Language Learning Experience in L2 Teacher Education

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Throughout this course, what I treasure most is not only a few German words, phrases and expressions I have learnt; the most fruitful benefit is that I can experience what difficulties the second language learners encounter, thus giving me an insight on how to teach second language in a way that helps the students most, based on the general teaching principles that I have generated from German lessons.¹

The notion of reflection is fundamental to contemporary thinking on L2 teacher education. Building on Dewey’s (1933) original conception of reflection, Schön (1983) argues that reflection-in-action represents the complex ways in which professionals interact with practical problems as they test out and modify their solutions within the specific contexts in which they work. Although there are many conceptualizations of the notion of reflection, there is general agreement that reflection is an intrapersonal process with the potential to facilitate personal and professional knowledge, that it can be a process and method of informing practice with reason, and that it can promote changes in behavior and practice (Knowles, 1991). Reflective approaches to teacher education can be seen as a reaction to the model of teachers as technicians, in favor of a recognition of the thoughtful and professional aspects of teachers’ work. A reflective approach toward teacher education encourages teachers to take responsibility for and ownership of their own professional growth and autonomy. It encourages individuality among teachers by enabling them to develop their own theories of educational practice and by constructing a vocabulary for talking about their own practice (Calderhead & Gates, 1993).

In this article, I describe an unusual reflective language learning experience that is part of the preservice BATESL program at City University of Hong Kong. The entire BATESL program is based on a reflective approach to teacher education, in part because the course designers themselves viewed this approach favorably but also in response to the particular educational situation of Hong Kong. Although in the late 1980s Hong Kong was experiencing tremendous economic growth

¹ Quotations throughout the article are from a collection of student diaries covering a 3-year period from 1993 to 1996.
and was rapidly becoming an extremely sophisticated metropolis, the educational system remained very traditional. Instruction in Hong Kong schools was teacher centered, with a heavy dependence on rote learning. The government was committed to reforming the system, however, with a view toward developing young people who would be more attuned to the new, sophisticated living and working environment of modern-day Hong Kong. A reflective approach to teacher education was therefore very appropriate because the society would need teachers who could adapt to the coming reforms but who would not necessarily accept them uncritically. Moreover, Hong Kong would need teachers who could take responsibility for their own professional growth and eventually assume new roles as leaders in curriculum development and educational reform.

Although a reflective approach underlay the whole of the BATESL program, here I describe one component, a language learning experience (LLE) course in which apprentice teachers learn a language that is new to them from the beginner level. The idea of an LLE course as part of a teacher education program is not new (Birch, 1992; Lowe, 1987; Rinvolucri, 1988; Waters, Sunderland, Bray, & Allwright, 1990). Accounts of such courses have focused on the value of reflection on the LLE course as a means of gaining participants’ insights into their future students’ learning processes and thereby informing their approaches to teaching. This article builds on these earlier accounts but shows how such a course can maximize its reflective potential by being fully integrated with the other components of a teacher education program.

THE PRACTICE

The LLE course is part of the 3-year, full-time BATESL program at City University of Hong Kong. The LLE course is a 40-hour, first-year course, running over one 15-week semester. Participants study a language other than Cantonese (their L1) and English for 2 hours per week and participate in eight 1-hour reflection sessions, spread over the semester. Participants keep a written diary during their LLE, the final entry of which is an extended reflection on the whole LLE course. The course has been run with German, French, and Spanish as the target languages.

The goals of the LLE course are for participants to develop insights into the language learning process at the beginner level; reflect upon, analyze, evaluate, and adapt their own foreign language learning strategies; develop their knowledge of the structure, function, phonology, and sociocultural dimension of language; and relate and evaluate issues in language teaching theory in the light of their own experience as language learners. The actual language instruction is somewhat eclectic, exposing participants to a wide range of teaching and learning techniques. All four skills are taught. The overall framework is communica-
tive, insofar as instruction is directed towards the goal of enabling participants to express basic functions and perform basic communicative tasks. At the end of the course participants should be able to communicate a range of basic functions in the target language. That is not to say that attention is not paid to language form. A balance is struck between focus on accuracy and fluency.

