

Teachers *and* Learners: Investigating the Language Classroom

Introduction

A particularly illuminating line of investigation in classroom language research is the one that looks at the social dynamics of language classrooms, rather than just at pedagogical issues (Allwright 1989, Breen 1985, Prabhu, 1992). But this more complex view of classrooms as both pedagogic *and* social encounters that are co-produced by the participants leads inevitably to a re-evaluation of the respective roles of teacher and learners, with the concomitant need to explore new ways of observing and interpreting lessons that may account for this all-important dimension.

1. The classroom as a social encounter

The notion of the classroom as a co-production between teacher and learners where the importance of the role of socialisation is fully acknowledged seems to be firmly established in educational research (Allwright, 1996a: 225). That being the case, it is intriguing to see that there are few empirical studies in English as a Second Language/ /English as a Foreign Language (ESL/ /EFL) that look at teacher and learners together (but see Block, 1995, for a comprehensive overview of the existing literature). Given the practical and methodological difficulties many researchers encounter in the course of collecting data from language learners, though, this relative scarcity of studies that look at teachers and learners jointly is perhaps not that surprising.

A more worrying cause for this dearth of research that looks at teachers and learners together may be traced back to the fairly widely disseminated perspective that positions learners as passive recipients of instruction. This traditional conception underlies many studies, which tend to 'sharply distinguish between teachers and learners as if there were no overlap of roles between them' (Allwright, 1982: 208). This in turn seems to be supported by a view of teaching as a system that mostly favours the transmission of knowledge (Freire, 1972), and does not take into account the possibility of the learning process becoming

an "emancipatory process" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000: 21). Although this particular standpoint about teaching and learning has been fiercely disputed by recent developments in the field, it seems to be quite entrenched in second language education research (not to mention language teaching), namely in the way learners are often portrayed in some recent studies that overtly do not align themselves with such conservative notions. The studies that have analysed the issue of the gap between teacher and learner perceptions and preferences are a case in point. Indeed, the underlying assumption seems to be an acceptance of the importance of teacher classroom intentions, while relegating the learners to the role of more or less successful interpreters of those intentions. This is particularly visible in Kumaravadivelu's 1991 article, which states with a remarkable degree of certainty that,

The narrower the gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation, the greater the chances of achieving desired learning outcomes. It is thus important that we understand potential sources contributing to the mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation. (Kumaravadivelu, 1991: 98)

I have no argument with the last assertion contained in this passage, although I would firmly argue for the need to embrace the issue of teacher and learner intentions and interpretations in the classroom – it is the expressed contention that the endeavour should aim at bridging the gap between teacher and learners as a way to enhance the effectiveness of the learning process that I find highly problematic, both conceptually, as well as operationally.

I would like to add here that one of the lines of investigation that seems to be fraught with difficulties is precisely the issue of determining whether a mismatch of perceptions between teacher and learners influences the amount and the quality of what gets learned. Not that the question has no place in foreign language research; quite the contrary, the ultimate goal of classroom research must surely be to help us improve teaching and learning within the classroom context. However, the difficulties of devising appropriate research methodologies that will allow us to determine with any degree of certainty what exactly induces more and better teaching and learning remain insurmountable.

As Allwright reminds us, ...the history of classroom research has taught us that we can not be sure that any changes we introduce deliberately will be the true causes of whatever changes appear,

especially if we have not attended to the problem of trying to understand the situation into which the changes are being introduced. (1999b: 8)

2. The institutional context

The importance of the institutional context has been emphasized by recent studies in classroom language learning, although the debate persists about what exactly should be included under the term "context". The literature can be roughly divided into authors that have addressed the issue from the perspective of the micro-context of the classroom (Allwright, 1989, 1996a, 1998; Breen, 1985; Cray, 1999; van Lier, 1988), namely how the co-presence of teacher and learners affects classroom behaviour, and those that have looked at the wider institutional, economic, political, and societal context in which classrooms are embedded (see, *inter alia*, Coleman, 1996; Dreeben, 1973; Holliday, 1994; Norton Peirce, 1995; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; Rogers, 1982). One of the main arguments emanating from some of the latter claims that Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research tends to espouse an asocial, apolitical view of the teaching and learning of English as a second/foreign language and therefore ignores the ideological, political, cultural, and economic forces that impinge on classroom events and the roles of the participants. Although Allwright does not take issue with the inclusion of the wider societal sphere, he points out that these studies may have a perverse effect – by concentrating too much on external factors they may in fact "divert attention yet again from examining social pressures *inside* the classroom" (1998).

