



An Honest Start: Reassessing the Role of Theory in EFL Teacher Education*

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This essay revisits the long acknowledged but still unresolved theory/practice schism in EFL teacher education. The methodology used included the research of literature related to the subject, a comparison and contrast of representative examples of its current manifestations, and an examination of its effects on a selected group of undergraduate students. Results showed a need for measures to be taken that would establish a more solid link between teacher education programs and teacher needs. It ends by suggesting alternative approaches that could begin to return basic and pragmatic content to teacher education and professional development programs.

Keywords: EFL teacher education, theory/practice gap.

Este ensayo vuelve a un tema que aunque ampliamente reconocido, no se ha resuelto: el de la falta de articulación entre teoría y práctica en la educación de docentes de lenguas extranjeras. La metodología empleada incluye investigación de bibliografía relacionada con el tema, comparación y contraste de ejemplos representativos y sus manifestaciones actuales, y un examen de sus efectos en un grupo seleccionado de estudiantes de pregrado. Los resultados demuestran una necesidad de adoptar medidas que sirvan para establecer un vínculo más seguro entre los programas de educación docente y las necesidades de los docentes. Este ensayo termina proponiendo acercamientos alternativos que bien pudiesen ayudar a reintroducir contenidos básicos y pragmáticos a los programas de educación de docentes y de desarrollo profesional.

Palabras clave: educación de maestros de inglés como lengua extranjera, laguna teórico/práctica.

Cet essai retourne à un sujet qui bien que largement reconnu, il n'a pas été encore résolu; le manque d'articulation entre théorie et pratique dans la éducation de d'enseignants de langues étrangères. La méthodologie employée inclut une recherche de bibliographie en rapport avec le sujet, la comparaison et le contraste d'exemples représentatifs et ses manifestations actuelles, et un examen de ses effets dans un groupe choisi d'étudiants de «licence». Les résultats montrent le besoin d'adopter des mesures utiles pour établir un lien plus sûr entre les programmes de éducation d'enseignants et les nécessités des profes-

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seurs. Cet essai propose des rapprochements alternatifs lesquels pourraient bien aider à réintroduire des contenus élémentaires et pragmatiques aux programmes de éducation de d'enseignants et de développement professionnel.

Mots-clés: entraînement d'enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère, lagune théorique/pratique.

1. INTRODUCTION

As professional academics responsible for preparing undergraduate students to be teachers and fostering professional growth in those who are already teaching we have succumbed to an over reliance on a plurality of abstract concepts to help us fulfill these roles. By abstract concepts I mean the theories, methodological approaches, ethical, hermeneutic, and epistemological concerns that have made their way to our field from linguistics, philosophy, and comparative literature departments. The increased presence of these in teacher education classes and in-service seminars has come at the cost of displacing more concrete and useful material.¹

I am proposing here that we reassess the increasing role given to this plurality of abstracts at the undergraduate level so as to limit their presence and thereby allow for more practical material to replace it. The call here is for theory to play a more limited role in the education of undergraduate students who are to become teachers.

2. CONTEXT

The divide between research and teaching, two areas that are ostensibly dependent upon one another, where sound research is supposed to lead to effective teaching, and effective teachers, is a matter that has teemed beneath much scholarship for decades. Richards presciently observed that the professionalization of TESOL brought with it an expansion of theoretical concepts and research issues that at that time (and today, I would argue)

¹ Undoubtedly that some of what is displaced by new theory is the old theory which it refutes and which, in too many instances its sole raison d'être.

constitute much of the field but that few of those engaged in this knowledge base “would claim any direct relations between the work and their preparation of language teachers” (1987: 212). Nearly thirty years later, the disconnection persists and has become more difficult to identify because it is often ignored. One of the root causes for the disconnection, according to Vick (2006), is the ambiguity of teacher education programs in general which are asked to satisfy two sets of requirements, that of the schools that expect their existing vacancies to be filled by candidates that will assimilate, adapt, and become a part of the school with little support, and that of the college staff who have a long term view of how their students should change or improve the field of education.

