an individual teacher can do on his/her own, such as maintaining a teaching journal or videotaping oneself (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001), and less on participation in externally-organised professional development events. In addition, more emphasis might be given to students' involvement in professional development opportunities now available via the internet, such as participation in online courses, webinars, and discussion forums. Teacher training institutions might also collaborate with local schools to create opportunities for professional development, such as allowing students to observe in-service teachers and to discuss their practice with them, opportunities that benefit pre-service and in-service teachers alike.

Finally, teacher education programmes may want to give more emphasis to teaching their students about continuing professional development but be constrained from adding another course to their curriculum. For these programmes, we suggest creating an extracurricular TESOL student organisation where these topics could be explored by interested students outside of class.

## **Development as teacher educators**

Teaching this course has stimulated our development as teacher educators in several ways. First, designing and implementing this course has pushed us to reflect on what continuing professional development is, what kinds of activities fall under its umbrella, and how a teacher can begin to engage in these kinds of activities. In this case, the 'how' has been very important as we want our students to be able to carry on with their professional development once they have graduated and become practising teachers. We have had to break the various activities down into steps and guide students through the process. For example, attending the TESOL Arabia conference involves applying for TESOL Arabia membership and registering for the conference in advance of the conference date. Preparing for the conference may entail reviewing the conference programme online and choosing which presentations to attend. Once at the conference, we have to locate the presentations within the conference site. After the conference, we need to organise our materials and reflect on what we have learned. We may also want to submit a proposal for next year's conference. Any of these steps can be overwhelming for the pre-service or novice teacher without support.

Teaching this course has strengthened our belief that continuing professional development needs to be made concrete for pre-service teachers. They need to engage in professional activities along with practising teachers in order to fully realise the value of these activities. It is not sufficient to talk about reading a journal, attending a conference, or conducting a research project. Experiential learning is key for pre-service teachers to transfer the knowledge they have gained in their coursework and apply it in their professional lives.

Finally, collaborating with students on their field research projects has facilitated our own understanding of teaching and learning. Some of the topics we have investigated with students are:

- teaching English to hearing impaired students
- allowing minimal use of L1 in learning L2
- gender differences in second language acquisition
- how to motivate students to read for pleasure
- students' attitudes towards L1 interference in L2 writing
- learning vocabulary through technology.

Every project we work on not only empowers our students but facilitates their working together as united, collaborative and co-operative groups. They learn to introduce the research questions, review the literature, and select methods of data collection. They plan and conduct interviews, design and administer questionnaires, and finally, interpret the evidence and report the findings. Guiding and overseeing the research projects has also given us the opportunity to meet the students' needs, focus on research topics of importance in the local context, and make a difference in the language classroom.

In conclusion, the *Continuing Professional Development Practicum* has been an important addition to the Applied Linguistics/TESOL programme curriculum at the UAE University as it provides valuable knowledge and experiences for our pre-service teachers which are not covered in any other course. We are proud that this innovative course contributes to the development of language teaching professionals in the UAE who are equipped to continue learning throughout their careers.

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# 10

## A shadowing experience for TEFL student teachers

Besime Erkmén

### Overview

This chapter describes the experiences of third year teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) student teachers on a one-day teacher-shadowing programme and reports on the positive outcomes for the participants. Drawing on data gathered from student teachers' reflective writing and survey responses, the chapter argues that the experience of shadowing a teacher is effective as it raises student teachers' awareness not only about what teaching entails, but also more generally about how teachers deal with classroom management problems, about collegial relationships, about teachers' various responsibilities and about the broader demands of the workplace.

### Introduction

Throughout their previous education, student teachers have been involved in an 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975) which shapes their philosophy of teaching and learning, and which may guide them regarding the kind of teacher they want – or do not want – to be. Becoming a teacher then requires not only theoretical knowledge, but also the skills and abilities to operate effectively and competently in classrooms which are filled with unforeseen events. Richards (2008: 160), in his review article on second language teacher education, states that English language teaching has become a professional career which requires 'a specialised knowledge base obtained through both academic study and practical experience.'

Student-teachers in their first years of bachelor of arts (BA) TEFL programmes, therefore, are typically taught various teaching skills and strategies to help them perform effectively in class. Subsequently, the practicum course, which in my context is typically offered in the final year of a BA TEFL programme, is the time student teachers are offered their first real experience in classrooms. At this point, student teachers have the opportunity to observe teachers, and also apply their knowledge and skills in practice teaching. This, therefore, is the time when they integrate their *knowledge about*, and *knowledge how* (Richards 2008).

However, several researchers (for example Enginarlar 1996, Seferlioğlu 2006, Peacock 2009, Coskun and Daloglu 2010) have evaluated the components of English language teacher education (or BA TEFL) programmes and reported on the strengths and weaknesses of such programmes. Although student

teachers generally agree that these programmes prepare them to be effective teachers, a common complaint concerns the lack of practical aspects and the limited number of observation opportunities. Seferlioğlu's (2006) study of 176 senior pre-service TEFL trainees' reflections on the methodology and practice components of their practice teaching courses in Turkey, for example, revealed that observing different classrooms with various proficiency levels and school settings was lacking in the methodology and practice components of their undergraduate programme. Similarly, Peacock's (2009) study of 166 third-year TEFL student teachers studying at City University of Hong Kong found that methodology courses were too theoretical and/or insufficiently practical.

Other studies (e.g. Johnson 1996, Peacock 2001, Farrell 2003, Hobbs 2007) conducted with trainees in their practicum reveal that their first experience in teaching practice may be a daunting one for various reasons, including incongruence between trainees' expectations and beliefs and the realities of teaching, as well as difficulties of socialisation in the school context. Therefore, Johnson (1996) argues for the need to prepare trainees for the realities of classroom and school life. One way of preparing student teachers for these realities might be, as suggested by Day (1990: 43), implementing a formal, guided programme of observation which can help student teachers in:

1. developing a terminology for understanding and discussing the teaching process
2. developing an awareness of the principles and decision making that underlie effective teaching
3. distinguishing between effective and ineffective classroom practices
4. identifying techniques and practices student teachers can apply to their own teaching.

Observing teachers in real classrooms is indeed one way of increasing student teachers' professional knowledge and awareness of what teaching in a classroom entails. Additionally, in a recent study, Cincioğlu (2012) investigated the effect of '*teacher shadowing*', which was offered as an assignment in the practicum course. To complete the assignment, student teachers had to spend one full day with a co-operating teacher to investigate how they spent their daily lives through observation and interviews. This study revealed that the shadowing experience effectively raised awareness about classroom practice and school life in ways not possible in course lectures, or via the observation of individual lessons. It also triggered individual interests and priorities in developing specific professional skills.

In this chapter, therefore, I argue that student teachers should also be provided with the opportunity of spending at least one full day at school with a teacher, preferably prior to their practicum experience or at the early stages of the practicum, in order better to conceptualise what the overall teaching profession involves.

### **The context**

The ten student teachers who took part in this study were doing their four-year BA TEFL degree in the Middle East Technical University (METU), Northern Cyprus. Nine of the student teachers were female and one male. All these student teachers were taking the Classroom Management course, which is a third-year course, for the first time. At the time of the study, eight student teachers were in their third year and two in their final year. These two fourth-year student teachers were also taking the Practice Teaching Course (practicum), and thus had had some teaching experience in the local high schools. The other eight student teachers had had no teaching experience in high schools or in English language preparatory schools at universities.

### **The innovation: a shadowing programme**

The innovation under investigation in this paper is a shadowing programme that was incorporated into the Classroom Management course in the academic year 2010–11. The Classroom Management course instructor believed that student teachers should be exposed to a real school environment prior to their practicum experience, which would be in their fourth year, and that this exposure would increase their knowledge and awareness of issues related to teaching and learning. The co-ordinator of the TEFL programme accepted the course instructor's proposal and suggested running a one-day shadowing programme at the university's School of Foreign Languages English Preparatory School. Support from the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) was essential, both from the administration and the SFL instructors. The co-ordinator of the TEFL programme and the Director of SFL worked together to agree on the terms of the shadowing programme. The SFL instructors were given the details of the shadowing programme, and only those who volunteered were randomly paired with a student teacher.

As I started teaching the Classroom Management course in the academic year 2011–12, I was informed about the shadowing programme that had started running in the previous year. The co-ordinator of the programme and the previous year's course instructor told me that their survey results revealed that all of the 11 student teachers who took part in the one-day shadowing programme had found the experience effective and that they had all agreed that the programme should be run again in the following year. Based on my colleagues' recommendations, the findings from the survey and my belief that engaging with an authentic classroom and workplace environment would be beneficial for the student teachers, I agreed to run the programme for the current year. As a teacher educator in my own right, I chose to change the content of the shadowing programme slightly in order better to meet what I saw as trainees' needs. That is, in addition to using the pre-shadowing task that was given by the previous instructor, I made some amendments to the tasks to enable the student teachers to be more reflective about their experience. The amendments are described in the 'tasks for the shadowing programme' section below.

## **Objectives, procedures and process of the programme**

Before describing the features of the tasks that I assigned to the student teachers, I will explain the objectives, procedures and processes of the shadowing programme. As mentioned earlier, the shadowing programme incorporated into the Classroom Management course aims to familiarise student teachers with a teaching and learning environment, with teachers' responsibilities, workplace demands and, by and large, what it is like to be a language teacher. It should be noted that student teachers who take the final year practicum are only responsible for observing their mentor teachers while teaching, and for doing several mini-teaching practices. Therefore, they do not actually know how teachers spend a regular day and what they are required to do as part of their job. As the majority of student teachers, then, do not get to observe a teacher for a whole day even during their time in school, it was believed that offering them this opportunity in the third year would equip them with some knowledge about a teacher's typical routine. As a result, this one-day shadowing would be an opportunity for the student teachers to relate the acquired theoretical knowledge to the realities of a school environment.

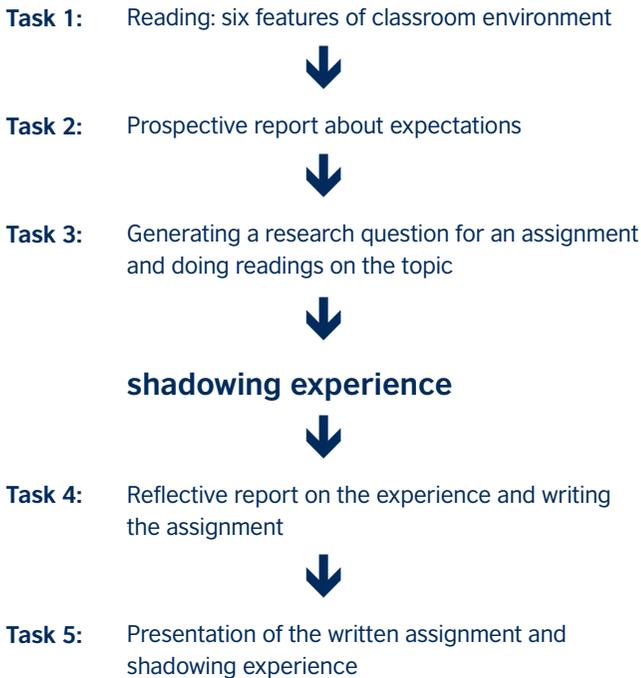
The shadowing programme proceeds as follows. The co-ordinator of the TEFL programme gets in touch with the Director of the SFL, informs her about the number of student teachers and asks the Director to ask for volunteer instructors to be part of the programme. The names of the volunteers are then given to me, as the course instructor, to be paired with the student teachers randomly. Once I have paired student teachers with instructors, I give each student teacher the relevant instructor's office number and email so that they can introduce themselves and get acquainted with them before their shadowing day.

Each student teacher meets their mentor instructor at their office at the start of the working day, i.e. 08.30, and spends the whole day, except for the lunch hour, with him or her. The SFL instructors teach three hours per day and have three office hours for each group they teach. Besides teaching and assisting students in their offices, the instructors are required to stay at the workplace until 17.00 in order to undertake administrative duties or be involved in other job-related duties. I did not tell my student teachers about what a typical day of an instructor at SFL is, as it was for them to find out. Moreover, one of the key terms negotiated by the Director of SFL and the TEFL programme co-ordinator was that student teachers were encouraged to be non-judgemental, and not to criticise any of their mentor instructor's actions, since the main goal was for them to get familiarised with the teaching and learning environment as it is and not in an idealised form.

## **Tasks for the shadowing programme**

In this section of the chapter, I will explain the tasks which I asked the student teachers to complete before and after the shadowing. The former pre-shadowing task required the student teachers to read Doyle's (1986, 2006; cited in Weinstein 2007) six features of classroom environment (multidimensionality, simultaneity, immediacy, unpredictability, lack of privacy, history) before shadowing. The aim of the task was to provide the student teachers with certain criteria to focus on while shadowing. Although I asked the student teachers to do the same task, I also gave

them additional tasks to complete before and after shadowing. The figure below illustrates how I organised the tasks which the student teachers had to complete in order to frame the shadowing:



I asked student teachers to do the reading first and become familiar with the six features of the classroom environment, as they would be examining them during their observations.

For the second task, I asked them to write a prospective report about their thoughts and expectations of the day. They were encouraged to think about issues concerning teaching and learning. Additionally, while we were in our Classroom Management course, we generated some questions that they could ask their assigned SFL mentor instructor. They were also encouraged to think of other questions that they wanted to find out related to teaching and learning, teachers' responsibilities or workplace requirements and regulations.

As for the third task, they were asked to think of a topic that they wanted to research in depth. They were encouraged to formulate a research question, do the necessary reading from books and research studies in the field, and ask their mentor instructor's view related to the topic that they would be investigating. I believed that this task would help students connect practice with theoretical knowledge and see if there is congruence or dissonance between real practices and theoretical knowledge.

Task 4 had two writing parts: a reflective report on the shadowing experience and a written assignment. The reflective report had to be written as soon as the student teachers completed their shadowing. In order to enhance the shadowing programme, eliciting student teachers' experiences and thoughts was important as they were the ones who were directly involved in it. They were particularly encouraged to write about the extent to which their expectations had been met and whether the questions that they had formulated earlier had been answered. There was no word limit for their reflective report and I told the student teachers that it would not be graded. The second part of Task 4 was writing their assignment, which had a 1,250 word limit and which was graded according to the rubric which I had adapted from our institution's scoring rubric. For this assignment, they had to combine their experience, their answers from the instructor's interviews and readings related to their research topic.

The final task for the student teachers to complete was a 15 to 20 minute presentation on their shadowing experience and assignment. The aim of the presentations was to share their shadowing experiences with their classmates and, if their classmates had any questions to raise, they could exchange information about their experiences. As for the aim of the presentation of the assignment, I believed that each student teacher would learn even more from their experience by having to articulate and share what they had learned, and that their classmates would have the opportunity to draw insights about various topics and discuss these later.

### **Evaluation of the programme**

In what follows, I focus mostly on data from two sources: Tasks 2 and 4, which were explained in the section above, and an online questionnaire which the student teachers from the current and previous year completed after their shadowing experience. It should be noted that the previous year's student teachers were not involved in writing pre- and post-reflection reports. Therefore, only the responses from their online survey will be presented. Moreover, I quote typical responses and comments to represent student teachers' views on the programme, using pseudonyms. The presentation of the findings is organised under two headings: (1) student teachers' expectations of the shadowing programme; (2) reflections on the shadowing experience. Anyone wishing to know more about other aspects of this work is very welcome to contact me at the email address given.

#### ***Student teachers' expectations of the shadowing programme***

Student teacher reactions to the shadowing programme were very positive before they went shadowing. They all wrote in their expectation reports that they believed that the shadowing experience would be beneficial for them and that they were very excited about the day. The following quotations are representative of student teachers' feelings prior to their shadowing experience:

*I definitely believe that shadowing is going to be very useful for all of us. I am curious about many things since I have never studied in the preparatory school... We have been learning the theory of teaching for semesters. Now is the time to see how the practice of teaching can be done.*

Dilara

*Shadowing day is my first experience in observing a real classroom atmosphere. I took lots of courses but I didn't think of them in terms of teaching and learning processes.*

Nil

*Next year, I will go to a school for my practicum. Before going there, I need to see how the classroom environment is and how the lessons are done. Seeing these things in a real life by living is very important for learning.*

Yasemin

Student teachers' comments imply that they were more concerned about how the classes are run, rather than how teachers spend their time at the workplace. These comments are not surprising as novices are generally interested in the actual practice of teaching.

To analyse the prospective reports inductively, I first examined the recurring topics that would allow me to code student teachers' interests. If an issue was mentioned by only one student teacher, I did not consider it worth recording. Having read the prospective reports several times, the following codes of interest, which were actual words and phrases derived from the raw data (Glasser and Strauss 1967, cited in Campbell et al. 2004) emerged. They have been arranged according to the number of times they were mentioned. Once I had established the codes, I grouped them into three more general categories to represent student teachers' interests:

**Figure 1**

Codes	Categories
1. Dealing with misbehaviour (6 student teachers)	Classroom atmosphere
2. Motivation (3 student teachers)	Classroom atmosphere
3. Rapport with students (3 student teachers)	Classroom atmosphere
4. Lesson planning and preparation (2 student teachers)	Lesson planning and preparation
5. Teaching methods (2 student teachers)	Teaching approaches
6. Use of L1 (2 student teachers)	Teaching approaches
7. Use of technology (2 student teachers)	Teaching approaches

### ***Classroom atmosphere***

Most of the student teachers were interested in seeing how teachers dealt with misbehaviour in their classes. This was not surprising as we spent three weeks on classroom control and how teachers respond to students' behaviour. The following excerpts are representative of student teachers' expectations regarding classroom control:

*I also want to learn about difficult behaviours and how he (the teacher) deals with that behaviour.*

Selen

*I expect to learn how the teacher controls the classroom when students cause discipline problems.*

Hande

The second commonly mentioned issues were: motivation (Hande, Nur, and Selen) and teachers' rapport with students (Hande, Nur, Nil). Three student teachers wanted to find out how teachers maintained motivation. In addition to student motivation, one student teacher was interested in finding out how the teacher motivated him/herself. The following statement illustrates why Nur was concerned about how the teacher maintained motivation:

*I expect most of the students' motivation to be low because they are pre-intermediates and some of them may still be beginners. Therefore, they may have the feeling that they will not pass the proficiency exam.*

In relation to teacher rapport, student teachers were concerned about interaction patterns between teachers and students. The following statement exemplifies three of the student teachers' expectations about teacher rapport:

*In our courses, we have covered, learned and analysed various teachers and their teaching styles and we have chosen the best teacher style according to their rapport with their students. I am curious about how the teachers' rapport has an effect on learning and students.*

Nil

### **Lesson planning and preparation**

Student teachers in our programme are introduced to writing lesson plans in their third year, and two of the student teachers (Hande, Nil) wanted to find out how teachers prepared lesson plans and how they implemented them in their classes. The following statement is a justification of Nil's expectation:

*My second expectation is to see how a written lesson plan can be applied in a real classroom. I have learned how a lesson plan is written but I do not know whether teachers prepare lesson plans as we do.*

### **Teaching approaches**

The following issues were mentioned by two student teachers: teaching methods (Dilara, Nil), use of L1 (Dilara, Hande) and use of technology (Cem, Nur). In relation to teaching methods, they were interested in seeing whether teachers used traditional teacher-centred approaches or 'the more trendy communicative methods' (Dilara). Similarly, Nil wanted to see how grammar structures were taught and whether authentic materials were used in lessons.