Given that the LLE course has two distinct aspects, the language learning itself and the reflection sessions that follow, it is important that they be carefully coordinated. For example, a reflection session on different methods of grammar instruction is generally preceded by a language class that exposes participants to a range of different grammar teaching techniques. Moreover, the syllabus for the reflection sessions includes various facets of the language learning experience: different ways of organizing the syllabus, goal setting, language learning attitudes, different teaching methods, vocabulary learning, grammar learning, the four skills, and fluency and accuracy. The reflection session syllabus is not meant to be comprehensive, however. It aims to cover a range of issues that are most appropriate for reflection and relate to various other courses in the BATESL program. The emphasis is on the process of language learning more than on the product, although as many links as possible are established with the other courses in the degree program. Such linkages are possible because the language instructor and the reflection facilitator are familiar with the entire BATESL syllabus and coordinate their efforts accordingly.

At the beginning of each reflection session participants exchange diaries and review their latest entries. Although participants are encouraged to include a self-initiated part in each diary entry, each week they write on an assigned topic from the reflection sessions syllabus. This provides a certain amount of structure for reflection and diary writing and creates a specific focus for discussion in the reflection sessions. Periodically, the diaries are collected by the facilitator, who returns them the following week to maintain ongoing feedback. A typical reflection session might include group brainstorming on what it means to be a good language learner, trying out different vocabulary or grammar teaching techniques, discussing fluency and accuracy in the target language, or comparing particular features of the target language with English and Cantonese.

Because the BATESL is a modular course organized around three main strands—English proficiency, English language and sociocultural studies, and theories and practices of teaching and learning languages—participants have opportunities to compare the ways they learn the target language with the processes described in their theory courses. Moreover, they can focus on structural aspects of the language—for example, how tense and aspect are realized in the target language—or they can reflect
on the sociocultural dimensions of the target language—for example, politeness conventions, contextual appropriateness, and language learning motivation. Because all of these features of the target language can be contrasted with those in both English and Cantonese, the LLE course makes an important contribution to the development of participants’ overall language awareness (Bolitho, 1988; Hawkins, 1984; James & Garrett, 1991; Wright & Bolitho, 1993).

RESPONSIVENESS

Within the context of the need for a reflective approach for the BATESL program at City University of Hong Kong, the LLE course responds in practice to the theoretical rationale of encouraging participants to reflect on their own language learning experiences and establish links with the other strands of the BATESL course. The LLE course creates a meaningful context in which participants can reflect on what Wallace (1991) distinguishes as *experiential knowledge* and *received knowledge*. Experiential knowledge, or Schön’s (1983) *knowledge-in-action*, reflects knowledge gained from practical experience, whereas received knowledge refers to facts, theories, concepts, research findings, and the related specialized vocabulary that make up the intellectual content of a discipline, sometimes referred to as *technical knowledge* or *research-based theory* (Schön, 1983). Experiential knowledge, it can be argued, is enriched when it has input from received knowledge (or theory). At the same time, received knowledge may be better assimilated when learned in an experiential way. As Wallace puts it, the aim should be to create conditions “so that the trainee can reflect on the received knowledge in light of classroom experience and so that classroom experience can feed back into the received knowledge sessions” (p. 55). Grounded in this perspective, the LLE course not only develops experiential knowledge, but it also allows for the integration of received knowledge.

Extracts from the participants’ own diaries provide striking evidence of how these two types of knowledge are developed and integrated through reflection on the LLE experience. For example, the following extracts highlight the value of participants experiencing the problems that their future students will have:

1. I think the module [course] gives me a good chance to gain experience in learning a new language and understand the difficulties that language learners may have.

2. I am the second language learner in learning foreign language that is new to me. Therefore I can note all the problems and characteristics of this second language learning, especially the communication problem.
Moreover, the following two diary extracts demonstrate that participants’ reflection on the LLE experience went beyond the self as a language learner to include reflection on the methods used by the LLE teacher as well as on the actions of and interactions with the other participants in the LLE course.

3. The syllabus can help me to learn simple Spanish that is useful in reality. I can also experience the difficulties and different teaching methods through the lessons.

4. Among all of my classmates, Henry was the one who I admired most. His learning attitude was active, positive and self-motivated. He [is] used to ask[ing] [the French teacher] anything about French no matter music, culture, etc. This time, I was amazed by his pillow-like dictionary. His Chinese-French dictionary was so thick that scared me much indeed. Certainly, he is really diligent in the pursuit of knowledge and he is also inquisitive. If he continue this learning attitude, he will be a successful language learner in future.