This divide has also generated criticisms about a lack of coherence between theory and practice and of an overemphasis placed on abstract, inaccessible material that lacks sufficient emphasis on preparing practitioners for possible real life situations (Vick, 2006). Clarke (1994) focuses on two populations that participate in this dynamic, Academic/ Researchers teachers, which I will refer to here as TAs and non academic teachers, or TTs.

Granting that there are those who occupy both the first (TA) and second (TT) groups simultaneously, there are a great many who do not and the reasons why they don't are indicative of the forces that have created the divide between research and teaching. A comprehensive representation of this argument can be found in Bauer (2003), Clarke (1994), Levine (2001), and Richards (1987).

Like the institutions that employ them, TAs and TTs have different motivations. TTs are paid to transfer knowledge and skills that, in all likelihood, will be measured by their employers, be that the school, district, or government. TAs are ostensibly paid to teach but the reality, as Bauer points out, is that in academia because “traditional scholarship is valued while writing about [...] pedagogy and the classroom is not” (2003: 428) they are actually paid to produce theories. Levin asserts this point when he writes that one becomes a star in academia, a nationally or internationally recognized scholar whose publications are the subject of seminars and conferences, not by being an outstanding teacher, but by “working the sexiest areas of cultural

or literary studies, and in the flashiest ways” (2001: 10). This because “it is possible to win the best teacher award [but] faculty who win such awards sometimes lose out at tenure time” (p. 11). Those in the third category, our undergraduate students, are motivated by, or “paid” in the form of grades, grades assigned by TAs.

Here then lie several possible conflicts of interest. First, if TTs share very different immediate goals from TAs the relationship between the University and the school, one meant to improve the latter, begins on loose footing. Second, if the students who we prepare to be teachers are rewarded by grades that we assign, grades that measure our priorities, macro, theoretical, discipline changing and not necessarily those of the schools where they will seek employment upon graduating, that relationship also seems strained from the start. These three groups are motivated then by different priorities, TTs by mandated standardized evaluations, undergraduates by the grades that we assign and which are a mimetic of our own priorities, the aforementioned abstract pluralities.

These pluralities are a common commodity in the academic market and have been often expected to do too much and to be too many things. To identify the cause of why abstract pluralities are so abundant in the social sciences (humanities, etc.) it is helpful to place these disciplines alongside the material sciences and medicine, where theories play a different and more concrete role. In the latter, a theory, an idea that explains why something is, or argues how something can be done faster or cheaper can be proved or disproved empirically in the field in which it is said to function. Theories can therefore be efficiently dispatched if disproved, or, if confirmed promoted to the books of general and accepted knowledge, that is, to acts.

This is of course, not the case in the social sciences and humanities, and not the case in the area of education. These fields work with people and not with parts of people or things so that despite the physiological similarities between individuals each whole individual is cognitively and behaviorally different from every other one and by extension so is every classroom and

every school.² As a result of this, methodological approach Z, which was shown to be effective by researcher Johnson in Valley High School cannot be dispatched to the dustbin even if it has been proven ineffective in many other similar settings.

The result is that we are left with a purgatory of sorts, a vast pool of possible approaches, theories, and methodologies. In this pool, alternatives that float to the top may or may not do so because of their usefulness to TTs and their students. The pool gets murkier when, out of habit or negligence, we present the teaching virtues of our adopted methodology or theory (to colleagues and students) as inherent to them and not as products of their implementation. This perpetuates our reliance on a discourse of theories as discoveries of the world as it is, universal, valid, reliable, and applicable and not as the products of cultured minds (Thomas & James, 2006). That is, it continues our appropriation of a scientific—as in the material sciences—discourse that is only marginally applicable to our disciplines.