3. The classroom

It has been often repeated that our present knowledge of classrooms is still fairly rudimentary (see quotes in van Lier, 1988: 78). The study of life in the classroom faces considerable challenges, especially the choice of an appropriate methodological framework that may aspire to do justice to its complex nature, as Cray points out:

It is difficult to formulate a framework which recognises and accommodates the complexity and density of classroom interaction and incorporates a consideration of the context in which the class-

room is situated. At the same time, it seems certain that if we are to understand what happens in a classroom in any true sense, we must develop the ability to look at that classroom in all its complexity. (Cray, 1999: 379)

One of the main insights gained from the observation and analysis of classrooms is that no observation model is ever final – rather, the classroom lends itself to a continuous process of analysis and reflection. According to Hutchinson, it is in fact impossible to grasp the classroom in all its complexity:

Because of the complex and dynamic nature of the classroom process, it is impossible to pin down everything (i.e., intentions, attitudes, beliefs, goals, values, etc.) that goes on in it. The classroom process can never be totally pinned down and dissected. (Hutchinson, 1996: 204)

A further complication concerns the limitations of classroom observation as a research technique. Indeed, the inferences that can reasonably be made by an external researcher from classroom data alone are fairly restricted, both in depth and scope. The issue of classroom participant intentions and interpretations is a case in point, as a study based solely on the observation of classroom behaviour would fail to reveal the wealth and diversity of views and opinions that each participant carries into each lesson. As Allwright points out,

Methodologically, in order to investigate such complexity with any hope of success, we are going to need a variety of approaches, using techniques that go far beyond the mere observation and inspection of the behaviour we are hoping eventually to understand better. (Allwright, 1996a: 225)

But the notion of the classroom as an endless source of scrutiny and reflection does not concern researchers alone. Elsewhere, Allwright suggests that understanding life in the classroom is a challenge to all classroom participants, "teachers, learners, and researchers alike" (1996b: 41). That teachers and learners can be the initiators and ultimately the main beneficiaries of this process of reflection and deepened understanding seems to be a hypothesis worth pursuing, and in fact is at the core of Allwright's proposal for teacher and learner development, *Exploratory Practice*, which will be discussed in the next section in more detail.

4. Teachers

That teaching is a very complex activity is certainly indisputable. One of the main difficulties experienced by researchers is closely linked with the complexity of analysing the process of teacher classroom decision-making. Quite reassuringly, there are plenty of references in the literature to the difficulties encountered by researchers in interviewing teachers (Block, 1995; Handscombe, 1996; Jackson, 1968; Woods, 1996). Handscombe in particular makes a good case for the merits of being persistent when interviewing teachers about classroom tasks, given the complex net of intentions and interpretations for any given activity. In a passage worth quoting in full, she says:

...I am certainly more aware than ever before that any activity in a classroom can carry multiple intentions and meanings. A spelling activity may be intended to improve a child's skills, but it may also provide a window into that child's world if there is some personal selection of words to be learned; it may be a lesson in self-discipline or delayed gratification if its completion is required before moving on to a preferred task; it may be an opportunity to learn through, and about, teaching others if children are asked to take more responsibility for each others learning; it may indicate to parents that their child is spending his/her time in school well or poorly. The list is almost endless. I am sure the next time I ask a teacher in the course of a study:

What do you see as the purpose of that activity?

after having heard the response, I will follow up with:

And what else? ... And what else? ... And what else? (Handscombe, 1996: 168).

However, this need for persistent interviewing in turn raises the issue of the length of contact required in order to be able to gather this kind of data. Indeed, the practical hurdles posed by a prolonged contact between researcher and researched are immense, not least because of the enormous amounts of data produced in the process, which then necessitate further description and analysis.

It seems then that the complex edifice of a teacher's professional views requires a careful, detailed analysis that can only be achieved through a lengthy, gradual process of observation, analysis and interpretation. Quite often the data available to a researcher require too much extrapolation in order to infer the main tenets of a practitioner's teaching practice. The assumption that sketching a teacher's professional

profile is a straightforward process is problematic, operationally, conceptually, and ethically. Firstly, it ignores the complexity entailed in being both able and willing to articulate one's professional beliefs, which in turn raises issues related to the personal and professional relationship between researcher and researched and to personal and professional self-esteem. At the conceptual level, it runs the danger of oversimplifying the myriad of personal, professional, institutional, and cultural factors that make up each teacher's professional persona. Last, but certainly not least, too rash an interpretation of a teacher's professional performance may lead to a distorted picture that ultimately may be extremely damaging to the participant, both personally and professionally.

One of the ways of minimising the research trappings mentioned above is to anchor the researcher's interpretation of the teacher data in a comparison between one's personal theories and those of the teacher whenever possible, in order to help the reader locate the researcher's personal preconceptions about teaching and learning. This positioning may turn any research process into a personally meaningful process of reflection.

