

Teacher Education and the Promotion of Innovation: Exploring the Possibilities

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Introduction

“Teacher education still has the honour of being simultaneously the worst problem and the best solution in education” (Fullan, 1993, p.105).

The teaching profession has been characterized by continual change. New curricula, materials and approaches are constantly being developed and advocated based on our evolving understanding about the teaching-learning process. Nonetheless, classroom practices continue to be portrayed as conservative and traditional (Rudduck, 1991; Fullan, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Literature on the diffusion of innovation has investigated the factors influencing the uptake of new teaching practices (Rogers, 1995; Markee, 1997; Lamie, 2005). This literature focuses on the structure and context of innovation and how these influence actual implementation. Although this literature has provided important insights for program developers and administrators, it has not adequately recognized the contributions of teacher education programs in promoting change. This study seeks to address this deficiency by investigating the effect of a constructivist-based course on student teachers’ disposition towards, and utilization of a theoretically supported innovation in second language education.

Identifying a Role for Teacher Education in the Promotion of Innovation

Teacher education programs are well situated to promote innovation. When students enter into teacher education programs they embark on a journey of transition from being learners to teachers. During this transformation, individuals begin to establish professional identities that will have a significant influence on their teaching careers. Moreover, teacher preparation is a time when individuals are able to collaboratively reflect upon education and develop professional skills without the pressures of immediate performance. This enables prospective teachers to reflexively analyze teaching practices,

unconstrained by paradigmatic norms associated with particular teaching contexts. The result is that novel approaches are more likely to be considered than when swamped by the demands of day-to-day life as a teacher.

The Traditional ‘Tell, Show, Guide’ Approach to Teacher Education

In order for teacher education programs to promote innovation, they must adopt approaches that promote conceptual change and encourage continual growth. However, teacher education programs have been strongly influenced by traditional practices (Freeman, 1996) in the form of the ‘tell, show, guide’ model of education (Myers, 2002). In most programs ‘telling’, in the form of lectures, consumes the majority of time spent in university classrooms with the other components addressed through occasional focus teaching activities or practical field experiences. This approach to teacher education is premised on the notion that learning to teach is a static, stable process and that the knowledge required by a teacher can be neatly packaged and presented to students by an expert within the field.

The ‘tell, show, guide’ approach to teacher education is problematic for two reasons. First, it ignores current theories of learning. Constructivist scholars have advocated the importance of mental schemata on the development of new knowledge (von Glasersfeld, 2005). From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is not an entity to be passed between individuals, but rather something that is constructed through interplay with new information. In its traditional form, lecturing does not provide adequate opportunities for interaction or negotiation with new concepts. Richardson (1997) wrote:

The traditional approach to teaching – the transmission model – promotes neither the interaction between prior and new knowledge nor the conversations that are necessary for internalization and deep understanding. The information acquired from traditional teaching, if acquired at all, is usually not well integrated with

other knowledge held by students. Thus, new knowledge is often only brought forth for school like activities such as exams, and ignored at all other times. (p.3)

As a result, the introduction of pre-service teachers to theories in a didactic manner is unlikely to have a significant effect on their conceptions of second language education.

Second, the ‘tell, show, guide’ approach to teacher education ignores students’ lived experiences by treating them as *tabula rasa*, or blank slates on which scholars may script their expertise. This is significant because socio-culturally based research has demonstrated the importance of early experiences as a learner – what Lortie (1975) labeled the ‘apprenticeship of observation’ - on teachers’ understanding about educational processes. During these formative years in the classroom, individuals develop philosophies about the teaching-learning process that become deeply rooted in their belief systems (Richardson, 1996) and create mental schemata through which new information is interpreted (Kagan, 1992). Research has demonstrated that early-established beliefs about education are difficult to change, in particular during pre-service training if they are only covertly challenged through exposure to contradictory evidence (Richardson, 2003). Therefore, the ‘tell, show, guide’ approach is unlikely to challenge early established conceptions of teaching, thus mitigating opportunities to promote innovation.

