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I thought it would be just like mainstream: Learning and unlearning in the TESOL practicum

MICHELE DE COURCY
University of South Australia

As researchers and teachers, we have particular beliefs about the world and how it works, and about classrooms and how they work. Borg notes that "beliefs colour memories with their evaluation and judgment, and serve to frame our understanding of events" (Borg, 2001, p. 187). When already qualified teachers, in a TESOL graduate program, undertake their compulsory supervised practice teaching in TESOL settings, they are confronted with just how different their new discipline is. Using former students' reflections on their placements as data, the research project reported in this article aimed to uncover what novice ESL teachers experience during the practicum. What do they have to learn in order to experience success in the ESL classroom? What do they have to unlearn? Some of the reasons for the steep learning curve that the participants noted were that mainstream pedagogy did not just transfer into the ESL context, that visuals were very important, and that they had to learn ways of gauging students' language levels.

Keywords: *teacher beliefs; practicum; reflective practice*

Introduction

The work of a TESOL teacher educator often involves working with teachers who are undertaking further study to add a TESOL specialisation to their teaching qualification. In many cases, in order to do this they need to undertake a supervised teaching placement, working with a mentor teacher. Part of the work undertaken for the University of South Australia on the placement involves keeping a reflective journal. On conclusion of the placement a reflective report based on the journal is submitted for assessment. The participants reflect on common themes about what a person needs to learn (or unlearn) in order to operate

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effectively in a TESOL classroom. The reason for using a reflective task is based on Moon's idea that "we reflect in the process of learning, in order to learn or in order to generate more considerations upon which we reflect more" (Moon 1999, p. 24), and on the contention that reflection on and learning from one's ongoing experience is vital for effective practitioners (Boud, 2001, p.11).

As part of the task, these journals and reflections reveal commonalities and differences in the experiences of the participants. One thing they have in common is that the experience is a very deep, emotional, often confronting one. Most of these graduate students have been teachers for many years, experts in their own disciplines, and to go back into the position of being under observation, and having to take advice from an often younger mentor teacher is not easy. Much of the research into learning on practicum involves pre-service teachers, which makes the area of research described in this article different and potentially able to reveal new insights into teacher education.

Background literature

Freeman and Richards (1996, p. 2) note that we operate in "a landscape of uncritical assumptions and myths about language teaching and language teachers" and that "in order to better understand language teaching, we need to know more about language teachers: what they do, how they think, what they know, and how they learn". An earlier observation on this topic was made by Cumming (1989) who found that:

> …the kinds of practical knowledge which teachers use in teaching, appear to exist largely in very personalised terms, based on unique experiences, individual conceptions, and their interactions with local contexts. It tends to have a personal significance for the teacher, which differs from prescribed models of educational theory (pp. 46-47).

Several studies have been conducted into language teachers' beliefs and practices. Examples are the studies contained in Freeman and Richards' (1996) edited volume, Burns' (1992) study into teacher beliefs and their influence on classroom practice in beginner ESL writing classes, and Breen's (1991) chapter on understanding the language teacher. Lortie (1975) contributed to the literature a much-quoted phrase – the "apprenticeship of observation"; the idea that the most powerful influence on shaping

language teachers' practices is the way they were taught. Both Freeman and Richards (1996) and Gough (1989) use the metaphor of stories to refer to teachers' knowledge. Gough compares teachers' pedagogical beliefs to "stories that embed individual experiences in a larger framework of shared values, meanings and purposes and that persist in a culture over relatively long periods of time" (p. 226). Grumet (1987, p. 322) notes that "our stories are the masks through which we can be seen, and with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of our thoughts so someone can get a glimpse of us".

As researchers and teachers, we have particular beliefs about the world and how it works, and about classrooms and how they work. Borg (2001), in her summary of key understandings relating to teacher beliefs, notes that "a belief is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (p. 186). She goes on to say that memories are coloured by the evaluation and judgment of our beliefs, and that our understanding of events is framed by them, too. Burns notes that "decisions made about classroom materials, methodology and resources will inevitably rest on implicit theories about the nature of language and learning" (1992, p. 57).