Swimming and sifting through this pool of possibilities, the contents of which we also call advanced studies, is part of our jobs as TAs. Advanced in this case does not necessarily mean better but simply that the alternatives that we work with and debate over, though related to the basic knowledge and skills in the discipline are separate from them by virtue of their mutability, novelty, and their proven usefulness. So why do we spend an increasing amount of time teaching undergraduates advanced studies and not more basic/practical knowledge? There are various reasons: a) We assume that our students will already know to some degree, the basic knowledge that all teachers should have; b) We assume that if they don't, they will learn it in other classes or on their own; c) We allow the insistent and omniscient presence of our own academic concerns to cast a shade on them; d) a spinoff of c., is that we see a world where knowing about theory is indispensable—frequently, our own academic world—and we want our students to be prepared for it.

2 This problem of replicability can be seen in the Harlem Children's zone; an education and wellness initiative headed by Geoffrey Canada. The program covers 10,000 children in a 97 block zone in upper Manhattan, enjoys generous funding from Wall Street and the federal government and yet has been unable to show that its methods and practices can, and should be replicated in other parts of the country. (Whitehurst & Croft, 2010).

3. IMPLICATIONS

Ideological debates, epistemological quandaries, and theoretical controversies are so much raw meat to undergraduates. When undergraduates, who have not developed the ability to discriminate, digest, and evaluate these products are served and excess of them we frustrate our goals and their expectations. When these pluralities are presented in a space, and by a teacher that has been advertised as one that will provide the basic skills needed for foreign language teaching, undergraduates are prone to accept ongoing theoretical debates as the tools that will help them to effectively manage a classroom of high school students. In this scenario the purpose of the class and of the teacher are blurred by the sheer force of our professional academic agenda.

This phenomenon can be seen most clearly in the introduction of critical and cultural approaches to the teaching of composition. Fulkerson shows how the introduction of Critical Pedagogy into the composition classroom can derail the purpose of a composition class; to teach students how to produce clear and effective writing. One of the instructors cited by Fulkerson, Ann George, sees her role as a practitioner of Critical Pedagogy as one that requires her to “engage her students in the analysis of unequal power relations [and to help them to] develop the tools to challenge this inequality” (Fulkerson, 2005: 660). Fulkerson furthers his case by citing James Berlin, a renowned proponent of the critical/cultural approach. Berlin defines the purpose of his composition courses to be to “encourage students to resist and negotiate [...] hegemonic discourses – in order to bring about more personally humane and socially equitable economic and political arrangements” (p. 660).

Whatever one’s opinion might be with respect to these interpretations of what Critical Pedagogy should do, it is clear that what these instructors attempt to do in a composition class goes far beyond the scope of what most of us understand a composition course to be about, or for. This example then leads one to question both the wisdom of not just bringing this approach to the undergraduate classroom but of enacting a very narrow interpretation of its principles without clear statistical data to support that it is in fact

an approach that has been proven to teach students how to express themselves clearly and effectively through writing. In the classrooms cited by Fulkerson, the ideological preferences of the instructors have supplanted their responsibility to teach composition and their students will be worse off because of it. They will be worse off because the information that they are taught may prepare them, in part, for a life in academia, but will not be of very much use if they, as most of our students, choose a profession in teaching high school or elementary school.

It is often the best intentions that lead to these most unexpected and undesired results and this seems to be the case with the well known and often used text book *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, which perhaps unwittingly, but effectively, makes clear why many undergraduates (and TTs) are led to believe in the primacy of the abstract over the practical in their discipline. The book does this in its first section where it provides a seven page overview of twentieth century teaching approaches. The overview covers nine approaches to language teaching and upon concluding reminds readers that “There are *also* five other things that the teacher should do to make good decisions [...]” (Celce-Murcia, 2001: 10; my emphasis).

