

Introduction

The Practice Turn: Redefining Teacher Education in the UAE

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It is recognised that the concept of action research has different meanings and connotations in different educational contexts. In the context from which we write, the Higher Colleges of Technology's Bachelor of Education in English Language Teaching in Schools (B. Ed ELTS) in the United Arab Emirates, action research denotes small-scale, classroom-based, reflective research by novice practitioners into issues of methodology in their own teaching of English in schools. As such, it represents an important strand in the preparation of a new generation of national teachers who are committed to bringing about change in the way in which language learning and teaching is conducted in Emirati schools.

As a progressive and outward-looking young state where Arabic is the first and the only officially recognised language, but where the role of English is becoming increasingly prominent, there is growing realisation in the United Arab Emirates of the need to enhance the teaching and learning of English in state schools. The effectiveness of English language teaching in schools has been extensively criticised by internal and external voices in recent years: see, for example, Loughrey, Hughes, Bax, Magness, and Aziz (1999); Guefrachi and Troudi (2000); Mograby (2000); Clough and Nutbrown (2001); Saunders and Quirke (2002), and Syed (2003). The B.Ed programme represents the Higher Colleges of Technology's contribution to the revitalisation, from the bottom up, of the teaching and learning of English in state schools through an applied approach to pre-service teacher education,.

The result of a contemporary global collaboration at tertiary level between two educational institutions: one, the Higher Colleges of Technology established for some twenty years in the United Arab Emirates, and the other, the long-established University of Melbourne in Australia, the B.Ed ELTS programme is informed by contemporary paradigms in second language and general teacher education, and in young learner education, and is influenced by neo-Vygotskian sociocultural theory of learning and teaching. Sociocultural theory proposes that learning is essentially social and cultural in nature, and not an individual and solitary phenomenon (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf, 2005; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). Influenced by the work of the Russian educationalist, Lev Vygotsky, it is concerned with the ways in which human action is linked to the cultural, institutional, and historical setting in which it occurs. As Vygotsky has written, "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and

later, on the individual level ... All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). A related term, social constructivism, is used by authors such as Wells (1999; 2001) to refer more specifically to the social nature of cognitive development.

Language teaching for the student teachers of this programme thus reflects a sociocultural and socioconstructivist approach. This approach is one that supports dialogue, and encourages an introspective stance that allows student teachers to reflect upon their teaching, analyze and evaluate their performance in the classroom, and come up with strategic solutions to improve their practice. Using this approach, student teachers learn to assess the relationships they have with their young learners, identify their needs, and create a learner centered environment. As Roberts (1998) states, "A social constructivist approach ... creates an interpersonal climate which promotes learning" (p. 45). These teachers in training learn to create a community atmosphere in their classrooms, where they gain the trust of their students, and allow them to be active participants in the teaching and learning processes, and most importantly, intervene on behalf of their success as language learners.

English for Young Learners

Responding to the needs of the school sector, the Higher Colleges of Technology's B.Ed programme was established at a time of a new emphasis globally on the teaching of English to young learners, and during a period when its introduction into state school curricula was happening at a younger and younger age worldwide. In his overview of the teaching of English in the wider Asia Pacific region, for example, and with particular reference to state schools in comparable locations such as China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam, Nunan (2003) has shown that the age at which English becomes a compulsory subject in state schools has shifted downwards in recent years, a shift that is the result of the perceived economic importance in a globalised world of the English language. In the United Arab Emirates, English language instruction in state starts from the first year of formal primary schooling in Grade One, and indeed these papers are written on the cusp of a likely future trend towards bilingual instruction in the Emirati kindergarten and primary schools of the future.

Teacher Education

In local as well as in regional terms, the establishment of the Higher Colleges of Technology's B.Ed programme marked a new departure in undergraduate language teacher education, most notably in its emphasis on the centrality for teacher education of school-based experience, and on the concomitant mentoring of student teachers in the school setting. Richards and Pennington's (1996) call for greater cohesion between teacher education programmes and schools, and for a more phased induction into teaching, has been realised in this programme through the early and prolonged engagement of students in schools over the course of eight teaching practicum sessions during their four years of undergraduate studies.

Teaching Practice placements begin right from the very first semester, and continue to increase in duration and in intensity throughout the four years, so that by the time they graduate, student teachers will have spent more than thirty weeks in a variety of

schools. This in effect means that one quarter of total undergraduate learning time is spent in schools, a substantial component by any international measure of undergraduate language teacher education. It is the feature that immediately brings the programme and its student teachers into contact with the situated reality of English language teaching in schools, and it is the feature that grants student teachers sufficient teaching time in the classroom to engage in action research.