In our methodology courses, we emphasise that language instructors should avoid using L1 as the class time is almost the students' only opportunity to hear L2. Two of the student teachers wanted to know if the instructors used L2 all the time and if yes, how they responded to students' use of L1.

In relation to teaching approaches, two student teachers who had studied at the SFL were interested in seeing whether their instructors started using technology in their classes.

The following quotation is representative of their interest in the use of technology:

*Are there any technological changes at the SFL classes? If yes, how do these changes affect students' learning?*

Cem

### **Reflections on the shadowing day**

At the end of the shadowing day, student teachers were asked to write a reflective report (Task 4) on their experience and later complete an online survey (see Appendix). This survey, which was prepared by the previous year's course instructor and also completed by his student teachers, had 12 questions. The first nine questions were closed, where the student teachers had to tick one box using a 5-point response rating scale, and the three open-ended questions aimed to elicit student teachers' opinions and suggestions about the shadowing programme.

In their reflective reports, student teachers wrote that they were able to observe the majority of the features which were mentioned by Doyle. Additionally, they were able to answer their questions which they had in their minds prior to their shadowing experience. For example, Nil who was interested in finding out how lesson plans are prepared and used wrote:

*I learned how a lesson plan is prepared and used in the classroom, and how different language skills are integrated into one lesson.*

All the student teachers asked their instructors about their typical day. They all stated that they had not expected a teacher's typical day to be so tiring. They said that even though they did not teach, being with the teacher throughout the day was tiring and explained that the requirements of teaching were beyond their expectations. Typical days of the instructors, as reported by the student teachers, were similar. All the instructors taught three hours a day and then spent their time preparing for the next day, preparing materials and activities for their lessons and checking homework. The student teachers expected their instructors to prepare lesson plans as we ask them to do in their methodology classes. However, the student teachers found out that all the instructors prepared their lesson plans mentally. The following are student teachers' comments about lesson planning:

*She usually prepares her lesson plans mentally, and puts the materials according to the stages of her lesson. Sometimes she takes simple notes to remember what she is going to do. She does not prepare lesson plans as we do maybe because she is an experienced teacher.*

Dilara

*They were actually planning their lessons in their minds. I liked the way they (instructor and his officemate) shared ideas and helped each other while planning their lessons.*

Hande

On the basis of student teachers' impressions of their experience and comments in their reflective reports, the shadowing programme proved to be effective, as they stated that they had greatly benefited from the experience and had learnt a lot from their mentor instructors. Student teachers' comments were further supported by their online survey responses. When asked whether they had benefited from the experience, all ten student teachers selected point 5 on the scale ('definitely yes'). Similar results were given by the previous year student teachers: nine of them selected point 5 on the scale ('definitely yes') and two selected point 4 on the scale.

When asked to describe their shadowing experience, student teachers from the current year expressed their satisfaction with the following adjectives: beneficial, helpful, fruitful, warm, effective, tiring but effective, nice. Previous year student teachers also described their experience with similar adjectives: informative, beneficial, enjoyable, exciting, contributory, helpful. These adjectives make clear that they enjoyed and appreciated their one-day shadowing experience.

Moreover, the survey results from both year student teachers revealed that all the student teachers were eager to participate in an extended shadowing programme and supported the idea that the shadowing programme be run again next year for the Classroom Management students. In relation to extending the shadowing programme, nine student teachers selected point 5 on the scale ('definitely yes'), while only one student teacher chose point 4. Student teachers' responses were supported with their suggestions, which they made at the end of the online survey. Suggestions from both years show that student teachers would like the programme to be longer:

*I think it should be fortnightly. It should be more frequent than it is now. It is a very helpful programme, practice for us. I think it is what we really need to experience more than the other courses.*

Cemile from 2010–11 cohort

*I think the shadowing programme is too short. It should be more than one day in my opinion because it provides a real classroom experience and I believe that it is really helpful for future teachers.*

Hande from 2011–12 cohort

Therefore, findings from both years suggest that the programme should be longer and that it should be continued in the following years.

Furthermore, at the end of their reflective reports, all the student teachers commented on how they felt about the shadowing experience and teaching profession. The following statements illustrate student teachers' views:

*This shadowing day contributed me so much. I learned so many things about classroom management, environment and the teacher's attitude and style. For my practice teaching next year, I will use some of the techniques that Mr K used.*

Nur

*When I go back and think about the experience, I realise that it is not easy to be an English teacher. It is difficult to deal with different student characteristics and meet their needs. It is also difficult to be patient all the time...*

Hande

*Being a teacher is difficult because a teacher can face a lot of difficulties in and out of class. We need to see how a lesson is taught, how the teacher manages times and how they treat students when problems occur... A teacher has a lot of things to do; checking students' homework, preparing a lesson for the next day's lesson, checking emails from administrators. Checking students' homework is difficult because she has to check 60 papers... Because they have a lot of things to do in a day, they certainly take work home.*

Yasemin

*After class, we spent two hours at his office. I learnt that he spends at least one hour to get ready for the next day's class. He also reads articles and looks for different activities for his lessons. He also told me that instructors have different responsibilities like attending training sessions, meetings and so on.*

Selen

Several conclusions can be drawn from these data:

- a. Student teachers are eager to find out about the teaching environment.
- b. Student teachers found the shadowing programme effective. This experience gave them a taste of what a real school context is like. It also gave them an idea about how lessons are conducted.
- c. The shadowing programme should be continued in the following years, and there is a desire for an extended shadowing programme.
- d. The prospective and reflective tasks combined allowed the student teachers to explore their expectations and relate them to their experiences. In other words, pre- and post-reflection tasks raised student teachers' awareness of what teaching is about.

### **Discussion, implications and suggestions**

As this study only involved ten student teachers' reflective reports and survey responses from the current year, and 11 student teachers' survey responses from the previous year, I realise that the results are particular to our situation. Although the results cannot be easily transferred to a wider population, I argue that some important insights might be.

The study has shown that involving student teachers in a one-day shadowing programme had a beneficial effect on the student teachers' understanding of the teaching and learning context. In particular, this one-day programme introduced the student teachers to the requirements of the teaching profession. When student teachers start their actual teaching, they may not realise what the overall teaching profession requires. I acknowledge that the practicum is one way of introducing

student teachers to the teaching profession. However, it may not fully prepare student teachers as they are only engaged in classroom observation and practice teaching. The teaching profession is not only about teaching in the classroom, but also fulfilling the requirements of the institution.

The student teachers in my Classroom Management course had the opportunity to see how teachers spend a typical day at school. In our classes, we often discussed how most teachers in private and state schools spend their day at school. However, they had not experienced a typical day of a teacher until they visited their assigned mentor instructors at SFL. With the opportunity of the shadowing programme, the student teachers were actually able to see and experience how teachers plan their lessons, design materials, collaborate with their colleagues while preparing lesson plans, evaluate students' homework in their offices, and deal with classroom management issues in their classrooms. Thus, the implementation of the shadowing programme provided the student teachers with authentic workplace experience.

The reflective tasks were indeed of value. Tasks 1, 2 and 3 prepared the student teachers for the shadowing experience. In other words, these combined tasks helped student teachers to brainstorm their expectations and needs prior to engaging in their new experience. Task 4, which had two parts, was also useful. I believe that the reflective task, which was not graded, was a valuable source of their own learning and provoked their overall awareness of what the teaching profession requires. The second part of Task 4, which required the student teachers to write an assignment based on their interest, also enabled them to take responsibility for their own learning. Completing the assignment called for private study on the topic they were interested in and opened up an opportunity to construct a bridge between their shadowing experience and theoretical knowledge. Although the assignments were rich in content, I found that I had to provide some guidelines as some of the student teachers were weak in organising and presenting their ideas.

Student teachers' presentations of their shadowing experience and their written assignment were both visual (i.e. PowerPoint presentation) and oral, and also included discussion afterwards. Presentations were indeed beneficial for the student teachers as they were all involved in asking various questions related to the presenter's experience and assignment.

Based on the student teachers' reflections and feedback about the shadowing programme, I would argue that a programme of this kind should be implemented in any teacher education programme before the student teachers start their practicum experience. Moreover, the findings indicate that the student teachers are in favour of extending the programme. If the programme is to be extended, I suggest the following two changes be made: increase the number of days for the shadowing, perhaps to four days; and allow student teachers to shadow at least two different instructors, preferably teaching different levels. In this way, student teachers will be better prepared for the teaching profession.

### **My own development as teacher educator**

Reflecting upon my experience in the shadowing programme, I have reached the following realisations about what I have gained: my experience in the shadowing programme was highly satisfying because I realised that the student teachers were able to utilise the opportunity of shadowing to learn more about the teaching profession. For example, they were able to gain some knowledge about what occurs in language classes and how teachers spend a typical day at school. Moreover, this experience taught me that a more productive learning environment and a healthier relationship with the student teachers can be facilitated when they are actively involved in decision-making, for example for Task 2, creating questions which they could ask their SFL mentor instructor. Additionally, this joint enterprise led me to learn to trust student teachers more with regard to giving them broader opportunities to learn, and trusting them to work independently with appropriate support. For example, I was hesitant about holding presentations at the end of their shadowing experience because, based on my previous experiences, student teachers would generally present their speech and no one would ask further questions or make comments. However, after the presentations, I realised that all the student teachers were eager to find out more about their friends' experiences and share their thoughts with them. As I saw my student teachers benefit from the opportunities that had been provided, I felt that what was done was quite right. All in all, this experience made me realise that perhaps a depth of experiential learning, even if only brief, can be more significant than abstract knowledge.

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## Appendix

General feedback: None of these questions are compulsory. If you feel you cannot respond to any question, just leave your response blank. Thank you.

1. Do you feel that you benefited from the experience of shadowing a METU SFL instructor?

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Definitely NO</b>						<b>Definitely YES</b>

2. How would you rate your experience of shadowing a METU SFL instructor?

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Negative</b>						<b>Positive</b>

3. In the classroom, how did the students perceive your presence?

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Obtrusive</b>						<b>Unobtrusive</b>

4. When I was shadowing the METU SFL instructor in their office, I felt I...

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>was in the way</b>						<b>was helpful</b>

5. Would you like to participate in an extended shadowing programme?

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Definitely NO</b>						<b>Definitely YES</b>

6. Would you recommend that the shadowing programme be run again next year for the EDUS304 students?

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Definitely NO</b>						<b>Definitely YES</b>

7. The information about the shadowing programme in the website was...

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>incomplete</b>						<b>complete</b>

8. The information about the shadowing programme in the website was...

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>confusing</b>						<b>clear</b>

9. I was prepared for the shadowing experience and clear about the expectations and outcomes.

	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Not at all</b>						<b>Absolutely</b>

10. What THREE Adjectives would you use to describe your experience in the shadowing programme?

11. Did anything happen which you would like to have had more information about? Give details.

12. If you were to participate in the shadowing programme again, would you recommend or suggest any changes?

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## **Besime Erkmen**

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Besime Erkmen has been involved in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) for over 10 years. She has experience of working as an English Language teacher in a high school in Northern Cyprus, and as a full-time language instructor at Yeditepe University, Turkey, as well as at Eastern Mediterranean University, Northern Cyprus. She has been teaching methodology classes on the TEFL Programme, METU NCC since 2010. Her research is in the area of teacher training and education. She is currently involved in a research project with two of her colleagues, investigating Secondary ELT teachers' perceptions and practices regarding professional development in Northern Cyprus.

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# 11

## iCorpus: making corpora meaningful for pre-service teacher education

Alev Özbilgin and Steve Neufeld

In this chapter, we will describe how we are incorporating elements of corpus approaches into our pre-service teacher training. We will explore the ramifications this has had on the perspectives of teacher trainees towards their own language development, and highlight the added value this gives our teacher education programme in allowing trainees to develop critical thinking skills and gain insight and practical experience into learner-centered, corpus-informed foreign language instruction.

### **What can the corpus revolution offer to teacher education?**

As teacher educators we are mindful of McCarthy's argument that we can no longer ignore the ramifications of the corpus revolution (2008: 573). He suggests that teacher education must raise awareness about corpora in three distinct stages: first, supply trainee teachers with hands-on experience to understand the theory and put into practice elements of a corpus-informed approach; second, build on this knowledge to develop skills to critically evaluate materials and course books in order to lobby publishers to adopt more corpus-informed approaches in practice; and third, provide ongoing opportunities to develop expertise in the use of corpora, including the opportunity to create bespoke corpora to meet individual teaching needs and contexts.

In our teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) programme, the teacher trainees learn the theory of teaching methods in the second year, which includes an introduction to the Natural and Lexical Approaches. We extend the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches to a practical application of corpus-informed tools and address McCarthy's first two stages in our third year course on Instructional Technology and Materials Development. Teacher trainees access published corpora, such as Mark Davies' corpora hosted at Brigham Young University (<http://corpus.byu.edu>) and complete tasks involving corpus-based tools from Tom Cobb's Lextutor website (<http://lextutor.ca>) for text analysis and materials development. However, from a broader teacher education perspective, we felt that limiting corpus work to several isolated sessions in one course was not adequate to introduce teacher trainees to the sheer scope and practical value of the available tools.

It is widely held that corpora can develop language awareness (for example, Tribble and Barlow 2001). Beyond the language skills component of pre-service teacher education, we feel that putting a bank of linguistic data at the fingertips of our teacher trainees will in the long term enable them to inform syllabus and materials design, classroom exploitation, and language assessment as envisaged by McCarthy. Our perception is that corpus-informed approaches expose the heart of language, which we see as a common bond that we want to strengthen between us and our teacher trainees. Additionally, they also promote critical thinking, which is a key priority in the mission of our TEFL programme. Indeed, what McCarthy advocates is a paradigm shift in which ELT professionals are not just aware of corpora, but fully integrate a corpus-informed approach into their own professional practice.

Our preliminary exploratory reading turned up ample evidence of this paradigm shift towards corpora as an influence in the language teaching profession in general (Braun et al. 2006, Cobb 2010, Paquot 2010, Yoon 2011), and in practical terms of incorporating corpora into foreign language instruction (Carter et al. 2007, Pérez-Paredes et al. 2011, Yoon 2008). However, when it comes to pre-service teacher education, the majority of teacher education programmes take little account of the ‘corpus revolution’ (Farr 2010). Our conundrum was to find a way to integrate ‘corpora literacy’ early on in our pre-service teacher training, allowing trainee teachers time to assimilate the use of corpus-based tools in a way that is meaningful to them, and build a foundation to carry this through into their professional life.

### **Making corpora meaningful in pre-service teacher education**

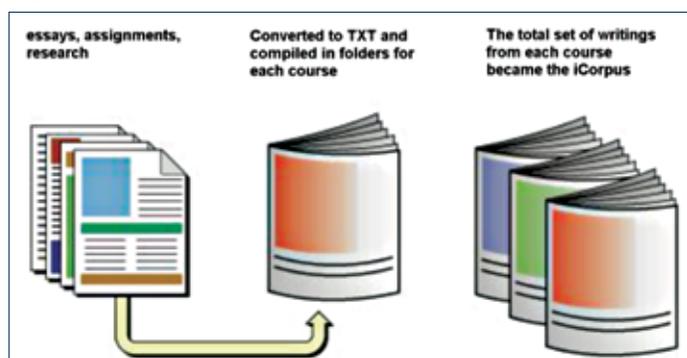
Our contention is that teacher trainees need to be trained and equipped to play a pivotal role in modelling and providing scaffolding for their future students to develop skills in their own use of corpora. Our teacher trainees had been shown how to use public corpora and create vocabulary profiles, concordance extracts, collocate tables, etc. as part of the instructional technology course in their third year. The teacher trainees perceived this as an interesting but somewhat abstract and academic exercise in using technology. While appreciating what corpora offer in theory, trainees had trouble finding a practical and meaningful link between learning how to use corpus-based technology and the role corpora can play in their education as teachers, or as language learners in their own right.

With this in mind, we felt that by turning the focus from standard published corpora to bespoke corpora, trainees would find it meaningful ‘to reflect on the kind of language they want to investigate’ (Hunston 2002: 14). Two types of corpora specifically compiled for teaching and learning purposes are learner corpora, which show how learners use the target language, and pedagogical corpora, which present the target language that learners need to master (Willis 2003: 165). Such approaches still view the teacher trainee as a passive consumer, with the instructor creating and managing the corpora, devising the tasks and directing the path of corpus analysis. Taking the trainees’ perspective as paramount, a more meaningful approach was to consider them the creators and masters of their own corpora, be it learner or pedagogical. Extending this philosophy one step further, encapsulating issues of ownership and practicality, led us to the idea of trainees using their own writing to create their corpus – a notion we coined the ‘individual-Corpus’ (iCorpus from now on).

In our TEFL programme, we have a majority of international students from Turkey. For the iCorpus pilot project, we focused on those in the third and fourth year. We ended up with six volunteers for the pilot, which consisted of three phases – an initial interview before the iCorpus training (see Appendix A for the questions), the iCorpus training followed by a period of reflection on the experience, and a follow up interview (see Appendix B for the questions). These interviews helped us understand the implications of the iCorpus from the trainees' point of view.

We gave the students three one-hour training sessions over three weeks in which they created their own iCorpus from their essays, as illustrated in Figure 1, and learned how to analyse their iCorpus using free concordancing software called AntConc (Anthony 2011). To illustrate the outcomes of this training, we have taken one student's iCorpus as an example in the following figures.