It is as a passing thought that the editor enumerates these five “other” things. Among them she suggests that assessing student needs (audience), considering instructional constraints (place), and thinking about what students need to learn (purpose) are matters that the instructor should take into account. Perhaps this inversion of priorities was an oversight but it is a telling one because it shows that what was once central to the teaching profession has become marginal. The desire to inform its readers about the most current and best known approaches is no doubt at the heart of this oversight and this is also worthy of our attention here because it reminds us that our emphasis on the theoretical is being imposed on those who need to first master the practical aspects of teaching.

Also participant in creating the conditions for this shift is the general consensus- among TAs- that a reflective/critical position will necessarily lead to an informed and flexible educator who will therefore be more effective.

In theory, the notion of having reflective professional educators is a good thing. It is possible, and perhaps probable, that because self analysis and reflection are a means for professionals to do more of, or do better that which they set out to achieve prior to the reflection it should be promoted.

However, the idea was that it is the professional, one who has mastered the practical aspects of his profession and is therefore paid to perform said job, who should be the person who benefits most from reflection. This was what Donald Schon, proponent of reflection in professional practice had in mind. Schon's inquiries into professional knowledge and education were based on the concept of knowledge-in-action; inductive reasoning where the activities of the professional were mined to formulate their organizational and epistemological underpinnings (as cited in Pakman, 2000: 6). So that reflection in professional practice had in mind not undergraduates, or interns, but professionals in the field. It also did not have in mind professionals outside the field, so that knowledge-in-action was not meant to define the deductive exercises that academics who are removed from the school house engage in.

What can happen when the well intentioned TA misunderstands or overestimates the applicability of a critical reflective stance and fosters this in TTs is that, rather than returning the teacher to his role with better or more tools for doing the job, he can overwhelm him with options that absorb his time and derail his purpose. It is in these cases that abstract pluralities, products of a critical stance, are in fact counterproductive. The priority given to the "critical stance" is of course a product of the work that TAs are asked to do. We are asked to reflect and enter into discussion with others who are doing likewise. We have time for this because we are paid to do this.

An example of how this perspective can lead to barren results, for both TAs and TTs, we can borrow from one TA who, while admittedly lost in looking for effective ways to train teachers, opts to reach further into reflection as a means out of his theoretical/practical labyrinth. What results from his well intentioned efforts is both an ambiguous and puzzling conclusion that is unlikely to be of any practical use to him or to the practitioners who read his essay in search of tools to better perform their jobs. In his essay, Allwright

(2005) sets out to explain to us how he came to exploratory practice (EP), what it is, and ostensibly, the benefits it holds for teachers, and by extension, students.

Allwright arrived at EP because of his “disillusionment at the beginning of the 1990s with an overwhelmingly technicist approach to research [...]” (2005: 353) and also found it appealing because “it marks an attempt to redress the balance after years of well intentioned mistakes [in practitioner research and training] [...]” (p. 355). What that balance may look like or how EP may differ from other well intentioned mistakes he does not say. Lest our concern go unaddressed however, he does say that he, as an academic researcher, has “rethought [his] role very seriously” (p. 356).

Of what EP is, we learn that it “tries to combat years of severe damage caused by academic researchers in their relationships with teachers and learners” (p. 356). Most of the ensuing definition tells us what EP is not: it is not problem solving, it is not technicist, it is not a technical fix, before finally arriving at an affirmation when Allwright tells us that EP is something that looks “for deep level understanding rather than high level scientific ones” (p. 359) and that its practitioners should “develop his or her own understandings to as deep a level as possible and then [...] try to live their understandings” (p. 359). Suspecting that “such a cryptic description does seem to demand its own set of notes” (p. 361). Allwright offers some definitions of the terms that he uses, among which his definition of “understandings”: “Understandings does not necessarily mean anything expressible in words” (p. 361).