During their teaching practice placements, students are engaged in what has become known as “the practice turn” (Ford and Forman 2006, p.1). This practice turn advocates for change, and implies the need for reform of the current teaching practices of teaching English in the schools in the UAE. Student teachers are urged to employ learner centered approaches, along with innovative alternatives to the traditional style of teaching. Pre-service teachers in this programme learn to master seven competencies as they learn to hone their pedagogical skills. These competencies encompass a series of standards which these trainee professionals are required to include in their daily practices. The competencies range from acquiring knowledge and understanding of the teaching profession, planning for learning, developing teaching strategies, and using effective classroom management skills, to monitoring and assessing students to develop effective communication skills, and to learning to critically reflect on their practice. In partnership with schools, students are encouraged to take active roles in the classroom from the first year they enter the B.Ed program.

By allowing student teachers these early experiences, they are encouraged to make links between the theories of teaching they acquire in their studies and the daily realities of the teaching profession. In creating these links between theory and practice, student teachers begin to take an inquiry stance where they are encouraged to critically reflect on and transform the current practices of teaching English in the schools where they do their teaching practice. Dana and Yendol-Silva (2003) state that “This stance becomes a professional positioning, owned by the teacher, where questioning one’s own practice becomes part of the teacher’s work, and eventually part of the teaching culture” (p.9). Developing a critical eye towards one’s own teaching is paramount, and this attitude of critical reflection is best achieved through action research.

The Action Research Project

In their final year of undergraduate study, fourth year students conduct a culminating action research project during the ten week long final semester’s teaching internship. As described in internal programme documentation, students are given the opportunity to investigate a relevant issue in the framework of authentic action research, to implement their research design and data collection tools, and to present their findings in a Research Project. In essence, this small-scale, classroom-based, research project involves the self-study by the student teachers of their own teaching situation with a view to changing it, to making it better.

As the major final assessed activity of the programme, the action research project connects the entire degree firmly to classroom teaching. As such, action research is linked strongly to self-selected professional development, to reflective practice, to the contextualisation of teacher knowledge, and - crucially - to change agency, because action research carries an inherent commitment to change, and change in the practice of teaching was something in which the programme designers attempted to engage its student teachers. It is now becoming commonplace for post-graduate level English

language teacher education programmes to require some type of classroom-based teacher research, and action research has in recent years become a component of many inservice language teacher education programmes. However, it is less common for this to be a requirement at undergraduate level, and the HCT's B.Ed programme is regionally innovative in this regard also.

Action research is characterised as different from other types of educational research in that it implies a commitment to change (e.g. Elliott,1991; Bryant, 1996; Meyers and Rust, 2003), and at a time of accelerated change in education in the United Arab Emirates, it has an important role to play in the evolution of schools and schooling. In Wallace's terms, action research belongs to the practitioner rather than to an outside researcher; it is directed towards the improvement of practice; and it usually has a specific and local application (Wallace, 1996, p. 292). This final year project is therefore best viewed as the engagement of pre-service teachers in reflective practice, rather than as an engagement in research per se. It is acknowledged that the term action research is in itself somewhat paradoxical, because 'research' suggests scientific detachment, while 'action' suggests involvement and immediacy (Wallace, 2007). In line with Wallace, the papers in this volume incline towards the privileging of action in the teaching process over research as an academic product.

These action research projects are reflective in nature. Student teachers are encouraged to reflect on their teaching, to think about what is happening in the classroom, and to come up with possible alternatives to solve any problems they might encounter as they teach. Students must therefore be able to interrogate current standards of teaching and learning English, and to adopt a level of criticality where they attempt to redefine and transform their own teaching and classroom realities.

This inquiry stance requires the formulation of questions for which answers must be sought. Thus the action research process involves a series of actions and processes which are cyclical and reflective. Throughout their research projects, student teachers are engaged in a continuous action-reflection-cycle where they identify an area of focus, collect data, analyze and interpret the data, develop an action plan, and recommence the process over again (Mills, 2003, p.19). These pre-service teachers are encouraged to be reflective practitioners, genuinely engaged in seeking ways to improve their practice.

Themes

The objective of this volume is to bring forth the lived classroom experience of teachers in training as they conduct small scale, classroom based action research during their teaching internship in the schools of this country. These papers provide a broad range of perspectives into the current pedagogical directions of English language teaching in the UAE, and are intended to engage the reader in questions of the shaping and reshaping of language teaching and learning. The young authors of these papers have posed questions, looked for solutions, and engaged in dialogue based on practical and theoretical applications in order to improve the future direction of English language teaching and learning. Each paper presents a specific and critical perspective in exploring problems and issues in language teaching methodology raised by these novice researchers. The authors of this volume challenge the status quo of teaching English in this country, and provide new insights and approaches into contemporary pedagogical imperatives.

Bell (2004) defines classroom based research conducted by teachers as action research, and she claims that this type of research is accessible to practicing teacher. As she states, “The essentially, practical, problem-solving nature of action research makes this approach attractive to practitioner-researchers who have identified a problem during the course of their work and see the merit of investigating it and, if possible of improving practice” (p. 9). These authors pose questions of who is learning what, how they are taught, and what needs to be improved in terms of the teaching of English in the UAE.