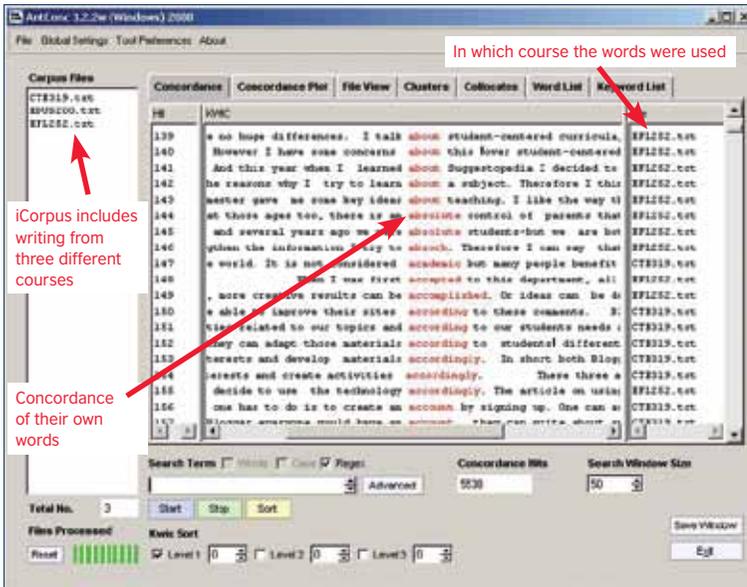
**Figure 1:** Students compile their iCorpus using writing from various courses



We asked the trainees to bring the 'soft copies' of written assignments from previous courses to the first session. Typically, these were written in Microsoft Word, but the trainees only brought a few, as many of their assignments – especially those from the first year – had been deleted or lost. In the first session, they converted the original word.doc files to simple text (txt) files using the *Save As Plain Text* feature and saved separate copies of these files. This is as simple as saving a file, removing all the formatting and leaving only words which the concordancing programme can process. The filename of each txt file in their iCorpus was prefixed by the code of the course the original assignment was written for, and saved in one folder.

After the first training session, students had created their own iCorpus and mastered the basic functions of the AntConc software: creating a keyword in context (KWIC) concordance, a frequency word list, and a concordance plot. An example of the output generated is shown in Figure 2, illustrating how students could index and display each word in context from their iCorpus, in this case from three different courses, coded EDUS200, EFL252, and CTE319. The students kept their iCorpus and the AntConc programme on USB memory sticks, bringing them to the subsequent training sessions.

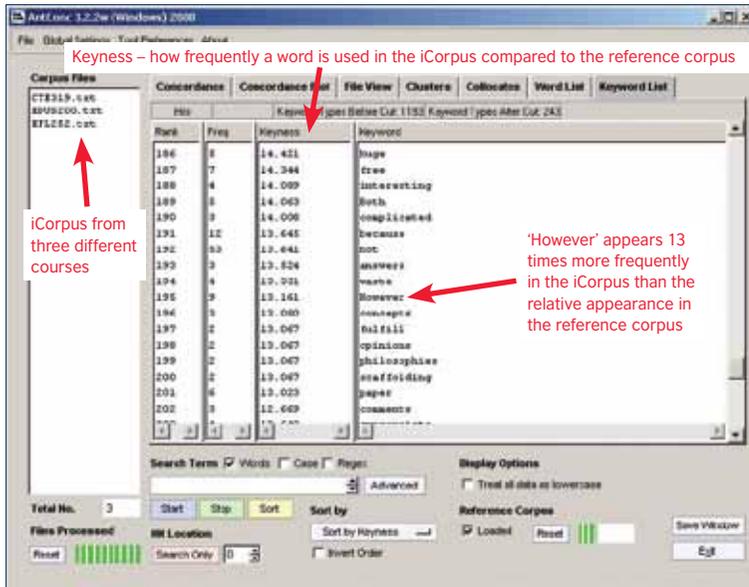
**Figure 2:** Students compile their iCorpus using writing from various courses



In the second session, students came with AntConc and their iCorpus on their USB memory sticks. While students gained some insight into their writing by learning how to probe their iCorpus with AntConc, they still had no terms of reference to indicate if they were using an appropriate range of vocabulary, or how well they were using vocabulary and collocations. The iCorpus on its own has limited value; the trainees still rely on direction and input for language development from their instructors. As one of the goals of the iCorpus project is to foster critical thinking, we wanted the trainees to become independent and critical language researchers. So, we provided a pedagogical corpus to give them their own terms of reference for language development. We chose academic texts as the relevant target language for reference, based on an ‘academic’ corpus (Cobb 2012) developed to focus on words in the University Word List (Xue and Nation 1984). Students downloaded this ‘target’ corpus alongside their iCorpus and learned how to compare their writing to the target corpus. Rather than relying on instructors, students now directly compared their writing in the iCorpus with the target corpus and made their own informed decisions.

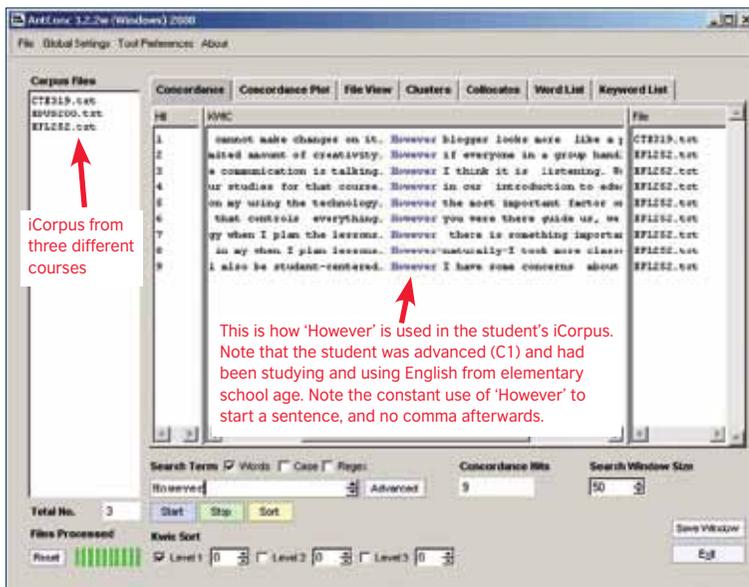
When students compare two corpora, AntConc reports ‘keyness’ – indicating words it thinks are ‘key’ because they occur relatively more frequently in the student’s iCorpus than in the ‘target’ corpus. The students interpret the results for themselves, and see their own writing from a totally new perspective. As shown in Figure 3, this student ‘notices’ that she has used ‘however’ in her iCorpus more frequently than in academic texts. The significance of this higher frequency of use is not yet apparent, but already the iCorpus has provided her a novel view on her writing.

Figure 3: 'keyness' showing relative frequencies of words



A single click on the word 'however' reveals all its instances in her iCorpus, as shown in Figure 4. The student was not surprised to see she used 'however' only at the start of the sentence as this was how she had been taught. She didn't perceive any lack of sophistication, nor did she pick up on the missing punctuation. Bear in mind that her language proficiency was equivalent to band 7.5 in IELTS, having studied four years in our English-medium TEFL programme.

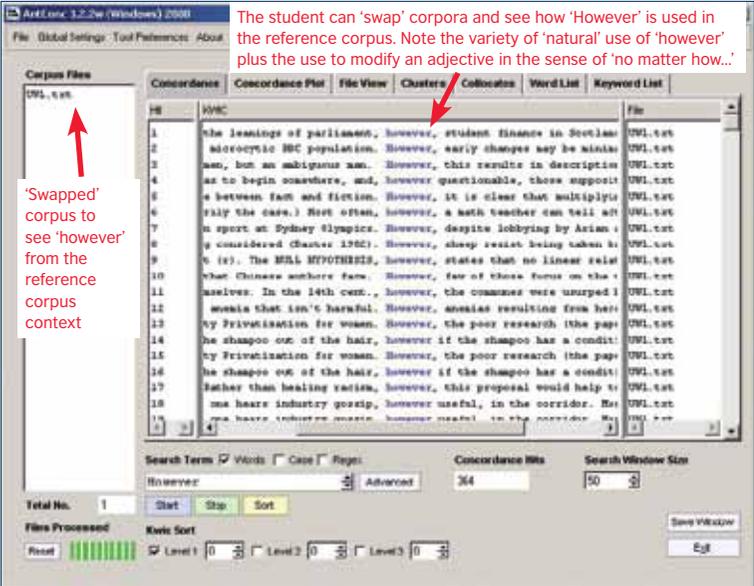
Figure 4: The 'Keyword in Context' display of the word 'however' in the iCorpus



Curious to see ‘however’ used in academic texts, she clicked a button to ‘swap’ her iCorpus with the ‘target’ corpus. She was surprised to discover the depth and breadth of use of ‘however’ in ‘real’ target academic English, shown in Figure 5. In all her years of learning and using English, she had never ‘noticed’ that her own writing lacked the appropriate punctuation, or that she never used ‘however’ in mid-sentence. She was aware of the grammar rules of ‘however’ plus adjective, but had never considered using this in her own writing in an academic context. Each student gained different insights, as iCorpus was specific to their own writing style, as Mehmet (names used hereafter are pseudonyms) reported:

*I became aware of the problems that I had not perceived before ... first I identified the change ... For instance my first year studies, second year's or third year's were totally different ... I was using simple words like those I used at high school but then I used more academic and more intellectual words, so when I see this development, I identified words that I use in a simple way and saw that there are alternatives ... so I focused on those to use academical ones more often in my studies ... and tried to replace those with academical ones to make my studies more serious.*

**Figure 5:** The ‘Keyword in Context’ display of the word ‘however’ in the ‘target’ corpus



Each student also sees the ‘keyness’ of the ‘target’ corpus when the corpora are ‘swapped’, showing words that are ‘key’ in the target corpus compared to their iCorpus, allowing them to notice both words that they don’t use that often as well as words that they perhaps over-use. The personalised nature of the iCorpus reveals words relevant to each individual student, as Cem relates:

*It enables me to study more focused because, for example, I'm looking for my usage of prepositions. If I didn't know or if I hadn't knowledge of iCorpus I would have or I had to search on paper one by one or by underlining all of these sentences, but by choosing from iCorpus the word I'm looking for or the structure I'm looking for, it shows me all the prepositions on my computer and I can study more focused on these structures.*

As we were interested in self-directed language development, we did not design any tasks that required sharing or collaboration. Neither did we expect any dramatic change in their writing. Rather, we wanted to gauge the change in perceptions about their own writing by reflecting on what potential iCorpus could offer them that they hadn't had from their previous language learning experiences. Notably, the revelation from iCorpus about the progress they had made in their English during their academic studies was commonly seen as a positive impact, with similar sentiments as expressed by Ekin that 'the corpus training allowed me to see my own development in language over the first three years and this had a very positive effect.' Ekin gave examples of how iCorpus helped him amend his teaching philosophy written in second year:

Written in second year	After iCorpus pilot project
<i>'...it's obvious that both reading and writing are correlated issues...'</i>	<i>'...it's obvious that both reading and writing are intrinsically related...'</i>
<i>'...the link between teaching and learning are fundamental structures of education.'</i>	<i>'...teaching and learning are corner-stones of education.'</i>

In the third session, we introduced trainees to other corpus-informed tools to allow them to springboard from their iCorpus to become fully fledged 'language researchers' in their own right. The iCorpus experience seemed to make the notions of a corpus-informed approach real and meaningful to the trainees. Where previous attempts at introducing corpora as an abstract and academic task in our third year instructional technology course had failed to establish the practical role corpora could play, iCorpus seemed to make the relevance clear. Ekin explained that after the iCorpus project:

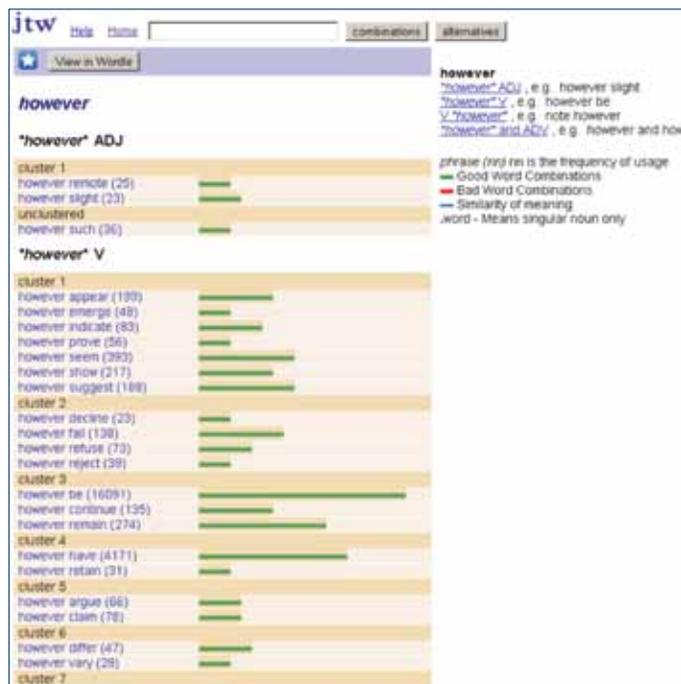
*I express myself in a more sophisticated manner. I look for other options to express my ideas; I try to find alternative structures and transitions in writing. How would my meaning change if I replace this word with this one?*

Cem also expresses how iCorpus provided real and practical guidance: '...I always used to use "since" or "as" or "because" but with this programme I learned "for the reason that" or "for that" so it [comparing his iCorpus with the reference corpora] teaches you new chunks that you normally wouldn't use.'

To illustrate how students used iCorpus as a springboard to explore other corpus-based tools, we will briefly mention two: 'Just the Word' ([www.just-the-word.com](http://www.just-the-word.com)) and 'Word and Phrase' ([www.wordandphrase.info](http://www.wordandphrase.info)).

‘Just the Word’ functions as a collocations sampler. Our teacher trainees find collocations a challenge, so they use this sampler to interact easily with one hundred million words in the British National Corpus and discover collocation patterns for themselves. The interface is simple – just type in the word and click a button to get a list of the various patterns of use of that word, and links to examples for each pattern. The frequency of use in the entire corpus is shown for each pattern by long and short bars.

**Figure 6:** The collocation sampler for ‘however’ from ‘Just the Word’



Following on from the word ‘however’ in the examples above, the student now has a specific framework relevant to her own writing and is therefore more motivated to explore the ‘extra’ information she can glean from this site. The iCorpus acts as a stimulus for the student to probe a quick reference to the broad lexico-grammatical context that is possible – in Figure 6 the student sees four ‘patterns’. It is then up to the student to delve into any collocation that sparks their interest. Clicking on any specific collocation displays the full context from the corpus, as shown for the pattern of the verb ‘admit’ preceding ‘however’ in Figure 7. The context is ‘authentic’ English, so the teacher trainees develop a critical awareness of the nature of English, in this case noting that native speakers can at times ‘bend’ or ‘forget’ the ‘rules’ of punctuation.

**Figure 7:** The keyword in context display of the pattern of 'admit' and 'however' in 'Just the Word'



At our institution there is a preference for American English, so in the third session we also introduced our trainee teachers to the 'Word and Phrase' interface to the Corpus of Contemporary American English. This interface is extremely rich, but consequently more complex to use and understand. The site has four frames, which can be disorienting, and the search parameters are complex, offering facilities to search for specific patterns that require knowledge of codes, for example the search string 'however [j\*]' will return a table of 'however' followed by an adjective. In addition, there are options to compare different genres, highlighting the differences between academic and spoken English, for example. The site also requires registration, which is free, but this adds another level of complexity. Ali, who was particularly keen on linguistic features of English, found this tool very exciting:

*...it gave me the idea of how language is formed. For example we are limited in our choices, our active vocabulary is limited. So by studying iCorpus, I was able to understand how to enrich our active vocabulary.*

While we consider our teacher trainees 'digital natives', they expect straightforward and seamless interfaces, usually icon based, and often get confused using an interface that requires clicking several buttons or giving commands by typing in text. Therefore most students preferred the simplicity of a tool like 'Just the Word'.

As mentioned earlier, we wanted to observe the process of using the iCorpus and understand its significance from the students' perspective. So, after the third training session, we left the teacher trainees to explore the tools on their own with no specific tasks or direction. We wanted to give them time to reflect on the experience, and told them we would have a follow-up interview. Our primary focus was to see if the

teacher trainees' new awareness of iCorpus provided a meaningful context for the practical application of related corpus-analysis tools and what effect this had on their perceptions of their own language development, critical language awareness and potential application to teaching. What follows is an evaluation of the impact the iCorpus pilot had on our TEFL students as language learners and teachers-in-training.

### **iCorpus – was it useful?**

For three trainee teachers featured in our project, iCorpus served as an effective stimulus for them to explore the use of corpora for themselves, as well as to realise its potential for their students.

Firstly, it seems that iCorpus helped them develop their language at the cognitive level. Ali, one of the participants, reported that iCorpus training and forming an iCorpus helped him in perceiving how English is used in an authentic manner:

*iCorpus provided me with a better understanding of 'pure' English or 'real' English. I was able to analyse English with different genres. For example, in spoken English which words are more frequently used, or in written English which words are preferred. It gave me the idea of the real English – what natives use, what natives prefer.*

Furthermore, these trainee teachers indicated that they learned how to analyse their own writing, as well as learning how to use different software to develop their language awareness, as expressed by Ali: 'iCorpus is an internet based/computer based study. So I saw how to integrate computer to studying English other than studying with multimedia.' In addition, they all started using more variety of forms in their own writing. They noticed the use of synonyms, as Cem explained:

*...it helps with the vocabulary and with sentence usage as well, because one of the main problems that we have as a second language learner is that we, for example, use 'because' in the first sentence and in the second paragraph, we want to use 'because' again but it sounds very simple when we use the because the second time so ... this programme helps you discover other variations of the synonyms. It's quite helpful with synonyms.*

Cem also related the use of chunks and collocations from the reference corpora:

*...we are learning chunks, it's quite helpful for looking for chunks. So it helps ... to produce more quality writing so when someone reads, it sounds better, looks more professional.*

In other words, iCorpus served as a meaningful tool to gain insights into their own academic writing, which they felt resulted in a higher quality of writing that appeared more fluent and professional.