As a fellow TA, Allwright’s essay leaves me frustrated and dispirited. I can only imagine what effect they might have on TTs who sacrifice to find the time to read them or on undergraduates who are expected to be versed in them as a prerequisite to graduating as licensed teachers. For Allwright, and others like him, the means have become the ends. There is no longer a product to be generated from reflecting. He offers no method or approach that can be recognized as such and that could be used in a classroom so as to measure its usefulness. His article is a representative example of the kind of degeneration that threatens advanced studies in a field that does not

always require the grounding of ideas in tangible, measurable reality—one that exist independent of the writer or his theory.³

Examples like Allwright's show that there are inconsistencies in our field that are a matter for researchers and academics to debate over and that these have a limited role to play in the everyday professional lives of teachers (TT). I say this not because TTs would not benefit from more options but because they would not benefit from investing the time, precious limited time, in becoming immersed in the ideological and political arguments that cover these options, often to the point where the options themselves disappear. They have, I argue, almost no role at all, save for a brief overview, in the lives of undergraduate students. It is an uncomfortable reality of research universities that we use our undergraduates to test our theories, but we should not force them into joining the debates over and around competing theories.

When we teach as though students have comfortably entered the conversation, as we call it, and they have not, we risk making them insecure and confused. Insecure and confused students who seek to please, or to pass, will not be autonomous or creative as we hope our presentation of abstract pluralities will make them, they will be docile and robotic. They will memorize the terms and discussion topics that we give and return them to us undigested, a process that they are unlikely to enjoy, and thus we would have done the opposite of what we set out to do, imposed a discourse rather than introduced alternatives.

Undergraduate students come to our classes because they want to learn the basic structure, the proven, or traditional, or accepted norms by which a discipline or practice is carried out, first. These principles and norms when applied to a discipline, or practice are not an either or affair. It is not a question of whether we have identified everything that works or whether everything is up for debate. There are practices, definitions, norms, and

3 Grounded Theory, the successful product of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss' 1967 book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was introduced as a solution to this problem. For its history and shortcomings see Thomas and James (2006).

standards that constitute the basis for our professions. This does not exclude some of them from being challenged or altered as need, and not just the times, may require. And then there are those concepts that some of us believe should be a part of this corpus, and others that should be excluded or altered, about these we debate.

I write this while fully aware that what may underlie our inability to draw these distinctions is the fact that second language acquisition lacks a defined and accepted theory, a coherent body of knowledge that summarizes what is known about language learning (Clarke, 1994).⁴ I do so to highlight its absence so that we may see the need to create one; to codify those parts that belong in such a body, the facts, and to separate them from the contending hypothesis and local descriptions of particular experiences. This is needed by our profession and by those who are to join it because of the indispensable need to be conversant in those practices that have lasted and have come to define our practices and disciplines *before* being able to discuss how or what to change.

Perhaps we are also deterred by a fear that by categorizing any approach or theory as defining the discipline we are in fact imposing a discourse. Taken to its logical conclusion this fear is absurd. It has been said that a sign that one knows a thing is the ability to describe and define it. If we cannot define our discipline of knowledge then an existential rather than nominal crisis ensues. So let's begin by teaching our students how and what we learned first, because for us and for those of past generations who went on to successful careers, it worked. And it is an honest start.

4 This, of course, is not for lack of effort. Attempts to bridge the gap between what occurs in the classroom and how we define our discipline go back more than thirty years. See Zamel (1976).

4. SUGGESTIONS

A useful principle toward this more honest start for undergraduate students can be borrowed from the fourteenth century English philosopher William of Ockham, for whom the principle of Occam's razor is named. Occam's razor has as its etymology, the law of parsimony which can be traced back to Maimonides and Aristotle. The use of its Latin "non est ponenda pluralitas sine necessitate" version (pluralities ought not be posited without necessity) in EFL classrooms would do much to simplify and re-focus both teachers and students on the task of learning to communicate in a foreign language.

