

Running Head: MY LEARNING AND TEACHING CAREER IN PERSPECTIVE

My Learning and Teaching Career in Perspective

Eve Ribeiro

Georgia State University

AL 8900 Practicum

Dr. Diane Belcher

Fall/2004

Introduction

I started observing the Structure & Composition class at Georgia State on September 13, 2004. I observed classes twice a week, which were held in Sparks Hall building from 9:00 until 10:45 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

The class was comprised of 12 students in the last level of IEP, which would make them eligible to apply for undergraduate or graduate courses. According to the cooperating teacher (CT), whose fictitious name is Linda, fifty percent of the students planned to do so upon its completion. The other fifty percent was studying English in order to hold their student visa status or to improve their language competence. Their age ranged from 20 to 34 and the majority was full time students who had off-campus employment.

This information sets the scene for this paper that draws upon the class observations which stimulated reflections on my past language learning and teaching experiences and the impact they have had on my conceptions of effective teaching. I will also make a critique of my own current practices and how the observations have impacted and will continue to impact my career as a language teacher. The sections of this paper will be as follows: Learning English, Teaching English: In Retrospect, My Future Career, and Conclusion.

Learning English

I was introduced to English in a Brazilian public school at the age of 11, in 1985. My teacher used a textbook divided by chapters that were introduced by colorful pictures and a dialog that presented the new structures such as the simple past or the present perfect followed by gap-filling activities and vocabulary practice.

Unfortunately, the public school system did not have funds to provide us with recording devices or publications in English. As a result, the only source of input was the teacher and the textbook. Needless to say, Portuguese was spoken most of the time in class, except when students had occasional vocabulary drills. The vocabulary was comprised of verbs in the base form, simple past and past perfect, nouns, and adjectives presented in the chapter.

Although a dialog opened the chapter, the teacher used the grammar-translation method rather than the communicative approach. First, she would introduce the grammatical structure devoid of any context. After the teacher presented the vocabulary by drilling it and providing the translation, the dialog was assigned for homework to be translated into Portuguese. Perhaps her assumption was that by providing both the structure and the vocabulary, the students would be ready to perform the task. Even though I liked English and was considered a fast learner, translating phrases or questions that have no equivalent in my L1 such as “What is she like?” “Let me know”, “Nice to meet you” was no easy task. Tests and quizzes were based on translation and discrete grammar points and vocabulary drilled in class.

The class structure was very rigid and we were expected to give the correct answer. The class was teacher-centered in order to maintain the discipline of a fairly large

class. Since we were not given the opportunity for output, risk-taking was totally foreign to me. In fact, English was foreign to my classmates and me not only because we could not understand it but because everything was unrelated to our world. Not a lot of importance was placed on the culture of the target language and such information was conveyed through texts as opposed to discussions and first-hand experiences.

In 1987, I chose to study French at a private language school. The course was very similar to what I had experienced with English, except that we had a tape recorder in class and a small library. Since French was not regarded as a language that would make me more marketable when it came time to look for a job, my parents encouraged me to enroll at a major private English institute called Fisk where there was a lot of input in the initial stages and students were not required to speak much, only to write. After some time into the program, we were introduced to teacher-centered speaking practices aimed at accuracy. For example, the teacher would read a sentence to one student at a time: “Ask if he has a sister” or “Say you could not come to the party”, and the students would say “Do you have a sister?” “I couldn’t come to the party”. As we approached the end of the program, the activities became increasingly student-centered. After about four years, the last stage was a conversation course that used the book *Great Ideas! Listening and speaking activities for students of American English*. Even though the book targeted listening and speaking, warm-up reading passages were really interesting but contained a lot of unknown vocabulary that posed a challenge to all us. In retrospect, I did well in that course because I enjoying learning foreign languages and I had developed strong compensation and affective strategies (Richards and Lockharts, 1994). Once I was taking a test and the reading passage contained the word ‘core’, which I did not know, so I

related it to the Portuguese word ‘coração’ (heart) and was able to answer the comprehension question correctly. Nevertheless, that was not the case with some of my classmates who felt terribly intimidated with speaking and listening probably because we had not had much practice in the previous levels, despite the fact that the teacher had established an excellent rapport with the students.

My teacher Silvana was delightfully well humored and made us feel very unique. She acknowledged everybody’s idiosyncrasies through her light-hearted teasing, had a genuine interest in our lives and seemed to have a sixth sense of when something was going wrong in class or in our personal lives. I am not certain if I had good receptivity because she gave me a lot of reinforcement and that, in turn, boosted my self-esteem (Allwright, & Bailey, 1991) or because we both loved English. I can certainly say, however, that she influenced my choice of becoming a language teacher. She was a role model for me since I wanted my students to enjoy learning English as much as I did with her.