Secondly, iCorpus helped the teacher trainees understand the relevance of context. According to them, iCorpus requires a deeper understanding of the context as the understanding of the whole text is balanced with a focus on the detail, as Mehmet reflected:

*In the learning process, well, maybe it [iCorpus] requires deeper thinking or deeper understanding of the context, because you focus on each part separately rather than taking the context as a whole ... it's also a benefit for students ... using iCorpus, because it makes a deeper understanding for them...*

So the teacher trainees found that iCorpus augmented the general understanding of the context (which helps them guess the genre) of a text with specific language use in a way sympathetic to the meaning-focused and form-focused elements of the four strands approach to foreign language instruction advocated by Nation (2007).

Thirdly, iCorpus helped these teacher trainees notice and become aware of language, and analyse their progress in language development in an inductive manner; they could see progress in using more complex/sophisticated words and noticed that they started to use a wider range of vocabulary, substituting simple words with more academic words appropriate to the context. Ekin reported: 'I compared my writings with the first year and fourth year writings or academic papers, there were very big differences ... so iCorpus ... helps you to determine or to detect these differences in a shorter time and in more focused way...' This project enabled them to explain or convey feelings in a more intelligible way, as Ekin reflected: '...you can express yourself better and explore your feelings with detail and with more sophisticated words.' It seems that iCorpus served as a stimulus for them to look for other options to express ideas, alternative structures and transitions in writing.

It was clear that these teacher trainees benefited from iCorpus by becoming aware of problems they had not perceived before, citing examples of where iCorpus enabled them to not only see weaknesses more clearly, but also use this to become better writers. As our context is using English for academic purposes, we had provided them with a pedagogical corpus of academic texts, and as a result they think that they can use the conventions of academic writing in a more efficient way. Ekin was able to see that iCorpus could go beyond the written word, and speculated that creating a corpus based on spoken language 'would be more beneficial and helpful for students and teachers like us because it [iCorpus] gives you just the data of writing, while speaking what kind of words we use as well and the frequency of these words would help us to improve our speech or speaking skills.' Ali could see the long-term potential:

*I think it [iCorpus] is beneficial in the long run. It may not be expected to see its benefits in the very short run but as long as you can use this tool, you always have chance to improve yourself, your language. So it certainly helps you to become better speaker, more proficient speaker ... you can always update yourself. So long as you have the basic corpora you can refer to, you can always update yourself. It can be in the next 40 years, next 60 years or next ten years.*

### **iCorpus – what are the drawbacks?**

In terms of practicality of use, some participants' criticism was about technical problems with the AntConc PC-based software (Anthony 2011). Cem felt the software was cumbersome and impractical:

*It requires a certain level of computer knowledge. So when you don't know – when you are not good at using computer – then it is going to affect the process. And second thing is the usage of the programme itself ... without the help of the instructor we're struggling a lot.*

The computer as an interface presented other physical problems, as Cem pointed out that 'after a while it is quite tiring, it is eye tiring.' Balancing this was Ekin's pragmatic view: 'it may be difficult to work on iCorpus at the initial stages but after you have learned, after you have practised it, it will enable you more time to study.' These comments are not surprising considering that AntConc was released in 2005, primarily as a tool for linguistic researchers. However, within six months of starting the iCorpus pilot we became aware of an emerging generation of corpus-assisted text production software that are much more user-friendly (<http://aitype.com> is one example) and offer more dynamic and real-time interfaces. No doubt this trend will continue, offering user-friendly interfaces especially for mobile devices. Similarly, new generations of word processors are appearing, such as <http://xiosis.com/> which offer suggestions to the writer based on a corpus of their existing documents – essentially their iCorpus. Building a foundation in iCorpus in teacher education will allow teacher trainees to be 'corpora literate' and make better informed choices of emerging software and platforms.

Regarding the learning process, we had applied no formal assessment in the process of exploration and experimentation beyond the initial training sessions. Participants suggested having long-term projects and sequenced activities in the training to provide focused outcomes related to developing proficiency level skills: '...it requires more devotion of participants... More training sessions, or maybe assessment not formally in terms of grading but an evaluation part can be done.' Upon reflection, we see that the trainees may initially need more structured activities and scaffolding to better evaluate the outcomes of iCorpus in comparison to their current practice in language development and how to apply the tools in teaching practice.

Another factor is related to learning styles and preferences, illustrated by Ela who found it very difficult to form an iCorpus and indicated that using the computer as an interface to the iCorpus was too artificial and static: 'What I prefer is how the language is used in practice. That's how I should see it, how I should observe it. I mean iCorpus is just a computer programme for me...' In other words, her belief was that language is learned in communication in a natural way not through interaction with computers. This philosophy of language learning seemed to colour her opinion of using computers for language learning, as she reported that the software was complex and more useful as a reference rather than an ongoing language development tool. In contrast, Mehmet, who appeared to have a more analytical and logical learning preference, reported that:

*After working on iCorpus, I noticed which words I should use more commonly or which would be appropriate in academic context, if the words are appropriate for daily context or academic context. So I can say I was better aware of the functions of the words after studying iCorpus.*

From our trainees' reflections, we surmise that the effective use of iCorpus is not just a factor of knowing how to use technology, but also requires finding relevance to individual learning styles and preferences.

iCorpus did seem to open up a meaningful window for the teacher trainees to the world of corpora within the context of teacher education, however, the real proof of the pudding is in observing how much of the knowledge gained is transferred to classroom practice and language teaching. Some of our participants started teaching after the iCorpus pilot project, so we followed up their experiences to see if any relevant aspects of iCorpus carried through in their novice year of teaching.

### **iCorpus – what value does it add to teacher training?**

As novice teachers, Ekin and Ali taught beginner and intermediate level classes. When asked if they had introduced corpus-related resources in their classes, they mentioned issues of materials and time. They were expected to use materials that were not corpus-friendly, and the density of content in the prescribed syllabus meant they could barely cover the compulsory materials within normal class time. With such a heavy course load, they had no time to consider starting from scratch in introducing corpus tools and strategies to their students, who had no learner training or previous experience in lexically-friendly approaches. In such a teaching context, they reflected that the primary value of iCorpus was in making them more self-confident in knowing how to use corpus-based resources to help them better understand the nature of the language points they were expected to teach and deal with questions in a more professional manner. Their students indirectly benefited from their heightened self-esteem and depth of knowledge of English gained through their iCorpus experience. Ali reflected on his use of English in class during his first semester with lower level students, noticing he simplified his own language and avoided synonyms, for example, always using 'but' and never alternatives like 'however'. In this teaching context, he had no need to employ his iCorpus skills. However, when dealing with more advanced students in the second semester, he needed to draw on more language learning-focused strategies. When he began giving feedback to student writings, he started to apply his iCorpus experience and used concordance extracts to illustrate different uses of words such as 'nonetheless, however, yet, nevertheless' to motivate his students.

Not untypical of newly graduated teachers in Turkey, Ali held down three different teaching jobs, totalling over 1,500 contact hours during his first year. In one post, Ali faced a dilemma in balancing his desire to teach students English as a language versus preparing students to pass the institutional language proficiency exam. He wanted to engage students in more lexically-friendly approaches to vocabulary development, as fostered by corpus-informed tools, but soon realised that his students were reluctant to see or experience vocabulary use outside the textbook context. His students appeared motivated when he dealt with language in the context of exam practice, so more traditional teaching techniques, reinforced by the washback from testing, were a dominating trend in his classroom practice.

In order to find a way around this impasse, Ali wanted to use online learning environments and social media, thinking this would appeal to young adult university students, and a manageable way to collect texts for iCorpus. However, he found that a significant number of the students were either not members of a social network or had no reliable internet access. Subsequently, students would submit handwritten assignments. Indeed, due to the legal framework protecting student rights in Turkey, institutions generally do not accept electronic files but require printed copies marked by hand and kept in archives in case of appeal. In Turkey, these factors mitigate against effective use of iCorpus in practice as it is difficult and time-consuming to compile a corpus from printed or handwritten texts.

As for their own iCorpus use, they mentioned time constraints of lesson planning, feedback and grading. Nevertheless, iCorpus gave Ali a new perspective on ways to approach ongoing professional development. Reflecting back on how the iCorpus pilot project revealed his language development during TEFL studies, he postulates that if teachers were encouraged to revise and revisit their teaching philosophies in a systematic manner, perhaps as a reflective journal in a blog, over time it would be possible to research and analyse their development in philosophy and language proficiency through an iCorpus of teaching philosophies. This demonstrates the value of iCorpus in fostering his critical thinking and action research skills. The perception Ali gained through iCorpus of teachers as ‘researchers’ gave insights of how to become a researcher. He began to discuss opportunities to conduct collaborative research with like-minded colleagues, and together they came up with the idea for each to record one lesson on a topic they all covered at the same time, transcribe their teaching talk and analyse the language they used in class by sharing their iCorpora. While they could not yet find time to realise this research, it seems that Ali finds a sense of achievement in being a researcher as well as a teacher. iCorpus promotes the sense of the teacher trainees being ‘language researchers’ in their own right, which reinforces the notion that conducting research is a necessary part of professional development.

### **Is there a place for iCorpus in teacher education?**

The findings of Farr (2010) are certainly relevant to Turkey and North Cyprus, where mainstream teaching institutions remain largely oblivious to the potential of corpora in language teaching. Likewise, we are far from the McCarthian world populated by corpus-literate EFL teachers willing to lobby publishers to produce more corpus-informed elements in course books. It is sobering to reflect that Tribble and Jones published the first ‘how to’ book in 1990, filled with practical ideas on how to use concordances in the classroom. Yet, over two decades on, there is scant evidence of any impending paradigm shift in classroom practice in terms of current models and approaches in teacher education in Northern Cyprus or in Turkey. So, is there any real worth in pursuing iCorpus in teacher education?

On a personal level, we found that the iCorpus research motivated us to upgrade our computer- and corpus-literacy skills as educators. We were initially intimidated by the technology and the bewildering array of corpus-based tools, however, iCorpus gave us a clearly defined scope and sequence – a sort of ‘sandbox’ in which we felt safe to experiment. We discovered how to make technology serve our purposes, and this enabled us to become much more creative and curious about the language we teach

in ways we had never considered before – both in terms of native and non-native speakers of English. One case in point relates to a query from Ali about the word *albeit* that he had encountered for the first time. His first step was to seek the opinion of a native speaker instructor. His initial enquiries led to the sense that ‘*albeit*’ was archaic and hardly used. However, Ali noticed that another lecturer used the term on occasion, and was puzzled that two native speakers had such different opinions about the same word. We resolved the issue together by exploring the relevant corpora (Corpus of Contemporary American English at [www.wordandphrase.info/frequencyList.asp](http://www.wordandphrase.info/frequencyList.asp) and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English at <http://micase.elicorpora.info/>) which in a few minutes showed that *albeit* was not common but is used sparingly in academic contexts. Armed with this insight, Ali decided to add *albeit* to his personal lexicon and indeed used it later on while answering a question in a final exam. More significantly, he started to consult corpora as a primary source in his own vocabulary research. There are many similar cases where we began to see nuances of language, formerly attributed to eccentricities of English, revealed in clear patterns or related to specific genres by concordance searches, just as our trainee teachers began to ‘notice’ aspects of their own language production they had never perceived before.

Based on the feedback from teacher trainees in the iCorpus pilot project, we are now taking steps to integrate iCorpus as part of the course syllabus for freshmen advanced writing and reading courses. We are including blogging as a new genre in the course, and students will compile their own ‘target’ corpus from their favourite bloggers, and use their own blog posts to compile their iCorpora for comparative purposes. Our teacher trainees were particularly interested in using iCorpus in speaking, so we will explore the feasibility of building spoken iCorpora from our public speaking courses, whereby teacher trainees create their own iCorpus of their spoken discourse to better understand the range and scope of their productive language in both speaking and writing.

Additionally, we may build up a target corpus of academic lectures to provide a reference to native speakers in an academic context. The iCorpus pilot initially focused on individual self-directed language development, but we observed that some teacher trainees were quick to consider ways to collaborate and share their iCorpora. Consequently, we plan on building collaborative practice in methodology and material development courses, having teacher trainees build course-specific iCorpora based on their research for course papers, and compile their iCorpora for a course corpus highlighting relevant key language, functions and collocations. To allow teacher trainees to assimilate corpus-informed approaches into their own teaching practice, we will encourage reflective practice on language development in posts in their individual blogs throughout their academic career.

Will institutions support a shift in teacher education that provides teacher trainees with iCorpus skills and encourages them to pursue elements of a corpus-informed pedagogy? In the short term, our iCorpus pilot indicates that the immediate benefits of iCorpus in teacher training is quite limited within existing norms of teaching practice, and the current levels of willingness and ability of students to engage in autonomous learning. However, the long-term potential, based on reflections of teacher trainees who entered the profession with iCorpus skills, suggests that introducing corpora through iCorpus is a meaningful addition to pre-service teacher education.

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## Appendix A

### Pre-iCorpus interview questions

OBJECTIVE: to understand their perception of their own language ability

1. What courses have you taken so far?
2. Could you please describe your experiences in terms of dealing with the level of language of the instructors?
3. Could you please talk a little bit about the course requirements in terms of the language skills and abilities needed to successfully complete the course?
4. Could you please talk about the problems related to these courses in terms of dealing with English as the medium of instruction?
5. Were the linguistic challenges and problems you faced specific to one course only?
6. What were the most common problems you had in all courses?
7. What can be done to reduce the most common problems you have had related with language?
8. How do you identify your weaknesses?
9. How do you address any deficiencies that you identify in your language abilities?
10. Could you please describe your experience in successfully overcoming weaknesses in your language ability?
11. Reflect on your experience. What tools do you use to grow as a language learner?
12. How do you develop your own L2?

## Appendix B

### Post-iCorpus interview questions

1. How does iCorpus help you become a better language learner?
2. How does it help you produce better academic writing?
3. How does it help you become a better L2 speaker?
4. How does it affect your study skills?
5. What are potential benefits of iCorpus?
6. What are its limitations – if any?
7. What layers of complexity/ease does it add to the learning process?
8. After using corpus tools have you changed your self-development?

### Wider research questions

1. How do you develop your own foreign language (L2)?
2. What are your strengths and weaknesses of your lexical range? What tools do you use to ‘mind the gap’?

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# 12

## Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) to scaffold reflective teacher learning in English language teacher education

Sylvia Velikova

### Introduction

This chapter features an innovative model for the implementation of the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (EPOSTL) in the English language teacher education (ELTE) curriculum at the Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Veliko Turnovo. The model has been designed and introduced with the main aim of creating, scaffolding and sustaining a culture of reflection in ELTE in our institution. This involves cultivating beginning teachers' capacity to undertake thoughtful inquiry *in and on* action, both individually and in collaboration with others, and to re-examine and become critically aware of their own assumptions (based on knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values) about learning and teaching within a broad context of issues: cultural, social, political, etc. (Dewey 1910, Schön 1983, Freire 1970, Habermas 1971, Mezirow 1990).

A variety of tools (journals, learning logs, portfolios, etc.) have been used with the aim of facilitating reflective teaching practices. The question of how portfolios can be implemented to cultivate reflective learning in teacher education is a consistent theme discussed among educationalists worldwide. By examining the use of the EPOSTL in one specific teacher education context, I hope to bring further insights to this discussion.

In this chapter, first I briefly describe the EPOSTL and the institutional setting in which it has been introduced. Next, I discuss the implementation stages and rationale by illustrating specific portfolio-based reflective procedures. Following a presentation of the student teachers' and mentors' perspectives in the evaluation of our work with the EPOSTL, I focus on the transferability of our portfolio scheme. I conclude the chapter with some reflections on the main changes of emphasis that occurred in my development as a teacher educator through the experience of using the EPOSTL.

## Context

### The EPOSTL

The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) has been created within a project initiated by the European Centre for Modern Language of the Council of Europe. The portfolio is intended primarily for students undergoing their initial teacher education. The stated main aims of the EPOSTL are encouraging student teachers to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences; helping prepare prospective teachers for their future profession in a variety of teaching contexts; promoting discussion between student teachers and their peers, and between student teachers and their teacher educators and mentors; facilitating self-assessment of prospective teachers' developing competence; providing an instrument which helps chart progress (EPOSTL 2007:5).

The EPOSTL is organised into three main sections:

- a **Personal Statement** to encourage student teachers to reflect on general questions related to teaching and learning to teach
- a **Self-Assessment section**, which maps out didactic competences in the form of 'can-do' descriptors
- a **Dossier**, which assists student teachers in documenting progress and examples of work relevant to their teacher education and their future profession.

Additionally, the EPOSTL has a glossary of the most important terms, used in the book and in teacher education (for example portfolio, self-assessment, task), a user's guide, and an index.

### Institutional context

The student teachers working with the EPOSTL pursue a qualification to teach English in secondary schools while earning a four-year Bachelor's degree in English and American Studies, and English and a Second Foreign Language. The three-year ELTE programme begins in semester three (year 2) with theoretical disciplines in the field of education, psychology, and methodology of foreign language teaching (FLT). The prospective teachers follow three periods of school-based teaching practice (TP), spanning from semester six to semester eight. During the school-based TP they work under the guidance of a teacher mentor and are supervised by a university tutor. The final practice period is organised as a separate ten-week block when trainees are allocated to schools to complete 75 hours of teaching and lesson observation. At the end of their teacher education, prospective teachers take a state practical exam which involves teaching and self-evaluation of a lesson before a board of examiners (the university tutor and the mentor).

### Need for change

The need for a systematic focus on reflection in our ELTE programme had been strongly felt since a *Baseline Survey of Pre-service English Language Teacher Education in Bulgaria 2001–2002* convincingly revealed that student teachers find it problematic to reflect on their experience during teaching practice and to self-evaluate their teaching (Thomas et al. 2002: 94). In the same study mentors pointed

out that *'It's a whole new world for them. It's a huge breakthrough that they have to make and it's not always easy'* (Thomas et al. 2002: 93). University methodologists also agreed that reflection and self-evaluation had to be emphasised more effectively in the teacher education curriculum and student teachers needed to receive more adequate support in developing the necessary skills.

Years later, though we had already been using materials from a published portfolio model in Bulgaria (Dimitrova and Tashevska 2004), the trainees' first responses, collected by means of an open-ended question survey during the early piloting of the EPOSTL, showed that many of them still lack confidence and feel resistant to engagement in self-reflective thought (Velikova 2009).