Constructivist Approach to Teacher Education

In response to the ineffectiveness of the ‘tell, show, guide’ approach to teacher education, a number of scholars have advocated the use a teacher education program that uses students’ knowledge and experiences as the starting point in preparing to become a teacher (Edwards, 1996; Winitzky & Kauchuk, 1997; Hasweh, 2003; Richardson, 2003). This form of instruction has been labeled by Tillema (2004) as an ‘embedding

orientation.’ In this approach student teachers beliefs are the starting point through which new information is filtered, promoting an incremental process of belief change. Tillema (2004) described this approach in the following manner:

Using lay theories or (student) teachers’ initial beliefs as a starting point for explicating the implicit know-how contained in them while at the same time gradually insert and link new prevalent and adjacent knowledge on teaching to the knowledge base of the student; thus preparing and scaffolding teacher learning with “adequate” reflective conceptions before engaging in the immediacy and pressures of classroom teaching. (p.143)

Thus space for conceptual change would be facilitated by exposing and analyzing tacit understandings prior to being introduced to new concepts.

Despite abundant theoretical support for a teacher education program that promotes the analysis of students’ experiences and beliefs as the impetus for professional learning, few empirical studies have been conducted to identify the impact of such a program on teachers. Fosnot (2005) attempted to apply the principles of an ‘embedding orientation’ to promote the use of constructivist teaching strategies. The program challenged students’ traditional views of education by engaging them in periods of reflection and dialogue during course work and field experiences. The results of the strategy were very favourable; however, this may also be a result of the unique structure of the program and the abundance of resources available. Tsang (2004) also utilized the strategy by analyzing the effect of analyzing one’s personal practical knowledge on the automatization of teachers’ instructional decisions. The author concluded: “Bringing personal practical knowledge to the foreground helps optimize the accessibility to, or potential application of, such knowledge in the decision-making process” (Tsang, 2004, p.195). Although both of these authors reported positive results, neither provides evidence of the efficacy of a constructivist approach in addressing early-established

conceptions of pedagogy and promoting innovation in a standard teacher education program.

The Study

The intent of this study was to investigate the influence of a constructivist based curriculum course in promoting innovation. The questions the study seeks to answer are: 1) What influence did a constructivist course have on pre-service teachers' disposition towards, and utilization of an innovation? 2) What factors influenced student teachers' instructional decisions during their practicum? The innovation selected for analysis was task-based language teaching (TBLT). TBLT is a second language instructional approach that is grounded in second language acquisition (SLA) research (see Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998 for a summary). Despite its theoretical appeal, TBLT has not been widely utilized in second language classrooms (Skehan, 1996; Davies, 2007). As a result, it is unlikely that student teachers would be familiar with the approach prior to entering into the curriculum course. This means that TBLT would truly be an innovation for the student teachers participating in the study.

Data for the study was collected from twelve students enrolled in an introductory curriculum course at a large Canadian university. At the outset of the course, the students participating in the study had limited knowledge of pedagogical theories for second language education and little or no experience teaching in a classroom setting. Data was collected at three periods of time - the beginning of the course, the end of the semester and the conclusion of the five-week practicum. This enabled the researcher to assess the influence of the curriculum course and the five-week practicum on students' perceptions and utilization of TBLT. Quantitative data was collected in the form of the Pedagogical

Beliefs Scale (PBS) at each of the data collection periods. The Pedagogical Beliefs Scale consisted of twenty statements relating to ten topics such as error correction, explicit grammar instruction, and group work. Each topic was represented in the scale with a positive and negative statement and students were asked to express their level of agreement towards each statement using a five-point Likert scale. The incorporation of positive and negative statements facilitated the use of the split-half method to assess the inner reliability of each statement pair. The overall rating of the pairs on the scale was 0.87, an amount that exceeds the standard deemed acceptable by Oppenheim (1992).