I took such a pleasure from learning the language that I decided to apply to a British language school, Cultura Inglesa, which prepared students for Cambridge Exams. It was the first time I had come in contact with the communicative approach. Although it was a preparatory course for an exam, the classes were student-centered and we spoke English with the teachers and classmates. I remember that I learned more complex structures such as “I can’t remember the last time since I last saw her”, “I would appreciate if you would...” that we were encouraged to use in the written paper and in the oral test in order to increase our grade. It was not until then that I had learned how to write formal letters to request information, letters of complaint, thank-you notes, and

informal letters to a friend. I was intrinsically motivated to do well in the exam and the school had various resources to quench my thirst for knowledge: a large selection of books, magazines, check-out tapes, videos, mock exams, and educational software. I received a B in the FCE (First Certificate of English), which promoted further interest. I prepared myself for the CAE (Cambridge of Advanced English) and the CPE (Cambridge of Proficiency in English).

Despite criticism that standardized tests do not provide equally valid assessment of all students, I saw them as a motivation to increase my knowledge and to challenge myself. I considered it a game that I had to learn how to play in and not an exam per se. The certificate was a tangible proof of my progress and I do feel that if it were not for the exams I would not have had the will to thrive.

Teaching English: Retrospective

When I was matriculated for the English classes in middle school, little did I know how my teaching would be shaped by my experiences as a learner (Richards, & Lockharts, 1994). I excelled both in high school and at *Cultura Inglesa* as far as languages, so I decided to apply for a Bachelor's Degree in Portuguese and English.

After the third year, I was eligible to start working and I got a job at a growing franchise called CNA. I had no experience teaching, but the school trained me on the functional approach. I walked into the classroom with the belief that my students would learn by having "fun". Little did I know that I lacked knowledge of classroom management to allow my teenage students to have fun in a controlled manner. It took me a few months to realize what was effective to keep them under control. I started to be

firmer with my students but never suppressed my or my students' sense of humor because I believed that laughter reduces anxiety and, as a result, lowers the affective filter (Krashen, 1982). I lacked the understanding that a class needs to find a balance between excitement and quietness and between building rapport and authority.

My learning style also influenced my teaching approach. When I was a student, I took very few notes, so most of the information was processed aurally and kinesthetically. As a result, I did not use the board very often. On the other hand, games and hands-on activities with realia were an integral part of my class. After observing other teachers, I noticed that if I wrote more and used more visuals it would suit most learning styles in my class and the amount of Portuguese spoken would be dramatically reduced. Without a doubt, a picture is worth a thousand words! Also, as a learner, I lose concentration very easily with long lectures, so I attempted to keep my lectures as simple and short as possible and allowed my students to use most of the class time for practice.

In my first three years of teaching, I did not have a clear idea of how a class should be structured, and therefore, I planned it intuitively until 1999, when I took the CELTA course in England. This intensive preparatory course taught me how to structure a class as well as several speaking, listening, reading and writing techniques. It taught me especially how to present the content in a context students could relate to and, thus, make it meaningful. That was also the first experience I had with consistent observations of other teachers in training and material development. This course significantly developed my self-awareness and critical views on teaching practices.

My next most important experience occurred when I was an exchange teacher at an elementary school in the United States. I had taught EFL at an elementary school in

Brazil for 2 years. EFL normally gives more emphasis on speaking, pronunciation, listening and grammar rather than reading, and writing (varying depending on the students' needs). However, American schools expect students to be able to read and write at a much faster rate than listening and speaking, which went counter to what I believed as a teacher and what I had experienced as a student.

I also had to adjust to a syllabus that established that ESOL teachers should plan technology-related activities such as web page designing and imaging which I was not acquainted with. I was supposed to teach English, not computer skills! In retrospect, I believe that was a watershed in my career because it made me rethink the approaches I had been using thus far and my role as an ESL teacher. I soon realized that I would not be taking on more responsibilities as a teacher. In reality, technology would be an ally I could use to facilitate learning.

Practicum Observations

I had never taught or observed a Structure and Composition class for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) before. Writing was tied to other skills and the highest levels of proficiency were geared at preparing students for standardized tests rather than academic writing. They overlap as far as the five-paragraph argumentative essay and reviews, but I was never required to teach how to organize a reader-response or a research paper. Since the nature of the classes differed in several ways, I have tried to understand my Cooperating Teacher's (CT) decisions and reflect on what I would have done differently and what I could learn from her. I have also related them to my own

classroom experiences in my own teaching context as a teacher of Portuguese as a second language for undergraduate students at Georgia State University (GSU).