An important subsidiary role of the LLE course is to provide a point of reference against which participants can test out theories of learning and teaching in practice. It is this aspect of the course that optimizes the interaction between received knowledge and experiential knowledge. For example, an introductory course in Semester 1, Introduction to Language Learning Theories, provided a retrospective means for this to happen, as the following diary extract illustrates:

5. I think it [the LLE course] is a very good chance in proving the theories of language learning that I learned in this Semester 1.

A reference to a more specific feature of an earlier course is highlighted in the next diary extract, concerning the critical period hypothesis:

6. Speaking French is quite difficult for me. I find the /r/ especially hard to pronounce. After 12 weeks’ practice, I still can’t produce it accurately. In my opinion, it’s not easy for me to articulate foreign language phonemes. Usually people who are already past the puberty stage would keep their own accents whatever language they try to learn. I am already 19, so it’s not surprising that I can’t vibrate my throat appropriately to produce /r/.

One of the roles of the facilitator in the LLE course is to guide discussion and reflection in such a way that other theories that will be introduced more formally later in the overall program are touched upon. In this way the reflection sessions can act as what Ausubel, Novak, and Hamesian (1978) call “advance organizers,” providing “ideational
scaffolding” in preparation for “the stable incorporation and retention of the more detailed and differentiated material that follows” (p. 172). In other words, the reflection sessions provide a means of introducing important metalanguage (reflective knowledge) that is needed when the theoretical concepts are later presented. For example, learners might experiment with different types of learning strategy in the LLE course whereas much later in the BATESL program they will be exposed to published taxonomies in the Learner Strategies course.

Another way of conceptualizing reflection in the LLE course is in terms of the direction in which it is pointed, or whether it takes place before, during, or after learning. Schön (1983) referred to reflection during action as reflection-in-action, whereas reflection before and after action he called reflection-on-action. Reflection in the context of the LLE course generally takes place after language learning, when learners write their diary entries following a language class and later take part in a reflection session. In these instances, learners’ diaries cover a very wide range of issues representing different types of retrospection. For example, they focus on the structure of the language, sociocultural issues, different teaching techniques, motivation, and learning problems and strategies. In the following extract, a participant reflects on the usefulness of a teaching technique:

7. We find that speaking with each other in German is really a fun thing to do. We can correct our own mistakes and it is not embarrassing at all. Such a strategy for practicing speaking German is really good and interesting.

But learners are also encouraged to reflect during the language learning experience. Reflection here consists of observations on classroom activities (what the teacher, fellow learners, and the learners themselves may have been doing) and reactions to and evaluations of these activities. On the other hand, reflections at this stage also take the form of introspection into thought processes and feelings that occur during actual language learning. Participants are encouraged to keep notes on their reflection during learning for later incorporation into their diaries. These diary entries typically mention problems with staying motivated, concentrating, or participating actively during the language learning course. In the following diary extract a participant reflects on her increased motivation as a result of better understanding:

8. Later, we watched the video presented last time once again. This time I found the video more interesting because I understood more as compared with that last time. A sense of satisfaction made me feel more motivated to continue my learning.
Finally, reflection, or more properly prospection, also takes place before learning. Throughout the course, and in all of the reflection sessions, learners are asked to project forward on specific language learning issues, and ideas first mentioned in these sessions could later be tested in the language classroom.

GENERALIZABILITY

The LLE course described here provides participants with an opportunity to reflect on language teaching from the perspective of the learners whom they will teach when they themselves become language teachers. In addition to renewing this connection with the learning experience, the LLE course is valuable in the cross-fertilization it establishes with the main strands of the BATESL program. With its emphasis on reflection, the LLE course, fully integrated within the overall teacher education program, encourages future teachers to adopt a reflective approach that we hope they will carry with them when they become full-fledged EFL teachers. In the context of the BATESL at City University of Hong Kong, the LLE has allowed us to respond to the particular situation in which we found ourselves when the program was designed, a situation in which Hong Kong was and still is seeking to develop EFL teachers and an education system more responsive to the conditions prevailing in its rapidly developing society.

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REFERENCES


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Collaborative Conversations

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As teacher educators, we encourage our preservice and in-service teachers to critically reflect on their teaching practices, and we support them in doing so. Regular reflection on their classroom experiences allows teachers to identify areas in their teaching that they feel need