I also think that the notion of teacher beliefs should be abandoned, in that it seems to entail a certainty on the part of the researcher as to the exact underpinnings of the informants' professional convictions that is impossible to sustain. I would like to suggest that Prabhu's notion of a teacher's 'sense of plausibility' (1987, 1990) may be more productive. This conception is defined as teachers' subjective understanding 'of how learning takes place and how teaching causes or supports it', i.e. some personal conceptualisation 'of how their teaching leads to desired learning – with a notion of causation that has a measure of credibility to them [the teachers]' (1990: 172). Importantly, Prabhu makes the point that teachers' sense of plausibility is neither a simple nor a static notion. To begin with, it is said to be influenced by several factors: teachers' former experience as learners, exposure to training and different methods, subjective evaluation of other teachers, and even by other roles they may play in their lives, such as that of parents (1990: 172)¹. Secondly, according to Prabhu, a teacher's sense of plausibility is likely to be 'strengthened, weakened, modified, extended, or brought into greater awareness by the experience of teaching' (1987b: 104).

¹ See also Gimenez, 1994, on the influence of training and past life experiences on trainee teachers' concepts of teaching.

There is empirical evidence in the literature of a plethora of institutional, professional, personal and interpersonal pressures and influences that a teacher tries to juggle with in the course of his/her practice, which seems to bear out the first attribute of a teacher's sense of plausibility as defined by Prabhu, viz. its *complexity*. On the other hand, teachers' sense of plausibility is said to be *dynamic* in nature, as it is continuously influenced by 'the ongoing activity of teaching' (Prabhu, 1990: 174). *Articulation* and *discussion* of 'pedagogic perceptions' are also central to Prabhu's notion of sense of plausibility, in that they help the process of 'sharing, sharpening, strengthening, weakening, changing or helping to develop further the different forms of understanding involved' (1990: 174). Crucially, Prabhu argues for a revised view of encounters between teacher and 'specialist' as opportunities for different senses of plausibility to interact, so that 'teaching can become most widely and maximally real' (1990: 176).

Finally, I would like to add here that the process of unveiling a teacher's professional profile or sense of plausibility should ideally entail a true partnership between researcher and researched, where the imbalance of power can be minimised and where the latter are given the opportunity to pursue their own professional and personal puzzles. This in turn invites further reflection on the role of classroom language learning research and its relationship to teaching and learning a foreign language, which will be briefly discussed below.

I used to endorse the view, not unknown among practising teachers, that research in EFL/ESL is or should be mostly a problem-solving process that ideally provides solutions to the difficulties experienced by teachers and learners in the classroom. That a number of teachers should subscribe to this view of research is hardly surprising, given the authoritative status traditionally attributed to research and academic researchers in our field. Besides, it is not unusual for new research developments to be used to sanction new teaching materials (Littlejohn, 1992), language courses, teacher training courses, and even university degrees (Allwright, 2000), which are then marketed on the strength of their academically-validated content.

But to portray teachers as unquestionably accepting the recommendations of academic researchers is to ignore the ambivalent and often contradictory nature of the relationship between teaching and research. The complexities of this sort of "love-hate" relationship between teachers and researchers have been summarised eloquently by Handscombe:

The researchers' view runs the gamut from teachers being nuisances who get in the way of good research and are responsible for preventing children from learning, to teachers as the only source of wisdom and expertise which is worth paying attention to. Teachers have a similarly wide range in their response to researchers, at one extreme dismissing researchers' preoccupations as jargon-ridden gobbledygook, irrelevant to the real task of educating children and, at the other, only adopting ways of operating in the classroom which come with a formal stamp of research approval. (Handscombe, 1996: 173)

Van Lier, for his part, suggests that more contemporary trends in SLA have abandoned the preoccupation with practical issues that was the hallmark of former academic research, which in turn has led to a growing schism between teaching and research:

Many of today's journals are filled with articles containing information that no practising teacher could possibly know what to do with, and reports of research that only a handful of specialists can understand. (van Lier, 1988: 26)

This author goes on to call for a more classroom-based orientation to the field of applied linguistics in order to narrow the gap between teachers and researchers (1988, 1994). However, the problematic relationship between research and teaching may not be totally solved by the former being more firmly oriented towards the here-and-now practicalities of the classroom, if the issue of relevance is still not properly addressed. According to Allwright, the perceived "parasitic" nature of research (1999a: 11) may be mostly due to the fact that research is traditionally conducted *on* teachers (not to mention learners) and their classrooms, without direct reference to their professional and personal concerns:

We need also to face the apparently well-earned accusation that research in the classroom has typically been highly parasitic, taking up valuable class time and offering little or nothing in return to teachers or to learners. (Allwright, 1999a: 11)

That "findings" from research reports are imposed on teachers, often with serious repercussions on their daily professional lives, further helps foster feelings of resentment amongst the latter, who are seldom heard and whose aspirations are not properly taken into consideration. It is not my intention here to suggest that researchers willingly set out to alienate teachers. In fact, some of the bad press that research gets is caused by the fact that their recommendations are often misin-

terpreted and misused by educational boards and ministries of education as a panacea to overcome problems that would require more drastic, more expensive, and probably less popular policies.