The responses from the Pedagogical Beliefs Scale were used to assess student teachers' disposition towards the utilization of task-based language teaching. Students' disposition towards the approach was measured by quantifying their beliefs related to each of the topics outlined in the PBS. For example, a student who strongly believed in immediate error correction would be much less inclined to use TBLT than a student who placed more emphasis on developing fluency in the classroom. The TBLT Disposition Scale (TDS) was established by using the numerical value of the five points on the Likert scale. For positive statements, checking 'strongly disagree' would result in a score of one ranging up to a score of five for 'strongly agree.' The inverse scoring system was used for negative statements. The end result was the creation of an eighty-point scale that ranges from 20 (very low disposition towards using TBLT) to 100 (very high disposition).

Additional data was also collected at each juncture of the study. At the beginning of the course data was collected in the form of reflections on personal experiences as a language learner and analyses of lessons using different models of instruction. At the

conclusion of the course data was collected in the form of a description of students' philosophy of second language pedagogy and an analysis of how their philosophy evolved. Finally, at the conclusion of the five-week practicum participants met with the researcher to participate in a two hour interview session. The session included a detailed analysis of lessons developed during the practicum and a semi-structured interview.

Influence of the Curriculum Course

At the beginning of the semester students generally viewed second language teaching as a very controlled endeavour that involved heavy doses of instruction and drilling. The role of the teacher was to carefully select and sequence the grammatical concepts and vocabulary that would be introduced and provide opportunities for students to solidify their knowledge about the material through numerous activities. This teacher-centered perspective on language teaching was evident in the assignments completed at the beginning of the semester. One student made the following comment about a structured lesson utilizing the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model of instruction: "This lesson makes classroom management very easy. The focus on lecture and individual work discourages disruptive behaviour and keeps the students on task." Another student added: "Very effective – teaches the same concept in many different ways. . . [It would be] very appealing if I have trouble understanding." A third student wrote: "By using a variety of drills the lesson is effective."

In contrast, most students were skeptical about the pedagogical value of TBLT. "Horrible! More of a social studies class than a language [class]. Too much culture, no grammatical learning," commented one student. A second student added: "I don't see the point of the lesson. It seems to be more of a discussion session than learning session."

Nothing seems to be related to a second language.” Another student commented: “There is very little focus on language acquisition. I think the lesson fails to teach the grammatical concept at hand.” These comments demonstrate pre-service teachers’ perception of second language acquisition as the accumulation of discrete linguistic knowledge from concepts introduced by the teacher.

Traditional perceptions of second language teaching and learning would be challenged in the course by promoting the analysis of students’ tacit assumptions and the critical examination of concepts introduced in class. The results of the personal inquiry promoted in the class were positive. One student noted that the course had “a particularly catalytic effect.” She continued: “I did not realize how much of an impact my experiences as a learner would have on my beliefs until this year. Until recently, I might have been inclined to believe that the way I was taught was the right way to teach.” For other students the influence of the course was not as dramatic: “My beliefs in language learning have not changed much, but the class has allowed me to look at other concepts of language teaching and validate my opinion or challenge it, leading to valuable reflection.” Nonetheless, the reflection that was undertaken helped the student to establish a more sophisticated understanding about second language pedagogy.

In addition to promoting general professional development, the constructivist-based course also prompted a general shift in students’ disposition towards the innovation. At the beginning of the course the average score among the twelve participants on the Task-based Language Teaching Disposition Scale was 62.8 (see Appendix One). Almost half of the students scored below 60 and only one student scored above 67. This demonstrates a poor disposition towards using TBLT. In contrast, at the

end of the semester the average score increased by 7.3 to 70.1. On an eighty-point scale this represents a significant 17% increase. Moreover, only one student experienced a decrease in the TDS from 86 to 81. This still represents a very strong disposition though.