I have noticed that my CT sometimes spent half to an hour lecturing and, consequently, students' attention wandered. So much so that one of her students was regularly caught dozing off during class. Once I asked her what she thought about the class she had just taught and she said that she would rather reduce TTT in order to let students work. Her complaint was that there was so much to cover in so little time that the only solution was to lecture them. In my opinion, the time in a foreign language class should be used by the students to practice L2, not by the teacher. In order to minimize the problem, if I were teaching this class, I would ask students questions at the beginning of the class in order to activate their schemata and to know where to focus my lecture on. She also provided handouts with the information of the lecture and went over it with the students, which took a lot of the class time. Alternatively, she could have highlighted the main points in very short lectures alternated with short hands-on practice and, if necessary, referred the students to the written material for detailed information. Needless to say, her choice affected the pace and variety of activities. My observations have corroborated my belief that students have a tendency to lose concentration when the TTT is excessive and when their input is not requested.

I have learned a lot from my CT about the writing process. She divided it into brainstorming, planning, drafting, composing, editing and publishing. First, the organization and writing style were taught inductively or deductively through a sample paper. When appropriate, Linda asked students to compare the rhetoric style of their native culture with English, which I find very beneficial because it raises awareness not

only of cultural influence on their style but also of what steps they would have take to adjust to the new rhetoric. The planning stages were aided by diagrams to help students through the drafting stage. Before turning in the final draft, students were asked to peer-edit as many papers as possible so as to apply their knowledge, possibly test their hypotheses, and develop a critical eye to their own and other students' writing style. These sessions were always guided by a rubric with very specific guidelines. When I taught writing, my students looked at only one sample because peer-editing takes a great amount of time. Linda showed me that this is not so if students concentrate on one aspect at a time (e.g.: introduction, conclusion, descriptive verbs). The students were not stimulated to publish their work except in the end-of -semester magazine published by the department. Publishing is an important part of writing, especially in academia where students need to be prepared to receive responses and questions from readers. Since the classes were held in a classroom with Internet access, I would have my students publish their work on web-based research webs such as *The English Spark Online Magazine* or *King's Road Project*.

As a consequence of my observations, I have asked my Portuguese students to post their draft paragraph on WebCT after they went through the brainstorming and organizing processes. Students were supposed to read each other's writing and reply to each of them pinpointing one aspect they liked and one that may need improvement. I could clearly see the difference between the students who took the time to read their peers' comments and the ones who did not because their writing was better organized and contained fewer errors. This experiment has confirmed that peer-editing can provide a refreshing insight into someone's writing. However, next time I do it I will provide the

rationale for them to do so. Students still do not fully understand the value of peer-editing because it is something relatively new that has not been embraced by the majority of the teachers.

Familiarity with technology has been increasingly demanded in academia and all fields of knowledge. The classes I have observed took place in a highly technological room. Yet the word processor was the only program regularly used. Students should move beyond the basic technological applications and explore other tools not only for the purpose of learning the language but also to keep abreast with the technology they will be required to know in their future career.

Teachers cannot encourage students to make use of technology if they eschew it themselves. This semester I did not teach in a room with as many resources as Linda's. However, whenever I took my students to the highly technological language laboratory on campus, I would write on the board using a word processor because my handwriting is slow, unclear and I tend to make spelling errors. By using a word processor, time was saved and I was able to organize the information in boxes and tables, use different font types and sizes and highlight it with different colors. I could also use the thesaurus and the spell checker.

Something very useful that Linda taught me was how to use a grammar log using Excel. The individual log had several categories of grammatical errors (spelling, run-on sentence, etc) and every time the student made an error, he or she would describe it in detail and rewrite the sentence correctly. The advantage of using the grammar log is that by the end of the semester, the learner could visualize the areas that needed improvement.

Finally, the Practicum CT raised an important issue I had never given it a thought: action zone. My Portuguese class is organized in a semi-circle. After the readings and the observations, I started to realize that I tended to look at the students directly facing me and avoided the ones sitting on the side, the students who looked uninterested or who made me uncomfortable for some reason. Consequently, I began to have more eye contact with them more often and soliciting their participation.