Among recent attempts at narrowing the rift between teaching and research, I would like to refer briefly to Exploratory Practice², Allwright's framework for teacher development and education (Allwright, 1992, 1993, 1999b; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997; Miller & Bannell, 1998), which proposes the integration of teaching, learning, and research in a way that is relevant to all classroom participants. The fact that teachers and learners pursue their own research agendas while conducting their normal classroom activities is a key feature in this proposal, as it advocates

... the deliberate exploitation of standard classroom language learning and teaching activities as the means for collecting data on what happens in the classroom, preferably making at the same time a direct contribution to the learning, and certainly without lessening in any way the value of lessons as language learning lessons. (Allwright, 1999b: 6)

More pertinent to the discussion at hand is the fact that this approach entails an inversion of the traditional relationship between research and teaching, as it constitutes a sustainable way of doing research *through* teaching and learning, rather than on teaching and learning. The issue of relevance is thus satisfactorily addressed – teachers and learners become the *initiators* rather than the subjects of the research process, as they make use of the opportunities provided by the language classroom to deepen their understanding about their personal puzzles about teaching and learning. Besides, the emphasis placed by an Exploratory Practice perspective on trying to *understand* the classroom before trying to implement *change* makes it a considerably less threatening proposal to both teachers' and learners' senses of plausibility. Finally, the investigative stance proposed, which takes up class time "but promote[s] language development rather than get[ting] in its way" (Allwright, 1999a: 16), allows for the active involvement of the learners – whose voice, I would like to argue, is heard the least in traditional classroom research.

² Exploratory Practice has been mostly developed at Lancaster University, where a research centre is run by Dick Allwright, Judith Hanks, Inés Miller, and Morag Samson. A exploratory practice approach has been carried out in different teacher development and education projects in Turkey (Özdeniz, 1996), Britain, (O'Brian *et al.*, 2000) and especially in Brazil (*inter alia*, Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997; Miller & Bannell, 1998).

5. Learners

We may perhaps hypothesise that it would be promising to use a similar construct to Prabhu's 'sense of plausibility' to learner conceptualisation of teaching and learning, especially (but not necessarily) in reference to that of the teacher. Prabhu also suggests that the interaction between different teachers' senses of plausibility is a powerful influence in the make-up of individual teacher subjective understandings (1990: 174). In this spirit, it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which a similar type of interaction takes place between the senses of plausibility of teacher and learners, on the one hand, and among learners, on the other, in the context of the language classroom.

The analysis of learner data also raises the professional issue of how to address learner heterogeneity within the context of the language classroom. I have suggested elsewhere (Pinto da Silva, 2001) that some of the literature tends to construe learners as a homogeneous body, most notably in those studies that purport to investigate the gap between teacher and learner perceptions of classroom events. I would like to argue here that a research perspective that looks at teachers and learners as if they were sitting on opposite sides of the fence, so to speak, may be also pedagogically counterproductive. Indeed, it may encourage the teacher to gloss over individual differences among learners (Block, 1995) in order to pursue "the greater pedagogic good" (Allwright, 1996a: 218) of an abstract majority of students. In other words, the narrowing down of perceived mismatches between teacher and learner perceptions is done at the expense of learner individuality.

The work of Naidu *et al.* (1992) makes a strong case for the benefits of fostering learner heterogeneity in the classroom, even when the particular circumstances of the teaching/learning situation would seem to preclude the feasibility of the enterprise. By accepting learner individuality as an inevitable but positive factor in any classroom, the teacher is in fact contributing to learner development and autonomy:

We realised that heterogeneity is the natural result when many minds are trying to come to grips with an idea through dialogue. Given the uniqueness of our learners (and of human beings in general) any expectation of homogeneity would be unreasonable. (1992: 260)

6. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to suggest that an Exploratory Practice approach to the issue of learner heterogeneity in the language classroom seems particularly appropriate, since it would allow teachers and learners to explore their diverse intentions and interpretations while going about their everyday business of teaching and learning a foreign language. As Breen has pointed out,

The classroom is the meeting point of various subjective views of language, diverse learning purposes, and different preferences concerning how learning should be done. (Breen, 1985: 144)

That this "meeting point" can also be used as a forum for teachers and learners to reflect upon their views and perceptions in a personally and pedagogically meaningful way seems to be a very promising investigative and professional conjecture.

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