A university teacher educator, in her written feedback sent to me by email, commented on this issue by reflecting on the implementation of self-assessment practices in teacher education in Bulgaria:

*Unfortunately, most of the educational practices, implemented in our higher education institutions do not encourage reflection or approve of self-assessment of students' knowledge and performance. The formalised system of external assessment, usually by an outer authority in the field, be it a methodologist or a mentor, is felt to undermine the value of self-assessment as prerequisite for personal development and growth. Self- and peer-assessment are generally viewed as subjective and unreliable by the students themselves. They are more likely to either play down their achievements or go on the defensive. Getting used to working with the portfolio as a non-threatening self-help tool will provide the initial scaffolding to step on and further their personal and professional growth.*

Irina

These and similar observations encouraged us to consider how we could further improve our practice and enhance student teachers' skills for reflection and self-assessment. We felt that the EPOSTL could offer us several possibilities in this respect. In the first place, we saw its potential to scaffold and sustain reflection primarily through its Self-Assessment section and the set of descriptors representing core didactic competences related to language teaching. These descriptors could be used as prompts for future teachers' reflection, not only during their TP experiences but also early during the university-based courses. Another critical aspect that we considered important was that the portfolio had been conceived as a dialogic tool. This, we thought, could take us to more effective collaboration between all stakeholders in the initial teacher education, and as a step towards co-operative teacher development (Edge 2002). To that end we considered it essential to bring to the trainees' attention the idea that self-assessment through portfolio development is basically a 'socially mediated' process. In other words, it is through joint reflection and collaborative dialogue between them, their peers, teacher educators, mentors, pupils, etc. that they will arrive at a more balanced perspective of their progress in teaching. Finally, the EPOSTL seemed to match to a great extent not only the aims of our teacher education programme, but also my personal and pedagogical explorations as a teacher educator.

## The innovation

### Theoretical perspectives

The EPOSTL implementation procedure resonates with several theoretical perspectives: reflective and experiential models of teacher education (Dewey 1910, Freire 1970, Habermas 1971, Schön 1983, Kolb 1984, Wallace 1991); sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978); collaborative learning and co-operative development; and the constructivist principles of learning, succinctly summarised by Marlowe and Page (2005: 7–9) as:

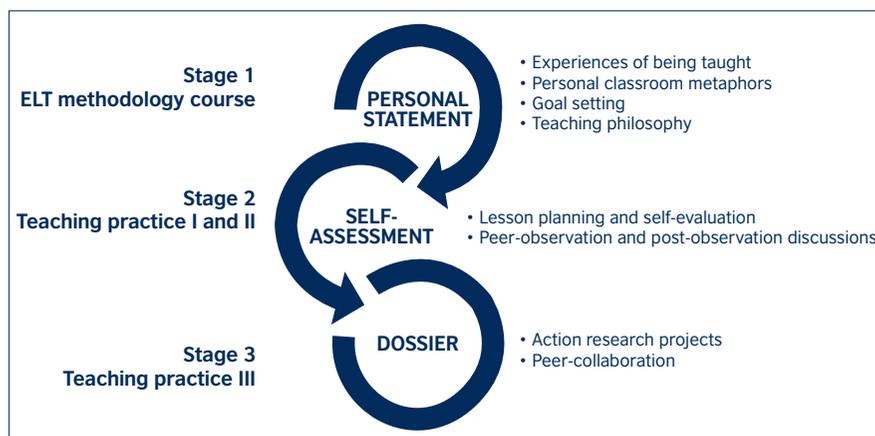
- constructing knowledge, not receiving it
- thinking and analysing, not accumulating and memorising
- understanding and applying, not repeating back
- being active, not passive.

The research base on using portfolios in initial teacher preparation (Krause 1996, Moseley and Ramsey 2005) has also confirmed our first experiences and intuitions: that structured support from teacher educators and mentors, especially in the beginning stages of the portfolio development process, helps scaffold beginning teachers' reflective learning. It also has a positive impact on their self-directed use of the portfolio as a tool for reflection in the long term.

### Implementation framework

There are three stages to the EPOSTL implementation (see Figure 1): 1) The ELT methodology course; 2) Teaching practice I and II; 3) Teaching practice III. These stages take place over the period of two academic years (four semesters). The sections below describe each of these stages, its rationale, and the procedures it involves.

**Figure 1:** EPOSTL implementation stages



## Stage 1: the ELT methodology course

### Rationale

During the ELT methodology course, the beginning teachers are first introduced to the EPOSTL and its Personal Statement section. This is the phase when for the first time they formulate their personal statement about teaching and produce their Teaching Philosophy. The aim of this stage, therefore, is for student teachers to develop an increased self-awareness, to uncover their existing beliefs about teaching and learning, and to formulate their expectations from the teacher education course. In other words, trainees start 'from within' and delve into their own experiences, which they subsequently connect with the EPOSTL and the course content. My task as a teacher educator (who is new to the group of student teachers) is also to build a positive learning environment of trust, sharing and co-operation between the members in the group, where everyone feels accepted and listened to.

### Procedures

#### *Experiences of being taught*

The first activity invites student teachers to think back to their experiences as learners at school and share them with their colleagues. The range of questions, which serve as prompts for reflection include the following:

- Why did you choose to study foreign languages?
- Was it a positive or negative experience?
- What did you particularly enjoy as a learner?
- What did you find boring?
- Describe your language teacher(s). How did they influence you and your decision to become a language teacher?

Student teachers discuss these and similar questions in small groups or pairs first. Their conversations then develop into a whole-group discussion in which they share not only their school but also their more immediate, university experiences of being taught.

After the discussion, student teachers are asked to reflect individually and record their responses in writing by filling out Task 1 from the EPOSTL Personal Statement, which the activity directly links to:

1. *As learners of language in school, you already have had a lot of contact with teaching. What aspects – teacher's qualities, practices etc. – of your own language teaching might influence how you wish or do not wish to teach?*

(EPOSTL 2007:10)

#### *Personal classroom metaphors*

The following activity engages student teachers in creating and sharing personal classroom metaphors. There have been a number of studies (e.g. Farrell 2006, Mann 2008) which have focused on the value of exploring teaching metaphors. First, trainees are presented with metaphorical images of the teacher and teaching (e.g. a mountain guide, an actor, a concert), and are asked to comment on the images. Following the discussion of the images presented to them, individually, student

teachers think of their own metaphors. Next, in teams they share the images they have generated, and take part in a plenary discussion of the personal metaphors the group has constructed. For instance, an interesting image a student teacher came up with represented the teacher as a cook who had to prepare a dish, taking into account children's individual preferences and, even, involving them into the process. Practically, student teachers share a very rich resource of images of teaching that I also refer to when introducing some concepts and approaches (for instance, the learning-by-doing approach implied in the 'the teacher-as-cook metaphor' above) during the discussion and the methodology course.

As with the previous activity, the follow-up task requires the student teachers to write down their answers to the questions of Task 2, included in the Personal Statement:

2. a) *What aspects of teaching are you most looking forward to?*  
b) *What aspects of teaching are you least looking forward to?*

(EPOSTL 2007: 10)

### **Goal setting**

The next activity asks trainees to make two lists:

1. the personal and professional qualities they possess that will make them effective language teachers
2. what they need to acquire and develop.

When they have finished, the PRESETT teachers compare their lists in pairs. Next, in a plenary discussion they come up with a list of qualities that the whole group possesses, and a list of qualities and competences the group wants to acquire.

The follow-up Task 3 from the EPOSTL gets student teachers to record their responses to the following questions:

3. a) *What do you expect most from your teacher education; b) What do you want most from your teacher education? c) What do you think that your teacher educators expect from you?*

(EPOSTL 2007: 11)

### **Teaching Philosophy**

After completing the tasks in the Personal Statement, trainees are asked to produce a coherent personal statement about teaching (Teaching Philosophy), using the ideas they have generated during the discussions and the notes they have recorded in the EPOSTL. In thinking through and writing their personal statements, student teachers evidently tend to draw upon the framework provided by the questions from the tasks in the EPOSTL.

Thus in their writing one can see reflections on their experiences of being taught and how they think these would influence their own teaching. As one trainee writes (in the following data extracts, I have used pseudonyms for the students involved): 'my wish to become a teacher was very much influenced by my teachers starting from

the primary, through the high school, to university teachers...’ (Tzvetelina). She was impressed and positively influenced not only by their teaching skills but also by their personal qualities, that is why she considered it important to develop as a person, who ‘would be able to help students learn new things by making them interested in the subject’ (Tzvetelina). Drawing on her experience as a language learner, another student teacher concludes: ‘I think it is important to know how to teach grammar, to know huge amounts of words, etc., but if you do not know how to approach the students, if you do not know how to attract and keep their attention, then you will not be a good teacher’ (Teodora). Therefore she is most looking forward to the following aspects of teaching:

*being creative and always try to think of extra exercises, games, etc. Ability to show the students that we can be friends and have good time, but familiarise them that this doesn't mean we are not going to work.*

Teodora

In contrast, the aspects of teaching student teachers are least looking forward to include:

*strictly following a certain manual or a set of exercises. This would not stimulate students to work and think but rather to do the tasks mechanically.*

Anna

Concerning student teachers’ expectations from their teacher education, they range from general statements like ‘to help me discover my strengths and support me until I feel confident enough to teach’ (Valeria), to some specific teaching competences: ‘how to select tasks and design lessons..., develop organisational skills’ (Biyanka), as well as conduct ‘extra-curricular activities and student evaluation’ (Reneta). What trainees think that their teacher educators expect from them is, for example, to conduct lessons in the most efficient way, and in a trainee’s words: ‘to participate in class activities which can help me see the process of teaching also through the learners’ eyes, to assess its weaknesses and eventually draw my own conclusions’ (Ivanina).

### **Methodology course project**

During the first EPOSTL implementation stage, central to our work with the portfolio, and aligned with the above-mentioned constructivist principles, is also to support student teachers in constructing personally meaningful knowledge of pedagogical theory and research. For instance, having worked with the Personal Statement, trainees are set the task of reading through the Contents of the Self-Assessment section (EPOSTL 2007: 13) and picking an area (for example grammar, culture) that they would like to explore in detail. By the end of the semester student teachers have to design an activity linked to their selected area, introduce it to the group (microteaching), discuss it with their peers, and submit a written paper, which they can include in the Dossier. The areas, which trainees find most interesting are those in the Methodology section (speaking/spoken interaction, grammar, pronunciation, etc.). One possible reason for their choices may be that they see these topics as immediately relevant and applicable to their future teaching practice at school.

## Stage 2: teaching practice I and II

### Rationale

Work with the EPOSTL proceeds over the period of student teachers' TP, running over semester six (TP1) and seven (TP2). During TP1, a cohort (10–15 trainees) visits local schools weekly to observe lessons taught by mentors. During TP2 beginning teachers continue visiting schools in the same groups to teach their own (first) lessons and to observe those taught by their peers. The main emphasis during TP1 and 2 is on the Self-Assessment section. In this stage the descriptors of didactic competences provided by the EPOSTL are used to stimulate and focus trainees' reflective examination of their concrete experiences in classroom observation and teaching.

### Procedures

#### *Lesson planning and self-evaluation*

During TP2, prior to their school visits, the trainees review the descriptors in the Self-Assessment section and, according to their personal priorities, select and discuss the items they consider relevant to the lesson to be taught or observed. The student who is going to teach the lesson briefs his/her colleagues on the descriptors he/she has chosen to address in his/her teaching and explains why he/she has selected them. This way the descriptors focus students' lesson preparation and observation, and function as stimuli for reflection during the post-observation discussion. In the lesson plan, trainees note their personal pedagogical goals by referring to the corresponding EPOSTL descriptors; for example, 'to encourage learners to express their opinions, identity, culture etc.' (EPOSTL 2007: 21; Methodology, Speaking/Spoken Interaction, A 3). In the self-evaluation comments, attached to their lesson plan, student teachers then reflect on the extent to which they have managed to achieve their personal pedagogical goals, thus demonstrating their self-assessment against particular descriptors. The following remark demonstrates a trainee's critical self-evaluation against the above-mentioned aim. In fact, she identifies a problem situation and explores a possible alternative (solution) which may work better:

*I consider my aim partly accomplished because the students were quite eager to share their knowledge of Bulgarian national holidays and traditions...The unsuccessful part of this lesson, was that I could not get any information about the traditions of the minority group students. I didn't expect that, oddly, they would not feel like sharing any peculiarities of their cultures. I think I could have prepared some information in advance.*

Zhana

Here, Zhana has successfully generated an appropriate methodological response. Using a cultural lens – as an alternative EPOSTL focus would encourage us to do, of course – we might also want to ask her to reflect on the surprise that she expresses, and to think further about what reasons minority groups might have for not wanting to talk about the cultural practices that distinguish them from the majority. Following on from that, what is the role of topics chosen, or the role of English being spoken, in making our society more or less cohesive?

### **Peer-observation and post-observation discussions**

The post-observation sessions are held at the teacher training schools, immediately after the lesson. These sessions are attended by the student cohort, the mentor and the university tutor. A key aspect of the post-observation discussion is the emphasis on prospective teachers' supportive feedback and joint reflection for learning. To that end, trainees are told that they are not expected to evaluate their colleague's performance but, in a non-judgemental way, to describe what they have seen in the lesson and share what they have learned from the specific observation experience and subsequent group discussion.

As a follow-up, students are supposed to produce reflective written self-reports where they have recorded their experiences at school, focusing on what they have learned through lesson observation and teaching, what competences they still have to develop, and how they think they can achieve this. The example below is an extract that comes from a trainee's peer-observation notes, and is linked to the EPOSTL descriptor C 8. (Context, The Role of the Language Teacher): 8. 'I can observe my peers, recognise different methodological aspects of their teaching and offer them constructive feedback' (EPOSTL 2007: 17, C 8).

*...I can conclude that Damian's lesson looked well structured (except for the missing links between the stages), I liked his use of humour as a stress relieving technique, and he managed to shorten the distance between him and the students. There are few key things that I've learned during his lesson: 1. When teaching vocabulary always to expect questions about new words, preparing a small (or large) corpus of presumable words in advance, to help me indulge the students' curiosity without trying to postpone the answer for the next class; 2. Linking the different phases of the lesson is very important to increase the comprehensiveness of the thought material. It also gives the students clear idea of what and why are they doing the exercises or studying the unit...*

Aleksei

The university tutor and the mentor also, in a non-judgemental way, facilitate the discussion trying as much as possible to take up the role of a helper who assists student teachers in articulating their thinking on various aspects related to the lesson. For this purpose, first of all we make it clear to the trainees that at this stage we are not going to formally assess their first lessons and their participation in the post-observation discussions (only trainees' written reflective self- and peer-observation reports are graded). In addition, we usually start from the student teachers' self-observations and listen attentively to what they have to say about their lesson. Sometimes, due to the immediacy of the taught lesson, the trainee himself/herself may be too emotionally involved in the teaching experience, which makes it difficult for him/her to start reflecting on it. Then, we take the turn but instead of giving opinions, advice or being prescriptive, we ask guiding questions (for example how do you feel about the lesson? What did you like about it?) to help the trainee to get started, make sense and explore his/her own perceptions of the experience. We find that this facilitative approach to classroom observation and discussion makes trainees more relaxed and open to enter into reflective dialogue, following their own agendas. As a result the post-observation reflective discussions often reach beyond

the analysis of the specific lesson just taught/observed, touching upon aspects of teaching style and classroom manner; and broader institutional, socio-political, cultural, age and gender-related issues in language teaching and learning.

## Stage 3: teaching practice III

### Rationale

The main aim of using the EPOSTL during the final teaching practice (TP3) is to help student teachers develop a proactive, self-directed approach to professional learning. Overall, during TP3, trainees focus on selecting and organising the materials for their Dossier entries. The collected artefacts should help support the prospective teachers' self-assessment 'can do' statements (EPOSTL 2007: 59), and trainees select and include materials from lessons given, lesson observations and evaluations, reports, comments from different people involved in their teacher education (including school pupils), analyses of learners' tasks and performance, action research, case studies, etc. (EPOSTL 2007: 60).

It is important to note that the use of the EPOSTL to provoke an internal reference point for reflection determines the interpretation and the nature of the artefacts in the Dossier. That is, they do not necessarily have a 'showcase' function, demonstrating that prospective teachers have met particular qualification standards; rather the materials provide a record of student teachers' self-assessment of progress in teaching and make visible their reflection over time in different learning contexts (academic courses, teaching practice, study visits abroad, etc.).

### Procedures

#### **Action research projects**

This task is similar to the Methodology course project described above but now trainees apply the same or other theoretical principles or teaching techniques in a real classroom; present the results of this 'mini-' action research project to their colleagues in a whole-group plenary session at the end of TP3; and write it up. The written paper and attached materials (questionnaires, teaching materials, tests, video-clip, etc.) can be included in the student teachers' portfolios, supporting self-assessment comments on particular descriptors. For instance, a trainee's written paper, reflecting on her experience in applying and testing the Multiple Intelligences theory during her teaching practice shows her progress in developing the following competences:

*9. I can locate relevant articles, journals and research findings relating to aspects of teaching and learning; 10. I can identify and investigate specific pedagogical/ didactic issues related to my learners or my teaching in the form of action research.* (EPOSTL 2007: 18).

#### **Peer-collaboration**

An example of how student teachers are encouraged actively to seek opportunities to learn from one another comes from the final TP period (TP3), when they are expected informally to arrange and exchange visits with colleagues in other schools, to observe one another's classes, team teach or just share thoughts and experiences on teaching and learning, which may be recorded as portfolio entries. For instance,

one beginning teacher wanted to explore in more depth the descriptors from Methodology, A. Speaking/Spoken interaction (EPOSTL 2007: 21). She invited her colleague to visit her class, record a video clip and give her feedback, which would add another perspective on her developing teaching competences. Following the lesson, the trainees watched the video clip together and shared insights about the specific area of concern. Eventually the video clip went into the trainee's portfolio, accompanied by reflections that show the beginning teacher's growth in the area of speaking and spoken interaction.