As noted above, many of the teachers undertaking graduate programs in TESOL have been teachers for many years, and are engaged in further study in order to open up the opportunity to teach English language learners. Many of these graduate students are teachers of English as a subject in secondary schools and may assume that teaching English to English language learners will be just a little different from teaching students who already know the language well. Others have been teaching across the curriculum in primary schools, or have been specialist teachers of other curriculum areas in secondary schools. As noted in an earlier study into language teacher beliefs, teachers preparing for a TESOL qualification often have little experience of language learning themselves, and being monolingual in English is the norm (de Courcy, 2005).

The attitude of students perceived by staff teaching the methodology class in the first few weeks is: How different can it be? It's still teaching English, isn't it? However, when these students undertake their compulsory supervised practice teaching in TESOL settings, they are confronted with just how different their

new discipline is. We see here confirmation of Dewey's belief that "direct experience was the key to learning" (cited in Smith, 2001, p. 222). Smith also argues that "new paradigms cannot be created by information alone. Teachers need to experience socially-constructed learning directly" (p. 222). Smith suggests that "the ideal direct experience for TESOL Master's students and teachers in training would seem to be the practicum" (2001, p. 223).

Pennycook (2004) explores the practicum using narrative and embedded story. He debates what it means to be critical, and, in particular, what is critical about the student's experiences during the practicum. He uses the term 'critical' to mean "a critical moment, a point of significance, an instant when things change" and encourages student teachers and their university visitors to look for "those critical moments when we seize the chance to do something different, when we realize that some new understanding is coming about" (Pennycook, 2004, p. 331). He explores ways in which the visiting lecturer can engage student teachers in acknowledging, through critical reflection on their practice, how their personal histories, and the complex social and political environments in which they teach, influence their embodiment as teacher.

The research study

The research reported in this article aimed to uncover novice ESL teachers' experiences and reflections during the practicum; the learning and unlearning required in order to achieve success in the ESL classroom. The study was small scale, intended as a pilot for a larger study. It used former students' own words as data and a process based on content analysis as the research tool. Students on placement were required to submit a short reflective overview of the placement upon completion. These reflections provided data on key TESOL pedagogic principles discovered while teaching. The participants were asked to describe their teaching: the sorts of classes, levels, competencies and stages they worked with; and, most importantly, what successes or failures they had experienced. They were also asked to discuss what had changed in their learning, ideas or attitudes. In particular, they were asked what they had learnt about differences between ESL methodology and their previous teaching methodology.

Former students were contacted by mail, provided with information about the project and a stamped addressed envelope, and asked to submit their anonymous reflections on their placements. Alternatively, participants could return their reflection

electronically, with a signed consent form returned either via email, fax or post. It was considered that ethically it was important that students be former, not current, students, so that they would not feel that opting in or out of the study would affect their results on the course. For the pilot, reflective journals from five participants formed the data set. It is acknowledged that this is an initial analysis of a small data set, and that therefore no generalisations can be made from the findings, but it is hoped that the findings will be of use to teachers about to undertake a practicum, and to their mentors.

The first stage of data analysis was a content analysis using the guidelines for the reflections as the framework to search for themes. In particular, a search was made for what appeared to be critical incidents for the participants. A critical incident is described by Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver and Thwaite (2001, p. 480) as "an important incident or occurrence in their teaching experience that could be related more broadly to their teaching or to student learning".

The five participants, allocated the pseudonyms May, Taylah, Brooke, Victoria, Dana and Colleen, were teachers of subject English in secondary schools, with the exception of Colleen, who was a mainstream primary school teacher. May's placement involved teaching young adults in ELICOS. Taylah was assigned to Year 11 and 12 ESL classes in a high school for international students. Brooke was placed with an ESL class in a multicultural high school. Victoria and Dana worked with adult ESL classes in a TAFE college. Colleen was placed in a New Arrivals Program class in a language primary school.