The increase in the TDS was primarily due to changes in students' attitude towards explicit grammar instruction, the use of drills in the classroom, and the importance of interactive activities. This shift in itself was not indicative of newly established support for the approach; however, when complimented with explicitly espoused support for TBLT, provided strong evidence of the influence of the course. One student commented: "TBLT was the one I found to be that I would want to use the most. I believe mostly, while you are doing a task that is the best way to learn a language." Another student, who expressed skepticism about TBLT at the beginning of the semester, declared after the practicum: "What works for learning language? So that was more task-based and group work and doing an activity with a different [communicative] goal as opposed to like a PPP [lesson]." The effect of the course was further solidified by the fact that students' scores on the TDS remained relatively constant from the end of the course till the end of the practicum. This would indicate that meaningful change had taken place.

Influence of the Practicum

Although students' positive disposition towards the utilization of task-based language teaching remained relatively constant throughout the practicum, the instructional approach was only occasionally utilized during student teachers' five-week teaching stint. Most of the students entered into the practicum wanting to experiment with a variety of instructional approaches; however, variables beyond their control

inhibited experimentation. Three case studies will be presented that highlight common issues that inhibited the student teachers from utilizing innovative practices.

Experimentation Gone Awry

When Brooke began the practicum she was excited about the prospect of experimenting with concepts introduced at the university. Very common second language learning experiences throughout her youth had led her to believe there was an ‘implicit professional consensus’ among teachers on how to teach a second language. After being exposed to a variety of new alternatives in her curriculum course, Brooke was anxious to add them to her teaching arsenal.

Due to scheduling constraints, Brooke was placed with two mentor teachers – an Italian teacher and a Ukrainian teacher. Her experiences with each of the mentor teachers would be very different. The Italian teacher utilized distance education materials sponsored by the government to teach the students in his class. Brooke explained: “The Italian class relied on the [curriculum] and all the material which would go with it. There were a lot of exercises [and] a lot of vocabulary, like the students were exposed to, I don’t know, fifty different words a day. And there were drills all the time.” Most of the time in the class was spent completing assignments individually or listening to instruction by the teacher. Italian was rarely used as instruction centered primarily on the explanation of complex grammatical constructs. Brooke expressed concern over the pedagogical value of the approach and stated that it was an approach she would not choose to use. Nonetheless, she was mandated by her mentor teacher to use it so that she would not disturb the routines of the class.

In contrast to her experiences in the Italian class, Brooke was given a significant amount of freedom by her Ukrainian mentor teacher. She recalled: “My Ukrainian teacher made sure that he was away from the first day. So I was alone in the classroom for four weeks with my Ukrainian class and so they considered me as the teacher.” After being restricted in the Italian class, Brooke was relieved to have the opportunity to experiment in her Ukrainian class. She decided to experiment with an inductive lesson to introduce students to the nominative and accusative cases. She provided students with a text and asked them to work in small groups to identify examples of each case. She felt as though the activity had been well organized; however, the results were not positive. She commented: “*They ended up talking and doing something else because they couldn’t do it.*” Although she acknowledged that they didn’t have the requisite skills to complete the activity, she attributed the failure of the lesson to her inability to control the learning process. She wasn’t confident with her classroom management skills or her ability to organize group activities to promote learning. She noted: “*I just didn’t know what to do in order to be effective.*” The absence of her mentor teacher from the classroom meant that she didn’t have anyone to turn to for support. Furthermore, she commented that even if her mentor teacher had been present, it was unlikely that he could have provided support because he never used group work in his class. Lacking support and confidence, Brooke refrained from future experimentation and, instead, relied on teacher-centered instruction that she had become familiar with as a learner. “*So I mostly did explicit instruction and then gave them a lot of exercises to practice.*”

Jumping Through Hoops

Catriona was assigned to a German mentor teacher who she described as a master teacher. The mentor teacher had been teaching languages for over twenty years and had established a very deliberate method of instruction. Catriona explained: *“Everything is the same and she teaches all of her classes, German or French, the exact same. They do the exact same things and so it’s very structured.”* The method she used consisted of using a reading passage to introduce particular vocabulary and grammatical structures that would then be reinforced and used through the completion of several exercises and worksheets.