My Future Career

Short Term Plans

ELT has required teachers to be able to shift their cultural perspective and behavior to match that of another culture. In one year's time, I would like to be teaching in an IEP program in Europe or the Middle East. I am still not sure where I would like to teach, but wherever I go, my ultimate goal is to "teach about other cultural perspectives-[and be] able to embody them, to some degree." (Hammer, & Bennett, 1998, p.10).

According to the IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory) I have taken this semester, I am in the minimization stage. Bennett's suggested activities include reading articles and/or discussing the values of my students' culture in order to move to the next stage, acceptance. Additionally, I will read books and articles about how these values are reflected in the learning environment.

After observing such an ethnically diverse group and taking the Intercultural Communication course, I have come to the realization that teachers have a role to help students become culturally self-aware and more aware of the target culture. If I teach in an IEP program in the U.S or abroad, I will suggest the inclusion of ethnographic

research on the target culture following the guidelines by Allen (2000) first, because aspiring college students may be required to write ethnographies in their courses and second, because culture papers can be used as tools to increase cultural sensitivity (Hammer, & Bennett, 1998). I now view culture as something closely intertwined with language and behavior rather than a “thing” we talk about when there are national holidays and popular festivities. However, I feel I need to do further reading on how to introduce it in plain language without treating the issues superficially.

In the short term, there are a few things I would like to integrate into my teaching repertoire. For instance, I have learned how weblogs can become meaningful communication tools that will encourage students to share their academic work, interests, culture and experiences in general. I would like my future students to experiment with it due to the benefits on discourse, length of writing and language functions (Wang, cited in Warschauner, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2000). I also would like to incorporate the grammar log done because students can independently identify what their weaknesses are, especially the ones who have reached a high proficiency level and erroneously believe that their errors are minor or that there is no more room for improvement.

Last but not least, knowledge of technology and theory without knowledge of students may not be ideal if teachers want to target individual problems. By the end of the semester, Linda exhibited knowledge about each student. She talked about their strengths and limitations in detail and had an individual plan for further progress. If I were to choose something I would emulate from my CT, this characteristic of hers would be my highest priority. I would like to know my students well enough to split them into different

groups according to their needs and have them work on the skills they need the most rather than doing the traditional, one-size-fits-all group planning.

Long Term Plans

Since my observations took place in a room with a lot of technology, it made me ponder over technology's role in ESL/EFL instruction. Technology still seems to be a pending task for many ESL/EFL teachers. Obviously, technology will not automatically make them effective teachers, but it will give them more options to maximize and stimulate learning. In five years, I would like to train teachers to help them make the best of their technological resources. Therefore, I will need to be totally comfortable using web-design software so that my trainees can share their work with their colleagues and provide out-of-class support to students. I think I can also make a contribution to computer-assisted assessment and pronunciation instruction by sharing my pedagogical expertise with computer technicians. In order to achieve this goal, I am going to apply for a Phd program related to instructional technology in the U.S..

Conclusion

I have been teaching for over 7 years and I thought that my beliefs were pretty consolidated. Observing an experienced teacher certainly contributed to my growth as a professional. First, it made me rethink my belief system as a learner and as a teacher. Second, it gave me an insight into an EAP syllabus that I might teach when I graduate.

I am certain that there are several aspects of my teaching that need to be rethought and improved. However, as Brown (2001) suggested teachers need to set priorities for

professional growth. Over the course of the semester, I have come to realize that I need to develop the ability to clearly understand where each student is at so that I can provide a more individualized instruction that will help them ameliorate. The observations have also confirmed by belief that I need to become more proficient in technology in order to offer my students more leaning opportunities.

Teaching is not an exact science that can provide teachers with a straightforward answer. Empirical research can guide us but each class is unique, each student is unique. I can find this uniqueness through reflection about my colleagues' teaching and my own.

References

- Allen, L.Q. (2000). Culture and the ethnographic interview in foreign language teacher development. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33(1), 51-57.
- Allwright, D., & Bailey, K. (1991). Receptivity: Some relevant research. In R. Allwright, K.M. Bailey, & M. Swan, (Eds.), *Focus on the language classroom*, (pp. 169-193). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. White Plains, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Day, R. R. (1990). Teacher Observation in second language teacher education. In J. C. Richards and D. Nunan (Eds.), *Second language teacher education* (pp.34-61). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hammer, M. & Bennett, M.J. (1998). Interpreting your intercultural development inventory (IDI) profile. In *Intercultural development inventory manual*. (pp.1-12).
- Jones, L., & Kimbrough, V. (1987). *Great ideas*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Krashen, S.D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition* (Chapter 2). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Warschauner, M., Shetzer, H., & Meloni, C. (2000). *Internet for English teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.