Findings

Two main themes were identified in the data set, each of which was further broken down into sub-themes. The first, 'focusing on self as teacher', included the following sub-themes:

- It's not like mainstream
- Problems with timing
- Learning/adapting teaching style

The second main theme involved 'focusing on the learners', and included the following sub-themes:

- The importance of using visuals

- Differentiation (working out the levels)
- Clear and short instructions
- Time to think/ silence/ wait time
- Group work and first language assistance OK (peer-peer or aide)

These sub-themes are explored in more detail below, using illustrative quotes from the participants' reflections or diaries.

It's not like mainstream

The participants had initially believed that an ESL classroom would not be so different from a mainstream classroom. As Colleen commented: "I thought that these mainstream teaching strategies would be easily transferred in an E.S.L. setting". However, their experience showed them that it was very different, even when the classroom was located in a school that also catered for mainstream students. The term 'mainstream' is used here to mean classes conducted in English, classes where, generally, 75% or more of the students are L1 speakers of English, and where the teacher can assume that the students understand the language at a functional level. In TESOL, this cannot be assumed; teachers have to make sure that their students understand. Brooke noted:

> It is clear that I did overestimate the language ability level of the year eights which I think is partially because of my experience teaching mainstream English to students of the same level. Since I have no experience with non-native speakers as students, I expected their ability to perform writing and language tasks to [sic] high.

Problems with timing

An issue, often mentioned in the lesson plans and journal entries, was the amount of material that can be covered in an ESL lesson compared with a mainstream lesson. Participants found that activities take longer in an ESL context than a mainstream context. Even packing up at the end of the lesson could take 15-20 minutes, rather than the five minutes the participant may have planned, because of the need to ensure that instructions were clear. This was initially a source of frustration and confusion, but participants gradually came to learn how to pace themselves differently to be in step with their learners. Below is an example of a comment on this theme from Victoria:

> I feel that there is a lot of material to cover in a short time and that my lessons need 'tightening up' in terms of timing... For example, I felt that I rushed Ss through a challenging reading text today in order to meet the lesson/course objectives when I would normally be more relaxed about encouraging Ss to work at their own pace.

Learning/adapting teaching style

The participants sometimes found a disjuncture between their preferred teaching style and that of their mentor teacher, the learning styles of their learners, and even the teaching approach taken in a set textbook. Victoria, commenting on her mentor teacher, stated: "I find that in practice, our approaches vary in degrees". On the other hand, sometimes they found their two approaches in harmony, which "reaffirmed" their philosophy that "learning can be fun and should always reflect Ss interests" (May).

The importance of using visuals

Something that was commented on in most of the journal notes and reflections is that visual supports, e.g. pictures, objects, drawing and writing on the board, are much more important in ESL than in the subjects the participants were used to teaching in their usual setting. It generally took some time for participants to realise their importance and include them naturally in their teaching. As one participant commented: "Today marks the seventh day of the teaching placement. Finally I understand the correct usage of visual cues for E.S.L. students" (Colleen).

Differentiation (working out the levels)

Different ESL settings have different proficiency scales for the measurement and reporting of student progress. It is difficult in the time allowed in a pre-service course to cover all the possible scales an ESL teacher might be required to use. Participants were generally unused to the terms used in the scales, or how to use them, and took some time to learn their use. They initially also found it hard to work out what level the students were, and often overestimated ESL students' productive ability based on their apparent receptive ability. A number of participants commented on the issue, and Colleen's diary is quoted here: "It is extremely difficult to ascertain the students' levels of language ability and their individual learning needs… Many of the assessment tools used at the language school are new to me".

Clear and short instructions

Giving instructions was also a challenge for the participants. Reiss (2005) states that what is needed is to give an instruction clearly, once, with visual support, and then, if repetition is necessary, repeat the instruction the same way. Brooke and May recognised this as a problematic issue: "I designed the test with two writing tasks (a formal and informal task) with what I considered to be very clear instructions, but the students didn't know what to do" (Brooke); "I tend to speak too much at times, and to repeat instructions more often than necessary… Need to speak loudly and clearly" (May).