Although Catriona enjoyed a very amicable relationship with her mentor teacher, she felt somewhat restricted to the method already established in the class. *“I didn’t really feel I had much room to move just because she was so organized and she had everything set out and they had a pattern and all of her students were used to it.”* The efficiency of the mentor teacher was perceived by Catriona to be a significant impediment to creating her own lessons. The units were so well constructed and sequenced that she didn’t feel she could depart from what had already been planned without jeopardizing the flow of the class. Catriona was concerned that if she didn’t use the materials created by her mentor teacher, she wouldn’t be able to cover the material normally covered in a unit. She lamented: *“I would have had to come up with something really big instead because they wouldn’t have been able to learn their vocabulary that she wanted to learn and stuff like that. And then for her to carry on after I left would have been difficult for her too.”* As a result, Catriona chose to strictly adhere to the method established by her mentor teacher.

Catriona's decision to follow the model established by her mentor teacher was not solely based on pedagogical concerns. Catriona perceived the practicum as an act of 'jumping through hoops.' She adopted a very politicized view of the process that led her to value getting a good evaluation more than developing her professional skills. She commented: *"The one thing I found about the [practicum] is that you have to do exactly what the teacher says because if you don't, like they're marking you right and pretty much you know I did anything they wanted me to, just because they say if I pass or fail. Like it was fun to kind of go and do it but you knew in the back of your mind that you're always being judged and if you slipped up and if you did something wrong or if the teacher just, like her personality just clashed or something like that, there was nothing you could do about it."* Catriona recognized the importance of establishing a good relationship with her mentor teacher. As a result, she chose not to undermine the positive relationship she had with her mentor teacher by adopting practices that conflicted with her well-established method.

Succumbing to Expectations

Addison was a staunch proponent of a number of the theories learned at university. She strongly believed in the importance of transformative education and sought to promote meaningful learning opportunities for her students. She was attracted to the notion of task-based language teaching and felt that it had great potential for achieving her aims. When she entered into the practicum there was little question in her mind that she would utilize TBLT.

Addison was placed with a mentor teacher who only taught one split level French class. The mentor teacher had struggled with differentiating instruction for the two

groups, therefore, it was decided that Addison would teach the grade ten students while the mentor teacher worked with the grade eleven students. Addison's mentor teacher taught using a very structured syllabus that was organized around grammatical concepts. Nonetheless, early in the practicum Addison drew on the principles of TBLT to organize instruction with her students. The resources available in the school included very few tasks that she could readily implement in her class. As a result, Addison had to spend a considerable amount of time developing her own materials. However, as the practicum progressed time constraints had a significant impact on her. She wasn't able to develop creative activities for each lesson and instead had to rely on worksheets from the textbook. She wrote: *"It's just frustrating in that regard and I didn't just want to give them worksheets, but that's all I had for resources and you know I was drained."*

Addison's decision to use a more traditional approach to instruction was also influenced by her relationship with her mentor teacher. Even though they were both teaching concurrently, Addison perceived that she was always being closely watched. She explained: *"You have someone watching you like a hawk, not to see if you mess up, but that you don't agree with what they are doing. And it is difficult, you are like this fresh face that is coming in that has just had all this language instruction so you kind of have an idea [of how to teach]. And you have all these grand ideas and they are like scared that you are going to criticize them and that you are going to look at what they are doing and go, well that doesn't agree with what I just learnt."* Recognizing the political nature of the practicum and the limited power she wielded as a student teacher, Addison sought to avoid being confrontational with her mentor teacher. She stated: *"You don't want to step on any toes and you have so little time and you are a student."* As a

result, she avoided pedagogical discussions with her mentor teacher and adopted classroom practices that would not be considered too radical.

In adopting a more traditional approach, Addison felt as though she had failed. At the beginning of the practicum she set out to provide meaningful experiences for the students in her class; however, due to contextual constraints she was not able to accomplish her goal. This led to a great deal of frustration that she directed towards the structure of the teacher education program. *“You have all this information that you’ve had thrown at you and it’s the most stressful semester you’ve had and you’re supposed to somehow magically filter it all and use it usefully and put it into practice. Well, that’s not how it works.”* Addison perceived that there was a significant gap between the expectations established in university courses and the reality of teaching. Furthermore, she believed that the teacher education program was setting students up for failure by introducing theoretical concepts without providing support to translate them into practice.