Some student teachers explicitly incorporate their colleagues' feedback in their lesson self-evaluation comments. For instance, the following note refers to the EPOSTL descriptors C1 and C2 (Conducting a Lesson, Interaction with Learners), '1. I can settle a group of learners into a room and gain their attention at the beginning of a lesson; 2. I can keep and maximise the attention of learners during a lesson' (EPOSTL 2007: 41):

*...I received good remarks on my lesson. My colleagues liked it a lot. They liked my idea to bring a teddy bear. It made the lesson more catching and there were no discipline problems.*

Vera

## Evaluation

In this section, following a discussion of the student teachers' views as the main stakeholders in the implementation of the portfolio scheme, I present the mentor's opinions on this project. The beginning teachers' responses were collected from a group of 4th year student teachers. Having worked with the EPOSTL over two years, they had to respond to a semi-structured survey, which asked them to reflect in writing a) on the benefits, and b) on the challenges they experienced while using the EPOSTL.

The pattern of responses indicates that trainees almost unanimously find the portfolio a useful tool for professional development, supporting self-reflection and raising awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Further to this, beginning teachers consider the EPOSTL a useful document that provides greater transparency of aims and didactic competences in teacher education. What they also mention is that the portfolio descriptors and the 'vision' of the language teacher they project coincide with their initial expectations and vision of what he/she should know and be able to do.

Another valuable feature of the EPOSTL, highlighted by beginning teachers, is its potential to facilitate continuous professional development and lifelong learning. Some opinions, however, allude to the initial uncertainty which prospective teachers feel, when unaccustomed to working with the EPOSTL, they are confronted with the task to set their own learning goals and think about self-assessment in learning to teach. Trainees' concerns decrease as they gain experience and skills in using the portfolio and they show a growing awareness that it is a tool for supporting teacher learning over time, and not 'just overnight'.

Surprisingly, the commonly cited pitfall of the portfolio – creating an additional workload for the trainee – is not mentioned as a problem by the student teachers

working with the EPOSTL. A possible explanation may be that trainees do not perceive portfolio construction as a separate activity in itself, especially the way portfolio work is integrated in the course; in comparison, trainees frequently voice their complaints about the time constraints activities like lesson planning, and reflection in writing (for example producing self-evaluation and observation reflective reports) impose on them.

The conversations with mentors, followed by written feedback (mentors have been invited to send it to me by email) indicate that on the whole they are positive about integrating the portfolio in the teacher education programme, because:

*Students who use the EPOSTL are more responsible of their own development. They show better skills in planning their activities; they are more motivated in general and reflect on their practice. Collecting materials for the portfolio and analysing the results, makes it easier for them to self-assess and set clearer goals for future development.*

Gloria

In addition, unsolicited feedback from mentors has repeatedly confirmed that they are impressed by the beginning teachers' enthusiasm to work and learn together during the teaching practice. The interactions between beginning teachers, inspired by the EPOSTL, take various forms and serve different purposes – selecting materials for the classroom, lesson planning, team teaching, exchanging visits for observation and feedback.

Along with the positive comments, mentors question the prospective teachers' long-term use of the portfolio as a tool for reflection and self-development. Once the teacher education course is over, will there be a motivating force for future teachers to keep their portfolio? However, mentors do acknowledge that work with the EPOSTL led to a dramatic change in student teachers' attitudes to self-assessment. They feel that beginning teachers have certainly embraced certain 'habits of mind' incorporating reflective enquiry, collaborative learning, and self-assessment, which is a major prerequisite for sustained self-development in the future.

## **Potential wider relevance of the innovation**

Since the initial piloting of the EPOSTL in our ELTE programme, I have been sharing results and experiences at my university with teacher educators who train teachers of Bulgarian, English, French, German and Russian at secondary school level, as well as with teacher educators from other universities across Bulgaria. I have run mentor and in-service teacher training sessions at seminars and conferences in Bulgaria and abroad. Within the EU Erasmus teaching staff mobility programme, I have given lectures and seminars for student teachers and university tutors in a number of European countries. As a co-ordinating team member of the ECML's project 'Piloting and Implementing the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*', from 2008 to 2011, I worked with an international network of European teacher educators. Clearly, the usefulness of the EPOSTL has been widely recognised by student teachers, practising teachers, mentors, university tutors and in-service teacher trainers. That is why I believe that the portfolio implementation principles and

procedures, presented in this chapter will be relevant to professionals working not only in initial teacher education, but also to colleagues involved in the context of in-service teacher education, mentor training, and diverse language contexts.

### **In-service teacher education**

Equally in contexts where the portfolio use is a new idea or an established practice, professionals need to know why and how they can maintain a portfolio not only as an informative record for professional achievement but also as a means for fostering ongoing development. During a training course with Romanian elementary school teachers on using the EPOSTL in teacher evaluation, one teacher noted:

*I was surprised to learn about the EPOSTL and how the portfolio can be used for professional development. I have a portfolio but it is just a folder with teaching materials that I must present for evaluation of my work at school at the end of the school year. I have never looked at it that way!*

Laura

A Bulgarian teacher further suggests:

*The practice for developing a teaching portfolio in the schools in our country is limited. One reason for this is lack of information. It will be especially useful for us to receive training in portfolio development as part of organisational staff training in school.*

Nelina

### **In diverse language contexts**

The EPOSTL has been created as a reflection tool for future teachers of languages, and not specifically for teachers of English. For this reason, colleagues involved in teaching other languages will gain helpful information and insights into its use as a teacher self-development tool. The use of the portfolio can be disseminated within institutional settings: for example, I have shared my experience with the foreign language teacher educators from my department; and beyond one's institution: for example, by setting up or joining multilingual projects and conferences in the area of language teaching and teacher education. The EPOSTL has been translated and is available in a variety of languages (English, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Croatian, Spanish and Russian). This can further aid the portfolio dissemination among foreign language professionals.

### **Self-development**

What did I learn? How did I develop through this experience? Looking back, I see my experience of using the EPOSTL as a long process of challenges and successes in which I have been constantly questioning and reshaping my own assumptions about learning, teaching and teacher education. My initial expectations that trainees, having been introduced to the EPOSTL, would easily enact their knowledge about the portfolio, have changed in the course of practice. It turned out that trainees did not benefit much from the information sessions on the EPOSTL and its use as well as from the portfolio guidelines they received at the beginning of each semester. I came to understand that portfolio development is a process which prospective teachers can

best internalise experientially and over time, within a flexible framework of portfolio-integrated activities, which leaves them the space to develop an exploratory, self-analytic, and creative turn of mind. Eventually, I realised that the decision to introduce the portfolio into the ELTE programme led me to a radical move from the knowledge-transmission model towards a constructivist epistemology and a 'teacher-as-learner-centred' approach to teacher education. This changing perspective encouraged me to explore my role as a facilitator, whose main responsibility is to support and guide student teachers as they learn and develop, both personally and professionally. The following areas of interest emanated from my inquiry into this emerging role.

### **Promoting learning not as a means to an end, but as an end itself**

Portfolio development as an integral part in the teacher education course gets student teachers to think about the process of their learning to teach. The focus on learning, and not on just trying to meet a programme requirement – is more likely to ignite excitement about learning or 'passion for learning,' which undoubtedly will be the driving force for future teachers to develop, and share this 'passion for learning' with their students.

### **Active listening: practised by me, and by my student teachers.**

Listening to beginning teachers helps me build a non-threatening environment where they feel valued, accepted, and allows them to summon the courage to face their limitations and anxiety or, to use a student's words, 'initial shock at entering the classroom for the first time'. Being an attentive listener, I can also help student teachers to elaborate and expand their ideas while participating in the collaborative reflective discussions. I also try to instil in beginning teachers the same culture of active listening and appreciating multiple points of view, sharing and learning from one another, which they need to apply during the portfolio conversations, post-observation discussions, and as teachers in the classroom.

### **Fostering inquiry and active exploration**

Finally, trainees can use the EPOSTL to pose personally relevant questions for inquiry into specific areas of classroom practice. I believe that cultivating in future teachers an active inquiry stance of informing, testing and re-constructing their own theories of language teaching and learning is a way to sustain reflective teacher learning beyond teacher education.

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# 13

## Beyond theory and practice: introducing praxis in pre-service language teacher education

Eline van Batenburg

### The context

The International Degree in English and Education (IDEE) is a four-year undergraduate degree programme that runs at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. It is a pre-service teacher education programme that prepares students for teaching English as a second language (ESL) to learners at elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate levels.

The first year of the programme offers students a fairly broad orientation to the programme delivered in the Higher Years as well as to a possible future career in education. Successful completion of the first-year programme allows students to enrol in the Higher Years programme at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences as well as study at research universities in The Netherlands.

In the second half of this first year, students spend a semester on placement. The main aim of this placement is to provide students with an orientation to school life and work in education from a teacher perspective. As of this year (2012), the IDEE programme supports this orientation by delivering the content module Language Learning and Teaching 1, during which students are introduced to the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and to some aspects of language teaching methodology. This module further aims to prepare students sufficiently for the in-depth language teacher education programme that is offered in the Higher Years programme.

Traditionally, quite a lot of time on the IDEE programme is invested in the teaching of theory. It has always remained a challenge to support students sufficiently in closing the gap between theory and practice. Students struggle to comprehend how theory might be relevant to their own teaching practice. They also experience difficulties in designing practical applications of theory in the language classroom. It has been difficult to illustrate sufficiently how teaching and learning theories proposed on the course might be used by expert teachers and what practical application of these theories looks like in a classroom setting.

Students are exposed to many such illustrations when observing teachers on placement. However, they tend to focus on the front-stage behaviour of the teacher and are not automatically inclined to investigate the rationale behind the teacher's practice. This seems to prevent students from developing more theoretical notions about teaching (Johnson 1994, Numrich 1996, Meijer et al. 2002). Students see a lot, but they are not aware of what they are looking at and, as a result, do not learn as much as they could from observing language lessons.

Clearly, students need to learn *how* to observe and analyse lessons taught by expert teachers, so that they are better able to interpret the teaching practice that they observe in light of current ideas about teaching and learning and, as a result, will be better able to relate theory and practice. It is this need that the module aims to address.

### **The innovation: observing and analysing expert practice together**

The idea behind the intervention is very simple: place observing and analysing language lessons in the student's zone of proximal development (ZPD) by having them perform these tasks under the guidance of the module tutor. The ZPD refers to the idea that students can successfully engage in tasks that are slightly beyond their current competence if they are supported by a 'more knowledgeable other'. This is thought to lead to a higher level of understanding and learning (Vygotsky 1978).

Inspired by Ethell (1999, in Meijer et al. 2002), we chose to make use of video material of reading, speaking and vocabulary lessons taught and discussed by expert teachers in a secondary school setting. For each topic, the process consisted of five steps:

1. *In-class observation of the language lesson.* Seeing the same lesson creates a shared experience amongst students that serves as the basis for analysis and discussion.
2. *Personal theories activity and class discussion.* This helps students to actively link their own ideas about language learning and teaching to other people's ideas. It also creates a shared language that can be used to talk about the experience, and it prepares students conceptually and linguistically for the use of written sources.
3. *In-class observation of an interview with the language teacher.* This introduces students to the teachers' rationale behind their lessons and uncovers theoretical concepts that can then be used as a starting point in 4.
4. *Interactive lecture delivered by the module tutor.* This allows the tutor to extend the students' perceptual understanding of the lesson and move towards a conceptual understanding of the theoretical framework in which the lesson can be placed. This framework is then used to evaluate the observed lesson in relation to theory.
5. *Follow-up reading and placement observation.* This allows the students to consolidate their learning in an individual manner.

## Guiding principles for the design

### Re-appraise the role of practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge in teaching

In our initial approach to teaching theory we might have over-estimated the role that theory plays in teachers' thinking. Research into teacher cognition has demonstrated that teachers' actions are mainly guided by practical knowledge, not purely theoretical knowledge. Practical knowledge is knowledge that stems from teaching, rather than knowledge that is developed for teaching. It is therefore personal, context-bound, based on experience and mainly tacit (Meijer, 1999). It contains both knowledge *and* beliefs about teaching and learning (Kagan 1990, Alexander et al. 1991).

Only about 25 per cent of teachers' interactive thinking draws on theoretical knowledge and considerations (Clark and Peterson 1986). Theory can help to make sense of practical situations and help increase teachers' ability to cope with these situations, but has little value on its own. After all, not all theory is applicable to all situations; theory is only given meaning in practice. We therefore choose to take practical situations rather than theoretical concepts as the starting point of the learning and teaching process and so move from a conceptual understanding to a perceptual understanding of theory (Korthagen and Kessels 1999).

### Allow students to explore their own beliefs about language learning and teaching

Our initial programme might have hindered students' ability to close the gap between theory and practice because it never took the students' own experiences as a learner as a starting point; we did not explicitly guide students in exploring their own initial beliefs about language learning and teaching. Doing so is thought to have a positive effect on both students' willingness to entertain new theoretical notions and their ability to integrate new ideas with existing ideas, as is proposed by more socio-constructivist approaches to teaching and learning (Johnson 2009).

Awareness of one's own beliefs provides a frame of reference against which new theories can be judged (Dolk 1997, Alexander 2006). Research into the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie 1975) shows that students use their own experiences as a learner to interpret the perceived value of theories, materials and teaching approaches and to accept or refuse proposed methodological frameworks (Johnson 1994, Numrich 1996). It is therefore essential that students are encouraged to explore their beliefs about learning and teaching, as it allows them to open their minds to new ideas.

In the first part of the module, students were engaged in tasks that were aimed at raising awareness of, and challenging their initial ideas about, learning and teaching. They also carried out a project that allowed them to uncover and analyse their placement mentor's practical knowledge and beliefs, using a concept mapping technique and a theoretical article. Anyone wishing to know more about this element of the module should contact me at the email address given. The second half of the module was reserved for observing and analysing expert practice. It is this intervention that I will now discuss in more detail.

## The design

### The video material

The lessons were filmed at schools that offer placements to our students, thus resembling our students' reality as closely as possible. The videos were edited for classroom use, with the build-up of the lesson always kept intact. Independent work or learner discussions were made shorter, but their illustrative character was maintained. Key questions and illustrative learners responses' were subtitled, allowing students to notice these more easily. Furthermore, we took care to focus on aspects directly related to language learning instead of aspects related to classroom management. The reason for this is that most first-year students are very concerned about the latter and so are easily distracted by behavioural aspects in the classroom. Whilst this is certainly relevant, these videos were meant to illustrate the teaching/ learning process itself.

### In-class observation of a language lesson

For each topic area, two 2.5 hour sessions were reserved in the programme. In the first session, the class carries out the video observation. At the start of the session, students are provided with background information about the class and the school and with the material that was used during the lesson. They are given time to study this or, where relevant, to try out the learning activity themselves. They are then instructed to watch the lesson, making use of an observation sheet (Figure 1). This sheet steers their observation in the direction of managing learning rather than managing behaviour. It asks them to i) note down teacher activities and invites them to ii) pay attention to the effect these seem to have on the learners. After the observation, students are given some time to reflect on what they have seen and are then asked to iii) make predictions about the principles underlying the teacher's actions and to iv) induce the aim of the lesson from the video. An illustration of this step can be found in the box overleaf. As I develop the account of this intervention, I will provide practical illustrations in boxes like this one, as an ongoing form of explanation.

Figure 1: Video observation sheet

Video observation	<i>What do you see the teacher do?</i>	<i>What effect does it have on the learners?</i>	<i>What might be the reasoning behind the teacher's actions?</i>
<i>What was the aim of the lesson?</i>			

### **Practical illustration**

Students **observe** a reading lesson in which a group of learners use a highlighter to mark cohesive devices in a reading text and brainstorm about what function these devices perform in the text.

In a class discussion, the module tutor ensures that all students have identified the various stages of the lesson and the types of activity that were employed. The tutor also briefly discusses the students' impression of the effect that these seem to have had on the learners, where necessary drawing attention to learner responses that have gone unnoticed or were misinterpreted by the students. Students are asked to share their ideas about the aim of the lesson. This sensitises students to the idea that lessons do not just happen, but can be planned with a particular goal in mind.

### **Personal theories activity and class discussion**

The students are asked to complete the personal theories activity (Figure 2) in small groups. This allows students to share ideas and draw from each other's knowledge. It also helps them to practice formulating answers to the questions, which will later be discussed in class. The activity asks students to reflect on the reasons behind, and effect of, the teacher's actions and to link their impressions to theoretical knowledge they have gained so far as well as their own ideas about teaching this topic. This allows students to reflect critically on their own ideas and other people's ideas in relation to the observed lesson, and encourages them to formulate these ideas carefully.

**Figure 2:** Personal theories activity

#### **Personal theories**

- How do the teacher's actions contribute to the learners' (language) learning process?
- If you were to teach the same group and the same topic, how would you approach this lesson?
- What alternative ways of approaching this topic do you know?
- Do you recognise elements in this lesson from the theory studied so far?

An alternative implementation of this activity is to integrate it into the whole class discussion that follows the in-class video observation. This allows the tutor to take on the role of 'more capable other' more swiftly and might enhance the depth of the discussion. This may be especially helpful with regards to the first question in the activity ('How do the teacher's actions contribute to the learners' (language) learning?'), which is a complex question for students at this stage.

**Practical illustration**

In the *discussion*, students notice that, unlike their own experiences at school, these learners are not engaged in quiet, detailed reading and answering comprehension questions, but in a class discussion about text features. They discuss whether this is a good way of teaching reading.

**In-class observation of an interview with the language teacher**

In the second session, the class watches a reflective interview in which the teacher comments on the reasons behind the choices he/she made in the planning, phasing and implementation of specific activities in the lesson. The students are asked to record the teacher's explanation for each activity or phase in the lesson. The students are then given time to reflect on the teacher's explanation in relation to language learning and teaching theory.

In the first session, the students will have made predictions about possible reasons behind the teacher's actions. In the brief whole-class discussion that follows the interview observation, the module tutor first asks students to verify these predictions and identifies points of interest that arise from this. Students are asked whether they feel that the teacher has consciously thought about the lesson and how they are able to see this. Subsequently, the tutor asks the students to consider whether this thinking seems to be informed by current theories. Here, the module tutor helps the students identify moments that they feel might have a theoretical basis and notes these down on the whiteboard. For example, one of the teachers taught a reading lesson focused on the use of cohesive devices in texts. Students had a hunch that this might be a theoretical consideration, but could not substantiate this further.

**Practical illustration**

In the *interview*, the teacher explains that she wants to make the cohesive devices physically apparent on the page, so that learners instantly notice the text structure. She shares her belief that raising awareness of this aids reading comprehension.