Time to think/silence/wait time

The participants sometimes found the concept of allowing sufficient time for answers or responses confronting, and had to adapt to the notion that teachers need to wait longer for an answer or a response from ESL learners than they are used to with L1 speakers. Comments from the teachers included: "I need to learn to give the students 'thinking time'… Need to wait longer for answers" (May); "Need to be comfortable with silence... [teachers need to] not think that they have to fill silence with their own voice" (Taylah).

Group work and first language assistance OK (peer-peer or aide)

For many years, group work has been encouraged in ESL classrooms as a way of enabling more time on talk for the learners. Many of the participants indicated their discomfort with this idea because of a perceived 'risk' that the learners would use their first language in the group work, which would interfere with the students' ability to acquire English. After practice, they became more comfortable with group work, and also learnt how to set up the groups for maximum interaction. As Taylah stated: "I need to be careful about who works with whom - strong/weak student mix… I had to learn a comfort level about L1".

Discussion and Conclusions

De Jong and Harper (2004) discuss the impression, common among teachers undertaking professional learning, that ESL teaching is "just good teaching". They note that although there are some shared elements, such as the use of visuals, activation of background knowledge, and the use of group work, that ESL pedagogy is distinctive in a number of ways. This understanding that ESL teaching is more than "just good teaching" came through in the experiences of the participants in this study.

One of the findings, the importance of silence in the ESL classroom, echoes the results of an earlier study into teacher beliefs (de Courcy, 2005). In that study a group of teachers learning another language reflected on that learning experience. In that earlier study, one participant commented on the need for language teachers to be aware of learners' need for silence:

> I review my early lessons with my Japanese student with some dismay – I know that I always filled silences with talk – and he must have felt a continual bombardment of words. My experience as a learner should improve this aspect of my teaching. (de Courcy, 2005, p. 9)

The understandings about TESOL practice that these participants have acquired also resonate with those of the experienced ESL teachers who were involved in Breen et al's 2001 study of teachers' principles and practices. Experienced teachers practised accompanying oral input with visual support, pairing stronger students with weaker ones, or using humour to establish rapport.

Another key finding is the importance of teachers, on placement, reading through their journals, in order to come up with a synthesis of their experience, as recommended by Bailey (cited in Gebhard, 2009). Their identities as teachers can be constructed and reconstructed through this reflexive reading (Gebhard, 2009, p. 253). This is a type of 'praxis' or "continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action" (Simon, cited in Pennycook, 2004, p.334). It can also be seen that teaching placement is, as Pennycook describes, "a time for teacher-learners to try to reconcile three competing domains: the knowledge and ideas gained through their formal study; the history, beliefs, and embodied practices they bring with them; and the constraints and possibilities presented by the particular teaching context" (Pennycook, 2004, p. 334), a kind of *praxicum* or integration of critical praxis with the practicum. "This might help us think not so much in terms of the practicum, in which learner-teachers get to practice what they have learned in their theory courses, but rather in terms of the praxicum, in which teacher-learners develop the continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire, and action" (Pennycook, 2004, p. 335). Conversations with the participants during and after their practicum indicate that they really value the practice of reflection developed during the course, and continue to include it in their regular teaching practice.

Many of the experiences described by the participants in this study are similar to those shared by student teachers as reported in previous studies. What is particular to this study was that the participants undertaking the practicum were not pre-service teachers, but were experienced teachers. In spite of this, they encountered the same kinds of issues faced by new teachers. As their reflections indicate, the TESOL practicum introduced them to a very different world to that which they had previously experienced; one which led them to re-examine their classroom practices.

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Michèle de Courcy is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL in the School of Education at the University of South Australia. She has been an active member of ACTA and relevant state associations. Since entering full-time university teaching in 1993, she has published numerous books, chapters and articles on second language acquisition, in particular, in the area of immersion education. Michèle's current interests are in bilingual education and language acquisition and in the education or formation of second language educators.

Correspondence: Michele.decourcy@unisa.edu.au