These concepts are based on Dewey’s (1902) notions of continuously challenging and re-examining current educational practices, and engaging in discussion about how to improve these practices. The collection of research papers in this volume present rich and detailed information of how these novice researchers have attempted to identify and select a problem, seek solutions by trying a set of action intervention approaches, and propose a set of alternative to solve these problems. They were able to lay the foundation for change through inquiry, and come up with a transformative agenda which advocates for change by proposing a set of new teaching and learning paradigms aimed at reforming the teaching and learning of the English language in this country.

The papers in this volume all focus on aspects of language teaching methodology. What unites them is a shared concern by these young teacher-researchers to breathe fresh air into the teaching of English in schools. There is a common desire to move away from a teacher-centred approach, towards more learner-centred approaches. There is a shared refrain throughout these papers that recognises the need to develop a more interactive approach to language learning, through the structured use of pair and group interaction. There is a concerted effort to bring a sense of purposeful and youthful playfulness into the classroom, whether this is through the use of language games, or songs, or a variety of kinaesthetic activities. The desire of these teachers of the future to move away from the limiting focus on one-page-a-day in the textbook, and to move towards the use of a variety of resources, is evident throughout. There is also common concern to move away from viewing learners as passive recipients of teachers’ grades, towards seeing learners as active participants in their own learning. Furthermore, there is evidence of an effort to move from solely summative approaches in the assessment of learning, to more continuous and formative approaches.

Language Matters

All the student authors of this volume are non-native speakers of English, and as such, they are second language learners. Medgyes (1994) reminds us that non-native speakers of English are still acquiring the language (p. 12). These student authors have faced a number of linguistic challenges in meeting the requirements of the task. First, they had to acquire a conceptual understanding of inquiry based action research, and this also meant that they had to learn how to empower themselves to problematize current practices in the teaching of English in schools.

In addition to these challenges, these novice researchers faced enormous linguistic challenges; for instance, they had to access sophisticated linguistic concepts related to research terminology. They had to learn and develop an academic writing style. In doing so, they had to learn to adopt rhetorical patterns which were initially foreign to them. The challenges they faced are endemic for all non-native speakers trying to write an academic piece. The program seeks to scaffold their learning in this regard by

providing them with models of writing and of research, the type of support which Ulla Connors (1999) recalls as a watershed in her own academic development. In addition, these students had to continuously revise their papers, conference with their mentors, and submit several drafts for feedback and revision.

These papers represent their authors' first experience in undertaking a major piece of academic work. The young teacher authors represented in this publication are acquiring proficiency in English, have wider training in child development, and are able to motivate young children, essential qualities for teachers in countries aspiring towards enhanced English at school level (Graddol, 2006). Although they continue to be learners of English themselves, the student teachers are quite confident in their 'ownership' (Widdowson, 1994) of the language. Indeed, the inexorable spread of global English is leading to a breakdown in the old distinction between 'native speaker', 'second language speaker' and 'foreign language user' (Graddol, 2006). With this in mind, readability has been the primary consideration in our editing of the eleven chapters in this compilation.

The papers were originally some six thousand words in length, excluding supporting materials in the forms of appendices, visuals, and raw data which we have not included. Literature reviews have been substantially foreshortened. Given the understanding here of action research as essentially synonymous with reflective practice, we have removed sections on reliability and generalisability, which students were required to include in their original papers as evidence of their learning about these fundamental research considerations.

Audience

Who is this book intended for? It will be of interest to student teachers of English language – or indeed, to student teachers of any subject – who are required to conduct classroom-based action research. The book will also be useful for teacher educators who are guiding student teachers through the process of conducting and writing action research projects. The audience includes teachers of English language in schools who may be interested in trying out some of the teaching strategies described here. It also includes practising teachers of English as a foreign or second language to young learners who may be interested in conducting some action research themselves in their own classrooms.

The book will also be of interest to those who are engaged in research into learning and teaching in schools in the Gulf region, to those who are responsible for educational policy and planning in the region, and to those who lead and manage learning organisations in the region. This publication brings to the fore the potential of the new generation of Emirati teachers and reveals the promise that they hold - while yet at undergraduate level - to be important players in a future age of professionalisation (Hargreaves, 2000) of school teaching in the United Arab Emirates.

Conclusion

Through their response to the task of conducting and writing up their action research, the student teachers have experienced a transformative understanding of what it means to take an inquiry stance, and to advocate for change. They themselves have

personally experienced change; they have created an interactive environment for their students; and they have integrated theories into their teaching as they went through a reflective process where their actions and intervention aimed to improve their practice. These novice teachers are budding professionals in the field, as they are already making contributions to the teaching profession, and they are well on their way to become highly qualified teachers. They understand the concept of life-long learning, are aware that they must always look for opportunities to improve themselves in order to meet the needs of their students, and to rise to the demands of teaching English with a progressive agenda. These are the young professionals who will help transform the teaching English in schools in the UAE.

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