**Interactive lecture**

The students' 'hunches' are taken as a starting point for the interactive lecture. The main aim of the lecture is to introduce students to theoretical concepts that can help explain the teacher's decisions and the effect that the lesson had on the learners. The tutor refers back to the observed lesson throughout the lecture. The lectures fit within a Communicative Language Teaching framework, inviting students to think about how real life processes can be re-created in the classroom. Each lecture includes activities that allow the students to experience a particular process first-hand (for example skim reading) and that outline the various strategies that are involved in performing a particular skill (for example prediction strategies). These are subsequently illustrated by looking at course materials that practise these skills and strategies.

### **Practical illustration**

In the **lecture**, the tutor discusses and illustrates three different groups of reading strategies, one of which is making use of text structure. This allows students to see the teacher's choice as part of a bigger picture.

Finally, the points addressed in the lecture are summarised in a theoretical model or framework. This framework is then used to re-evaluate the observed lesson, asking students to make links between the activities employed in the lesson and various elements of the framework. In addition to sealing the link between the theoretical notion and a practical application, this allows the module tutor to discuss what other types of activities a similar group of learners would benefit from.

### **Practical illustration**

The **framework** (Hedge 2000) shows that reading strategies are part of a group of reader elements that also includes the development of cognitive strategies, language knowledge and schematic knowledge. The students' conceptual understanding of elements that influence the reading process is thus further enlarged.

### **Follow-up tasks**

As a final step, students are asked to do background reading. This should help students consolidate their learning. The background reading texts include chapters from authors that are also used in the Higher Years Programme, such as Brown (2007) as well as journal articles taken from *English Teaching Professional*, which offers practical discussions about language teaching that are informed by theory. Students are also encouraged to use the theoretical framework to observe lessons in their placement school.

### **Practical illustration**

From the **article** (Watkins 2011) students learn about, for example, the difference between a product and a process approach to teaching reading. As such, the article complements the lesson, the interview and the lecture.

At the end of this process, students have seen an expert teacher at work, have formulated questions about this teacher's practice, have listened to the teacher's ideas behind her teaching and have been introduced to a variety of theoretical notions that are relevant to the teacher's actions. Their conceptual understanding has been extended, so that they can explain the relative merits of the observed lesson, while also gaining a broader theoretical perspective that should enable them to observe and analyse the lessons that they see in their placement school more critically.

## Evaluation of the innovation

The effects of this intervention were evaluated by analysing end-of-term exams for students' ability to explain practical teaching situations in relation to the theories studied. A questionnaire was used to determine students' perception of their own development and the usefulness of the various learning tasks in relation to the module outcomes. Finally, a selection of four students partook in a group interview to give meaning to the data obtained from the questionnaires. I summarise the most salient findings under the headings of attitude, ability, and design strengths and weaknesses.

### Attitude

The module seems to have had a positive effect on the students' willingness to accept new ideas about learning and teaching. Students report that they have become more aware of their own beliefs about language learning and teaching (96.3 per cent) and that the module has challenged these beliefs (84.6 per cent). Students claim to have gained more insight in understanding the reason behind teachers' actions. Their critical thinking skills have developed along with an understanding of, as one student anonymously reports on their questionnaire, 'How much is involved to teach a language and to be able to learn it.' Along the same lines, another student comments that:

*It was really beneficial because I understand more of how to be a language teacher as opposed to just a teacher.*

Anonymous

### Ability

The module also seems to have generated the desired effect in terms of students' ability to explain practical situations in relation to theory. In the end-of-term exam, students were shown an excerpt of a lesson and were then asked questions designed to demonstrate their ability to:

- Define theoretical concepts (*e.g. what is the difference between global reading and detailed reading?*).
- Identify activities or interactions that pertain to these concepts (*e.g. give an example of a question that the teacher asks about the reading process during the lesson*).
- Explain how these concepts fit in with the learners' development of the language skill (*e.g. how does awareness of text type help L2 learners understand a text?*).
- Understand the relationship between a teacher's principles and chosen activities (*e.g. considering this teacher's approach to vocabulary teaching, what approach is she most likely to take to testing this vocabulary?*).

Out of the 28 students, 27 successfully rounded off the assessment, obtaining an average score of 72 per cent. There was no specific area that proved problematic. Where scores were low, the main problem seemed to be the limited scope of the answer provided by the student, for example discussing only one or two aspects rather than the targeted four or five. With some students, we detected limited consistency, for example being able to identify activities pertaining to text type, but not to text structure.

Students also perceive themselves as being able to recognise how lessons they observe relate to theories studied; 78.5 per cent of the students indicate that they are able to do so when observing vocabulary lessons. For reading, this score is as high as 92.9 per cent. When asked how much theoretical knowledge they feel they have gained, students report an average increase of three points on a ten point scale. Four students rate themselves below six, suggesting that they feel insufficiently knowledgeable. One of these students decreased his score from a seven at the beginning to a five at the end and comments 'I now realise that I have a lot to learn.' It seems more likely that this student felt humbled by the experience than that his knowledge had in fact decreased.

### **Strengths in the design**

Students were asked to rate the extent to which the five elements that make up the video-observation cycle helped them develop an understanding of the relationship between the theory and the practice of teaching language. All elements were perceived as useful, with scores ranging from 79.1 per cent (background reading) to 96.3 per cent (group discussion).

The students perceived the videoed lessons as very useful in that they showed them 'how things work in class' (Tjitske) and provided practical examples for their own teaching practice. In turn, the interviews with the teachers convinced the students that lessons do not just 'happen':

*If you don't have the interviews, I would think that the teacher just makes up the lesson without thinking about the why. You have to see that the teacher actually thinks about it at all.*

Suzanne

However, the students supported Tjitske's comment, 'the guidance we got ... is what taught us the most.' They appreciated the fact that the observation forms limited the scope of their observation, showed them what to look out for and prevented them from focusing on aspects less relevant at this stage. They were adamant that discussing the videos together with the module tutor was the most beneficial part of the learning experience as this allowed them to check whether they had identified and understood key concepts correctly. In these discussions, the tutor was able to show what there is to look at in a lesson, and what types of question this raises. Suzanne commented that 'Without someone helping me question it, I would take everything for granted.'

The tutor role is mentioned again when the students comment on the set up of the observation activities, particularly when aiming to give (theoretical) meaning to their observations:

*It was us coming up with our findings first. We discuss them and then you make additions and elaborate on these and help us go into a point if we miss it, or go around it ... It was mostly us doing the work and you were there guiding us.*

Soufiane

Students need sufficient time to process what they have learned, to reflect on issues raised during the lesson and to discuss these with fellow students and, where possible, mentors. This became apparent when, due to an unforeseen change in the timetable, the time spent on vocabulary was shortened to one session. This, they reported, did not provide them with enough opportunity to discuss and think about what they had seen. Taking two weeks for each topic is thus an important part of the design.

### **Weaknesses in the design**

Students believe that this module should come earlier in the programme. At the moment, it runs parallel to their placement. They feel that being shown illustrations of classroom practice and being taught observation techniques in advance would have prepared them better for their first placement. We are currently looking for ways to integrate some of this module's activities into the generic placement preparation module in Semester 1.

Many students also indicated that they want to be involved in activities that will help them apply what they learn to their own teaching practice. Whilst this module aims to help students identify and understand concepts in language learning and teaching, the students clearly feel that they need to be using these concepts themselves. This could indeed be considered a missed opportunity. After all, being pushed to try out new knowledge in practice generates depth of learning. This oversight could easily be remedied by having students plan learning activities that meet the theoretical principles in class, then try them out on placement and discuss their experiences in the next lesson.

Overall, it seems that taking practical examples as a starting point for the students' learning process and adopting a more socio-constructivist approach works well. The tutor's role is to apprentice the students into the observation and to scaffold the sense-making process: the tutor sensitises the students to what to look at in a lesson, how to question their observations, and how they can make sense of these observations with the use of theory.

### **Relevance**

Whilst the actual intervention is fairly simple, collating suitable video material is not. It is time-consuming to obtain good and diverse material that resembles the students' teaching situation and that serves as an illustration of good practice. Depending on what the material needs to illustrate, it might be worth consulting online sources, such as TeachersTV, available on [www.teachersmedia.co.uk](http://www.teachersmedia.co.uk)

There are also ethical considerations. The videos are used for critical evaluation. Therefore, the teachers on film become vulnerable, especially if they supervise the students on placement at a later stage. It is essential that the module tutor is able to manage respectful class discussions. Explicit permission to use the video material for educational purposes must be obtained from the teachers and the material must be edited for classroom use. We decided to select only examples of good practice and to edit out weaker moments in the lesson. We did not share the material in the digital learning environment, but used it during class sessions only.

The results obtained from the questionnaire clearly showed that students felt able to make use of theories to interpret classroom practice. However, only about half of the students indicate that they actually used their theoretical knowledge when evaluating language lessons or talking to their mentors. Students say that the main reason for this is that they are very aware of the fact that they are a guest in the school, that they are dependent on their mentors and, as such, do not feel free to discuss what they have learned. They strongly feel that a critical approach was not appreciated in the school. They shied away from including critical observations in the reports they had to submit at the placement school.

In this chapter, we contended that teachers' actions are mainly guided by practical knowledge, that theory can help make sense of practical situations and that it is therefore only given meaning in practice. If we are to increase this design's learning potential, we must engage the placement mentor more directly in this process. At present, mentors are mainly asked to provide a model for, and feedback on, the student's teaching. However, if students learn most from discussions about teaching, then mentors can contribute to closing the theory/practice gap substantially by sharing their expertise and engaging in discussions about their thinking and teaching with the students. They are a potentially powerful resource that we should not want to leave untapped.

Various instruments designed to help students and mentors articulate and discuss their practical knowledge have been introduced. Meijer et al. (2002) report positively on the effects of using concept mapping interviews and stimulated recall interviews. Van Velzen et al. (2012) discuss a tandem teaching approach, where the mentor and the student prepare the lessons together and the student's role in delivering these is gradually increased. Here, the teacher educator's expertise can be elicited in formulating the mentor's ideas about teaching and learning. Setting up such small communities of practice (Wenger 1998) allows teachers, students and educators to work together from a shared principle and to create a model in which all parties can learn from each other.

### **Self-development**

This experience has allowed me to take concrete steps towards adopting a more socio-constructivist approach to teacher education, in which students' initial ideas and beliefs about language learning and teaching are explored and used to make sense of new ideas, and in which the tutor's role is primarily to guide and extend students' thinking about teaching and learning. In all, this module challenged not only my students' beliefs about learning and teaching, but also my own.

Watching the videos together created a shared experience between students and ensured that all students could draw from the same visual representation during the class discussion. Here, the role of the tutor turned out to be most important. The students' extremely positive evaluation of the tutor's contribution sensitised me to the fact that students learn a lot from being shown *how to* observe, question, and make sense of practical observations with the use of theory. Before, I was mainly focused on a transfer of knowledge – even if this was nicely illustrated with practical examples. Now I am much more concerned with developing the students'

understanding of and thinking about teaching and learning and with looking for practical, concrete examples that illustrate fairly abstract, theoretical notions.

An important insight is that teachers' thinking and teaching is guided much more by practical knowledge than theoretical knowledge. Therefore it makes sense to move from a conceptual approach to a perceptual approach to teaching theory. Before, I aimed to get students to understand the principles behind current theories and more or less left it to them to look for and come up with practical applications of these. Now I realise that these practical applications should come first and that, if students learn how to use theory to make sense of practical situations, they are more likely to integrate theory and practice.

This module has provided students with the opportunity to see how expert teachers make sense of, and use, theoretical knowledge in practice. It also invited them to use theory to interpret teaching practices. This dialogic approach seems to have the potential to help students create new understandings of teaching and learning that contain both theoretical and practical knowledge. Johnson (2006) provides an interesting discussion that might help us strengthen this approach and do away with the theory/practice dichotomy altogether. She introduces the concept of praxis as practical knowledge that is '...organised around and transformed through theoretical knowledge' (Johnson 2006: 240). The sense-making process that featured in this module has the potential to lead to a transformative process, where theory serves to reorganise students' lived experiences. This idea will be further explored and more fully worked out in the near future.

The experience has had an impact on the design of the new methodology curriculum for the Higher Years. In the old design, practical illustrations were limited to in-class materials analysis. Discussion of the students' efforts to link theory and practice mainly occurred when providing evaluative feedback on their teaching. The new programme now also includes sessions in which lessons taught by students are watched and discussed, when they bring in and analyse specific cases from their placement and sessions that are devoted to microteaching. These activities would also fit well with Johnson's transformative approach.

The evaluation has shown that bridging the gap between theory and practice also means bridging the gap between teacher educators and teachers in the field. For this reason, we are currently looking into ways of setting up communities of practice with a small number of placement mentors. We hope that this will further strengthen our students' ability to create links between theory and practice in the English Language classroom in preparation for the continuing development of their own professional praxis.

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# 14

## ‘Being there?’: comparing synchronous and recorded online instruction for language teachers

Jo Gakonga

### Overview

Short (120-hour) pre-service training courses, such as the Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) or the Trinity Cert TESOL, are notorious for being intensive. In what can often be only a matter of weeks, it is necessary for trainees to acquire both the knowledge and the skills required for them to survive and develop in a classroom situation where they may or may not have much continuing support. Priorities have to be established and this can lead to difficult decisions on courses that are aimed at people with no previous teaching experience, especially as they also often come to the course with little explicit knowledge of language.

I am involved in running and teaching such a course at a college of further education in the UK and our team wanted to provide support by improving language awareness before the course began. Our initial proposal, following other centres, was to develop some face-to-face materials which could be covered over two to three days. However, because of cost, staffing and the required numbers of learners, it was never possible to implement this idea, so I started to look at other possible online modes of delivery. Initially, this was purely for practical reasons but as I developed the course, I realised that there might be other pedagogical advantages. In 2011, I ran two pilot courses to help trainees develop better grammar awareness. I experimented with both synchronous, ‘real time’ classes online and recordings which could be asynchronously accessed. To begin with, I used only a virtual classroom in real time as I expected this to be the best substitute for the face-to-face class I had wanted to run. However, my findings led me to include recordings of the classes and then finally to abandon real-time classes completely and embed the course into recorded presentations. Whilst my initial assumption was that a collaborative synchronous methodology (mimicking a face-to-face classroom as nearly as possible) would be the most successful, the final results were both surprising and thought provoking, leading to the development of a quite different methodology and the realisation that it may not only be for practical reasons that online delivery may be advantageous.

## Innovation

It is generally held that knowledge about language is a crucial part of the development of a language teacher. There is good evidence that explicit teaching of grammar is helpful in language learning for adults (Norris and Ortega 2000, Gass and Selinker 2008, Spada and Tomita 2010) and in order to teach grammar, it is important that the teacher has a good level of understanding. This is not to say that learning the nomenclature and systems of the language is the only factor in teacher training, nor that a knowledge of grammatical terminology will guarantee excellent teaching ability (Andrews 2001, Bartels 2005). As Wright (1991: 68–9) suggests, ‘one great danger of acquiring specialist knowledge about language is the possible desire to show learners that you have this knowledge’. However, Andrews and McNeill (2005: 159) state that it may be a ‘crucial variable in determining the quality and potential effectiveness of practice’ and it is certainly observable that those trainees with a better language awareness often have less difficulty in planning lessons. Wright and Bolitho (1993: 292) state this in even more strongly worded terms; ‘Our starting point is simple: the more aware a teacher is of language and how it works, the better.’

Many of our trainees are native speakers of English and although those who have studied a language in school to a degree of proficiency often have some grammatical knowledge, the majority have little awareness of terminology. A significant number of our trainees come from bilingual backgrounds and may be expected to have a greater awareness of language, but it is often the case that they have learned English in an immersion situation and consequently have the same difficulties as monolingual English speakers. Over a number of years, our team debated how best to approach this issue. As mentioned above, several centres in the UK and overseas run pre-course sessions and find them helpful both to increase awareness of language and also to help trainees to bond before the teacher training begins. Our difficulties were practical ones. In our institution, there is a minimum requirement of 12 participants on a course. For a course of this nature, it was considered unlikely that we would reliably be able to recruit this number, especially since there would be no funding and it would represent a prohibitive cost for many. A further practical difficulty was time-related. Trainees apply for and enrol on the course at times ranging from six months to only six days before it starts. Thus, deciding on a time which would be suitable for all was problematic. For these reasons, whilst the concept remained in our minds, it was never realised.

In 2011, becoming more interested in the possibilities that technology affords for teacher training, I returned to the idea. Initially, I looked at the possibilities of running a course in *Second Life*. This has several advantages and using a virtual world, where avatars are visible, and voice as well as text-chat communication is possible, is an attractive option. However, it quickly became apparent that the barriers to entry for the majority would be too high. Whilst *Second Life* is a free tool, it is necessary to download the browser, customise an avatar and learn how to manoeuvre it before it is possible to join a course. For many, this is too high an investment of time and effort. Instead, I turned to the idea of a virtual classroom using *IlluminateLive!* This addressed many of the concerns I had with *Second Life* as it requires very little technical expertise to use. Trainees are simply given a link where they sign in and have only to check their audio system using a simple Wizard tool in order to join the class. The tutor can be seen on a webcam and a PowerPoint presentation can be uploaded so that all of the participants can see it on their screens.

There are many advantages to a virtual classroom such as *IlluminateLive!* and whilst it does not have the immediate appeal of a face-to-face class, it is a reasonable approximation. Trainees could see and hear me and could communicate both with text chat and voice as well as interacting by writing and drawing on the whiteboard/ PowerPoint. I was able to check understanding and answer questions when asked and there is also a facility known as a 'breakout room' which allows participants to be put into pairs or small groups separated from the main room in order to work collaboratively on tasks.

### **Pilot 1**

The first course I developed consisted of 12 sessions: the first five covering parts of speech and tense nomenclature and the second seven looking in more detail at parts of the language that are often difficult for learners and teachers. These included areas such as the present perfect, how the future is expressed and conditionals. I advertised this as a free class and enrolled 30 participants, mainly from the UK, but also from India, Malaysia, China and Singapore. I taught sessions of 90 minutes duration 'live' on a weekly basis. One of the advantages of using this kind of system is that it was possible to open up the class to a worldwide audience and this was appreciated by many:

*[The course] enables learners from all parts of the world to come together, giving them an opportunity to enhance their learning experience, which they might not have been able to do because of work/family commitments.*

Kirpal

There were also other practical aspects to hosting the course online and many of the trainees commented on these:

*I enjoyed being able to sit at home in relative comfort with a cup of tea whilst participating!*

Stewart

One of my concerns was that learners would not be engaged without the 'personal' element of a face-to-face class. However, it was surprising how well I felt I knew some of my learners and most were very positive about the experience.