In my composition courses I have found some of the general tenets found in Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* to be a simple and effective way of implementing the principle of parsimony in my own teaching. What Aristotle sought was to define those components involved in the act of communication so that they could be easily recognized by the speaker and he could adapt his discourse accordingly, thereby achieving a more effective interaction. His focus then is, in many respects, the same as that of our students who must as students, and ultimately as professors, teachers, and academics begin an act of communication by identifying the variables present in each particular context. The places where this may occur may be greatly different from those that Aristotle encountered but their purpose, to persuade, instruct, explain, inform, and entertain, and their audience, students and peers, experts, and laymen, remain very much the same. For this reason I refer to these components when teaching composition to undergraduate EFL students.

Teaching the basic components that exist in the interchange that occurs when we try to communicate and helping students to identify and understand some of their permutations, and some of the possible interactions between their individual exigencies when it comes to constructing an effective text, lesson plan, or presentation, has been both effective and surprisingly challenging to do. I reason that it has been difficult for me and my students because of the deceptive nature of "teaching basics" which, at the university level, really means reformatting the way that they see themselves and the activity of reading or speaking. That it has proven challenging confirms

my assumption that a simple and pragmatic approach can be rigorous while avoiding the more rigid aspects that often define abstract pluralities.

By introducing five variables: speaker, message, audience, place, and purpose, to an activity that was seen as involving at most three, greatly changes the scope of the whole enterprise by making it more complex and thereby opening up a myriad of possibilities. Take for example the role of the speaker; that the first thing that a student learning to write must do is identify and define himself. It is for this purpose that elementary school teachers ask us to write about ourselves, our families, our pets, and our vacations. This basic lesson is often papered over in college where undergraduates are taught, to imitate the sounds, ideas, words and syntactical structures that their professors quote to them and have them read. So that, focusing on the speaker is an attempt to return to that lesson learned in elementary school that teachers ask: “would you use this word to describe this to a friend in conversation?” or “is there a more effective way to convince your reader to..?”.

In doing so, our elementary school teachers were not only looking to create audience awareness, but speaker awareness; the idea that a student must make the connection that he, the person who speaks to friends and thinks, is the same he, that is presently speaking *to* an imaginary audience *through* this written text. Encouraging students to take ownership of their text is a common way to describe this process, a description that I choose not to use here because it fails to emphasize the practical and critical consequences of them doing so or not. It has become a cliché that suggests that “ownership” is a nice thing for the writer to have rather than pointing to the need for the author to be present if effective communication is to occur at all.

Teaching this ability and that of having students imagine potential readers (or classrooms) are equally difficult tasks because an ever present obstacle to developing a voice is that it is cheaper, both in effort and in courage, to resort to imitating someone else’s voice and that, unlike a conversation, there is no one in front of you to provide the kind of feedback, blinking, yawning, frowning, that would naturally force the speaker to modify his delivery or content.

The two other variables that students must consider as independent and critical are the message and the purpose. By consider I mean that the student must be aware of their existence as components that must be allotted time and attention; that the latter must be subordinated to the former; a student must have decided and committed himself to the effect that he wants to produce in his reader or listener. For Aristotle, the possibilities were to persuade, inform or entertain and though the past two millennia have given us a long list derived from these three they remain as firm a ground as any from which students can begin their understanding of effective communication, written or spoken.

Using basic rhetorical elements to teach composition to prospective EFL teachers is one example of the kind of simple and practical content that should be present in undergraduate classrooms. It is a pragmatic approach that can be a successful alternative in the teaching of second language skills to undergraduate students.

Resources for a more general approach to refocusing the content of the undergraduate curriculum can be found online where privately and publicly funded organizations like: The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (nbpts.org), The Educational Broadcasting Corporation (thirteen.org/edonline), The Royal Society for the Arts (rsaopeningmind.org.uk), and the George Lucas Educational Foundation (edutopia.org), have tried to codify some of the core skills that all effective teachers should have. A gradual distancing of undergraduate students from abstract pluralities and a concerted move toward the kind of priorities mentioned above would do much to improve the quality of future teachers and thus, to our profession as a whole.

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