General Trends

The experiences of the three students are indicative of the difficulties experienced by most of the student teachers in the study. Although most of them believed in the value of task-based language teaching and expressed an interest in experimenting with the approach in a practical setting, very little experimentation took place. The reasons for a lack of experimentation can be grouped into three categories. First, experimentation was inhibited by certain mentor teachers’ view of the practicum as an apprenticeship. Dewey (cited in Shulman, 1998) identified two distinct forms of practical preparation. The first he labeled the ‘apprenticeship.’ This approach was based on developing the practical skills needed to do a job effectively. The second approach, labeled the ‘laboratory’, was

premised on promoting experimentation leading to a more sophisticated understanding about education. Brooke and Catriona both had teachers who viewed the practicum as an apprenticeship. Brooke's Italian mentor teacher demanded that she mimic his approach to teaching, believing that this would enable her to develop the skills of an effective teacher. Catriona's mentor teacher didn't impose her method of teaching upon her student teacher; however, the fact that she didn't discourage mimicry demonstrated that she viewed the practicum as a training exercise. In adopting the perspective that the practicum is a form of apprenticeship, mentor teachers inhibited their student teachers from experimenting with innovative approaches.

Second, pressure to obtain a good teaching evaluation inhibited risk-taking. The criteria used to evaluate student teachers' performance did not include an element of experimentation. Therefore, students do not benefit by employing techniques that require them to move out of their comfort zone. On the contrary, experimentation is likely to lead to decreased performance because students are less familiar with the approach and are likely less competent in implementing it. Addison and Catriona were both overtly aware of the evaluative nature of the practicum and adopted a politicized attitude towards instruction. They tried to appeal to their evaluators by either modeling their approach or teaching in a manner that would not be considered threatening. This also served to reduce the value of the practicum as a laboratory in which to develop a personal teaching approach.

Third, the structure of the teacher education program made it difficult to translate theory into practice. In university courses students were introduced to a number of theoretical concepts, including task-based language teaching, which they were expected

to then utilize in a practical setting. However, a number of the mentor teachers were not familiar with the concepts and, therefore, were not able to provide support. Furthermore, the instructors who introduced the concepts and could provide assistance were not available for consultation. The absence of support resulted in feelings of frustration (Addison) and the abandonment of risky strategies (Brooke).

Conclusion

Teacher education programs are well situated to contribute to the advancement of innovative approaches. The results of this study demonstrate the potential value of curriculum courses that recognize the lived experiences of students. On both a qualitative and quantitative level the course had a significant effect on student teachers' disposition towards innovation. Nonetheless, the effect of the course was negligible on student teachers' utilization of the innovation during the practicum. Data collected on students' instructional decisions revealed deficiencies in the structure of the program. Weak or non-existent links between student teachers, mentor teachers, course instructors and program administrators diminished the value of the practicum as an exercise in professional development rather than skill development. This points to the fact that the teacher education program is unlikely to play a prominent role in the promotion of innovation until the structure of the program is reformed.

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Appendix One: Course Effect on TBLT Disposition Scores

<u>Student Name (Pseudonym Used)</u>	TDS Score	
	<u>At Beginning of Course</u>	<u>After Course</u>
1) Elisabeth	57	57
2) Deidra	65	65
3) Catriona	59	69
4) Brooke	54	66
5) Addison	55	86
6) Fiona	65	67
7) George	53	63
8) Heidi	66	69
9) Jacob	86	81
10) Kristin	64	75
11) Laura	67	74
<u>12) Meredith</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>69</u>
Average	62.8	70.1
Score on eighty-point scale	42.8	50.1
**On an eighty-point scale this marks an increase of 17% in students' disposition towards the use of TBLT.		