*I was engaged and felt 100 per cent involved.*

Ben

*As long as I set time aside in a quiet room, it was just as effective as being in a classroom.*

Marianne

It was also interesting to note that for some there were advantages to an online class that transcended the purely practical:

*I think I participated more than I would have in a real class as no one knows who you are so it's less embarrassing if you make a mistake.*

Sofia

Given the comments above, it would seem that the problem of how to provide pre-course support affordably and practically had been solved. Participants gave very positive feedback on the course and access was much less geographically bound than for a face-to-face class. However, a major difficulty remained. Despite the positive feedback, the attendance at the classes was very low. With a cohort of 30 trainees, only an average of five came to each class in the first pilot. Several reasons were cited for this in feedback. One of the most common was the practical difficulties experienced by trainees in different time zones.

*It was purely a time factor – midnight on a Sunday evening.*

Sam from the UAE

*The time difference is what kept me from being as regular about it as I would have liked.*

Kiran

Another common factor was that other commitments had taken priority:

*Our house is being extended and it was too chaotic and noisy in the house for me to sit down and concentrate.*

Mags

*They clashed with other things (babysitting my nieces and nephews or helping my dad with his sheep).*

Stewart

However, one participant was more candid and reflected on the possible difficulties of motivation in online courses:

*I think I'm just lazy. I honestly had time last Friday, but I preferred to go out because it's so easy not to attend a class that is online. I think it's the main problem of online education: it's too tempting to cancel classes or just miss them.*

Viv

Motivation in online courses has been well researched and some studies have shown much better results regarding attendance. Waschull (2001) for example, found that attrition in her online undergraduate psychology course was low and comparable to face-to-face courses. However, it is likely that in this case there was a strong external motivation linked to the attainment of a college degree. In other studies, (Wegerif 1998, Hughes et al. 2002) motivation has been shown to be less easy to foster and dependent on both ease with the technology and strong self-regulation. On the grammar course I developed there was no formative or summative assessment and no requirement to 'pass' for certification purposes and this may also have been a significant factor in the low attendance rates. In addition, as a free online course, there was a very low barrier to entry and this also had an effect on motivation. One trainee observed:

*It's too easy to say yes to something that is free without considering all the implications, so this is the dilemma!*

Sarah

## Pilot 2

Having had some experience of using the virtual classroom, and seeing some of the difficulties in the first pilot, I wanted to investigate the effects on motivation of using recordings which could be independently and asynchronously accessed in addition to the synchronous classes. I hoped that the convenience of this would increase uptake and a new course was developed with 70 participants from around the world signing up. Some of these had not yet started their training, some were doing a course and some had recently finished. The Grammar for Language Teachers (GLT) course was designed around the same live classes on a Sunday evening that I had used in the first pilot, but used Moodle to provide a platform on which to embed a link for a recording of the class. This allowed participants both to access the classes in their own time if they missed the live session and also to re-visit the session for revision purposes if they wished to do so. I also made efforts to encourage social contact between the participants by asking them to post profiles and pictures and by the use of forums, both for tasks and for 'chat', hoping that this would increase their sense of involvement in the course and thus improve participation rates. Unfortunately, none of these measures had any great effect on attendance at the live classes. Numbers were still low and similar to those in the previous pilot although again, the feedback was positive. As in the first pilot, most stated that this was due to other commitments or time differences.

Although the continued low attendance at the live classes was disappointing, the recordings were very well received and much better utilised with access rates up to 600 per cent higher. Feedback from participants was also positive:

*They are a fantastic resource, which I am glad to have had access to, especially as it was difficult for me to make the live sessions.*

Kiran

*...just as effective as taking part.*

Liam

Only one person expressed reservations about them pedagogically:

*I found it helpful, but I found it took longer to get through the material. I had to replay it to understand it... Overall, live was definitely more engaging.*

Ralph

Unfortunately, there were some difficulties associated with the *ElluminateLive* recordings. The first and most important were the technical difficulties that were experienced by some with download time. A number of people, myself included, encountered difficulties with downloading the recordings. These often took a long time and once loaded were not easy to navigate forwards and back.

*It would take one or two tries before I was able to load Elluminate and the loading time was a tad long.*

Sikander

In addition to the load time, there was also the need to accept the download of each video each time and this made some participants nervous:

*It feels as if you might be downloading a huge Trojan virus!*

Julie

In the last three weeks of the course, due to these difficulties with the *Illuminate* recordings, I also made recordings of the material using *myBrainshark.com*. This free web-based tool allows a PowerPoint presentation to be uploaded and for an audio soundtrack to be recorded in conjunction with this. The resultant video presentation can then be shared as a link or embedded on a webpage or blog. As the recording comprised a monologue of the content of the session, it was much shorter in comparison to the online class; the former taking around 30–40 minutes whilst the latter usually lasted around 90 minutes. The content remained the same, including the tasks for participants and instructions to pause the recording whilst they did them. It was hoped that participation would be increased by a greater ease of access and by a shorter recording.

### Evaluation

The results of the second pilot were in many respects counter intuitive both in terms of the relative uptake of ‘live classes’ versus recordings and also in the type of recording that was most popular. Interestingly, of those who filled in the exit feedback questionnaire, there was support for the longer *Illuminate* recordings, despite the fact that some people experienced technical difficulties in downloading them. Opinions expressed were that the *Illuminate* sessions were more detailed or more ‘human’ as they involved personal interaction:

*I prefer Illuminate because of the classroom interaction aspect. I used Brainshark to clarify the notes that I made having watched sessions on Illuminate.*

Linda

*I tried the shorter versions. They were informative but I missed the additional interactions.*

Kiran

However, it is perhaps the case that these comments were from the small number of participants who returned questionnaires and were perhaps the most highly motivated. Quantitative analysis of the relative access rates show that *myBrainshark* recordings were accessed much more frequently than *Illuminate*, examples being the conditional session (12 views of *Illuminate* to 25 views of *myBrainshark*) and that on Relative Clauses (eight views of *Illuminate* to 20 views of *myBrainshark*). One opinion expressed on this was:

*...because the (Brainshark) recording was shorter, I felt I could listen to it right the way through and then replay it again taking notes. With a long recording there's much more investment in time ... Brainshark is also a lot more accessible than an Illuminate recording – I can jump forward or back quite easily.*

Julie

It had been expected that the recordings would act as a primary source of input for those who weren't able to attend the live sessions and that the convenience of being able to access the information in their own time would be advantageous for some participants. However, it was evident from survey data that in addition to using these as a primary source, some participants were using the recordings as a revision aid and watching them after the live class in order to recap and make more effective notes.

*...I was able to catch up and also re-watch the sessions I had participated in and make notes by pausing and rewinding. And because I had access to this information, I felt I was learning more and was therefore more prepared for the next session.*

Nicki

*...a useful way of enforcing and embedding what is learned in sessions. I think this is particularly helpful for learners within the higher age group category.*

Robert

Additionally, and interestingly, some trainees actually found the recordings more useful than the live classes. The following comment was particularly thought-provoking as the participant expresses strongly and eloquently the potential benefits of asynchronous independent learning:

*I found myself pausing often, sometimes for 5–10 minutes at a time in order to make notes. I'm someone who prefers to work things out on my own rather than deduce things by liaising with peers... Hence, allowing people to watch the playback versions has the advantage of longer contemplation time and the opportunity for the watcher to really test themselves **without the fear of 'help' from anyone else** (my emphasis) ... I can think more clearly when knowingly not under pressure to deliver a 'quick' answer.*

Paul

Khan (2011) in his work teaching maths suggests that learners may find a recording more beneficial than an online tutor in real time for several reasons. The first may be that with a recording they are able to pause and rewind if they haven't understood, without any fear that they are wasting the teacher's time. In addition, if they need to repeat or review information at a later point in time, it is available without the embarrassment of having to ask the teacher directly. Learners are also able to watch videos in their own time and at their own pace, reducing the 'one-size-fits-all' dangers of lecture-based material and ensuring effective differentiation. Finally, and he suggests possibly most importantly, where concepts are new and require time to be assimilated, it is not necessarily helpful to have the pressure of a teacher's expectations. It is noticeable that these reasons are confirmed in the feedback above.

In addition to this, there were those who genuinely preferred the recording for other reasons:

*I found it hard to interject in the live session. I was conscious that I was starting from a low knowledge base and I did not want to hold up the class with silly questions. I know I would have had fewer inhibitions in a face-to-face class.*

Robert

*I didn't want to go into the breakout rooms if I didn't fully understand something. I've never liked answering questions in class. I prefer to mindlessly take notes and then reread and consolidate them afterwards. So, personal learning style, I guess.*

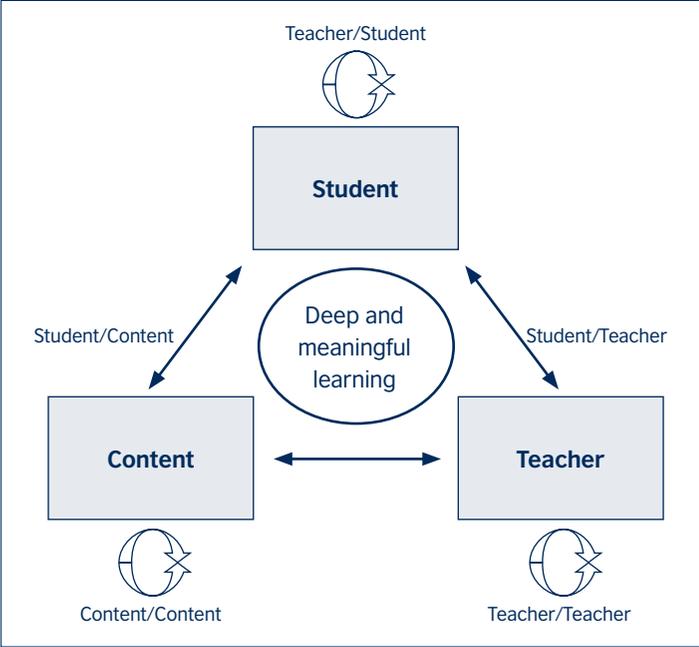
Jane

*I prefer watching the classes at my own speed, pausing to take notes and flip through grammar books.*

Kumar

These findings were quite unexpected. The recordings, which had been included as a complementary addition to the live classes, were not only the more widely accessed option, they were also the preferred one for a number of participants on grounds other than convenience.

In considering common interaction patterns in distance education, Anderson and Garrison (1998) describe three main possibilities, teacher to student, student to student and student to content (see below).



Of particular interest, because highly relevant to the current project, is the interaction between student and content. Anderson (2003: 1) suggests that 'there is also evidence that many students deliberately choose learning programmes that allow them to minimise the amount of student–teacher and student–student interaction required.' In the context of the current course, this is particularly interesting as it corroborates my research findings that there are indeed many learners who access an online course without wishing for a collaborative environment. He goes on (*ibid.*) to state that:

*Deep and meaningful formal learning is supported as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student–teacher; student–student; student–content) is at a high level. The other two may be offered at minimal levels, or even eliminated, without degrading the educational experience.*

My findings suggest that this is the case for this particular course and that for many learners student–content interaction was of greatest importance, evidenced by the preference of most for access to recordings neither requiring nor necessitating collaboration. Anderson (2003) suggests that most forms of student–content interaction can be recorded and displayed asynchronously and this can be effective when content is delivered in a text-based form. However, his findings also support my use of *Illuminate* recordings, and later the *Brainshark* presentations, as he states that, 'some teacher interaction can be transformed into learning objects (videos, animations, assessment programs etc.), thus migrating student-teacher interaction to student-content interaction' (Anderson 2003: 1). Thus, whilst the reality is a student–content interaction, there is an illusion of a teacher–student interaction which may improve the pedagogical experience for the learner. This illusion is in part due to the inclusion of a personal voice and this is the area in which a voice-over presentation video may be more engaging than only text-based content. Participants on the new course have made comments such as:

*I have been listening to your course for the past few weeks, and I feel that I know you.*

Almas

In addition, I feel that this methodology is successful because it allows learners a large degree of autonomy whilst giving them a feeling of tutor support. Participants report watching the videos on multiple occasions and, giving feedback after the course, one noted:

*It is well laid out, user friendly and all teaching is at an easy pace allowing the learner to stop and start whilst taking on new information... Above all I felt in control of my learning.*

Barbara

Given the results and evaluations of the pilot courses, 'Grammar for Language Teachers' was redesigned in a very radical manner. Whilst I had felt that the synchronous class would be effective and motivating, this was not the case and the

new course was therefore delivered only in recorded form. This allows participants to access the material completely at their own pace and convenience and has the added practical advantage of them also being able to start the course whenever they choose. The recorded presentations cover the same syllabus as the original pilots and are embedded in a Moodle page, this platform being chosen because of its adaptability and functionality as well as the ability to easily password-protect the course. In addition to the presentations, there are also quizzes with feedback for each unit built within the Moodle programme to help consolidate learning. These are generally short in order to maintain motivation but there has been good feedback on them and it is likely that I will continue to develop these further with time. Finally, a forum is available for trainees to ask any questions that they have. This is a facility open to all participants and thus answers can come from both the tutor and other learners. The final result is available to view at [www.elt-training.com](http://www.elt-training.com)

### **Relevance**

This use of technology could easily be extended to other situations in a number of ways. As has been noted, teacher training courses are often overburdened with content, some of which may be jettisoned simply for logistical reasons. Whilst covering all possible ground will remain unrealistic, some useful content can be presented using the format of voice-over video presentations delivered online. These would therefore be available at the trainees' convenience to view and review as often as necessary as a discrete course before teacher training begins (as mine is), or used as part of a blended learning experience during teacher training. This allows trainees to set their own pace of working and, for many learners, the illusion of a tutor's presence enables a greater engagement with the material and enhances the student-content interaction.

Many institutions have a learning platform such as Moodle or Blackboard and these are clearly ideal as a setting for this type of course. It would also be possible, however, to make such a resource available on a simple website or blog, embedding videos and accompanying instructions for each unit of the course. MyBrainshark.com is a free tool used to produce publicly available videos and is very user-friendly allowing for presentations to be made with little training. There are also many training videos on the internet which will give helpful suggestions on producing engaging presentations. For many trainers the constraining factor will be the time required to produce the material and it is undeniable that this may represent a difficulty. However, once produced, the videos can be used by successive course participants with little extra tutor time required and they can also be edited to some extent, allowing changes to be made. Whilst tutor time is a factor, there are ramifications of cost reductions in other areas which may provide some compensation for an institution. Presenting input in this way may reduce the physical cost of providing rooms and it also allows participants from a wider geographical context to access material.

This use of technology is not new or unknown in education. The Khan Academy, for example, uses voice-over presentations to teach mathematics and training videos are commonplace in software tutorials. However, the concept of developing training

videos for teacher education as an adjunct to a course and as a method of providing engaging input as an alternative to print-based material is still in its infancy and it will be interesting to watch its progress.

### **Self-development**

The most obvious aspect of my self-development whilst working on this project has arisen from the realisation of the huge potential that the internet has for teacher training and development and the relative ease with which it is possible to gain the skills required to participate in this in a very active and productive manner. Only 18 months ago, this was an area in which I had no knowledge at all and a very low skills base. I had basic computer literacy but no experience of website construction or video presentation production and I considered reaching a useful level in both would require more time than I had at my disposal. Beginning with a blog, done as part of an assessed unit on my MA, I realised that many tools are designed in a very user-friendly way and developing the course and the website that hosts it has given me confidence in my ability to use technology that I would previously have considered well beyond my abilities.

More important than the technical confidence alone, however, has been the synergy created by increased connection to a much larger group of English teachers worldwide who are interested in their professional lives and therefore interesting as professionals. In the best staff rooms, there is support, sharing of good practice and a professional 'buzz' as issues about language teaching and learning are discussed, and this is stimulating and sustaining. Many of us, however, work in situations that are less than perfect in terms of the continuing professional development that is offered and it is easy, particularly as other pressures in our lives mount, to fall into a pattern of teaching which is repetitious and without inspiration. In the past, with courses, conferences and seminars often being prohibitively costly and even opportunities to discuss practice not always possible, teachers may have had few external opportunities to continue their development. In many contexts, this is no longer the case. A computer and a broadband connection give access not only to a wealth of information but also to the possibility of developing links with a range of other language teaching professionals on blogs and forum discussions; activities both profitable in terms of sharing practice and in increasing motivation and professional stimulation.

This project began as a direct result of studying for an MA, with the research forming my dissertation and this undoubtedly helped to motivate what was a major consideration in terms of time and effort. No charge was made for the classes in the developmental stage of the pilots and having redesigned the course on the basis of the results, I was then faced with the decision of whether it would be a commercial enterprise. There is an enormous amount of free training on the net and I feel strongly that the potential for expertise to be shared easily and freely is something that is to be encouraged. However, I also felt that I had to balance this against my own longer-term motivation to provide my time without financial recompense and the reality that people are generally more motivated to complete a course that they have paid for.

The compromise was to charge a fee for the course that I hoped would be generally affordable (and was comparable with the purchase of a course book) and to also provide monthly teacher training webinars on the site that are free and openly available. This has proved to be a good solution and the Grammar for Language Teachers course, the webinars and the communication I have had with other professionals as part of this process have been tremendously powerful in terms of motivation and satisfaction. I truly feel that they have opened a window for me onto a much wider world of teacher training possibilities and this in turn has injected a new sense of excitement and possibility into my professional life.

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This publication brings together from across the world a range of innovative ideas and practices for the pre-service education and training (PRESETT) of teachers of English. The British Council hopes that the volume will stimulate reflection and help to refresh practice in PRESETT, for the benefit of future teachers.

Julian Edge, co-editor of this publication, is an honorary lecturer at the University of Manchester. Involved in TESOL and teacher education since 1969, he has lived and worked in Germany, Egypt, Singapore, Turkey and Australia, as well as in Britain. His main research and publication interests have concerned continuing professional development and the socio-political implications of the spread of English.

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