Linking theory with practice on an MA TESOL programme

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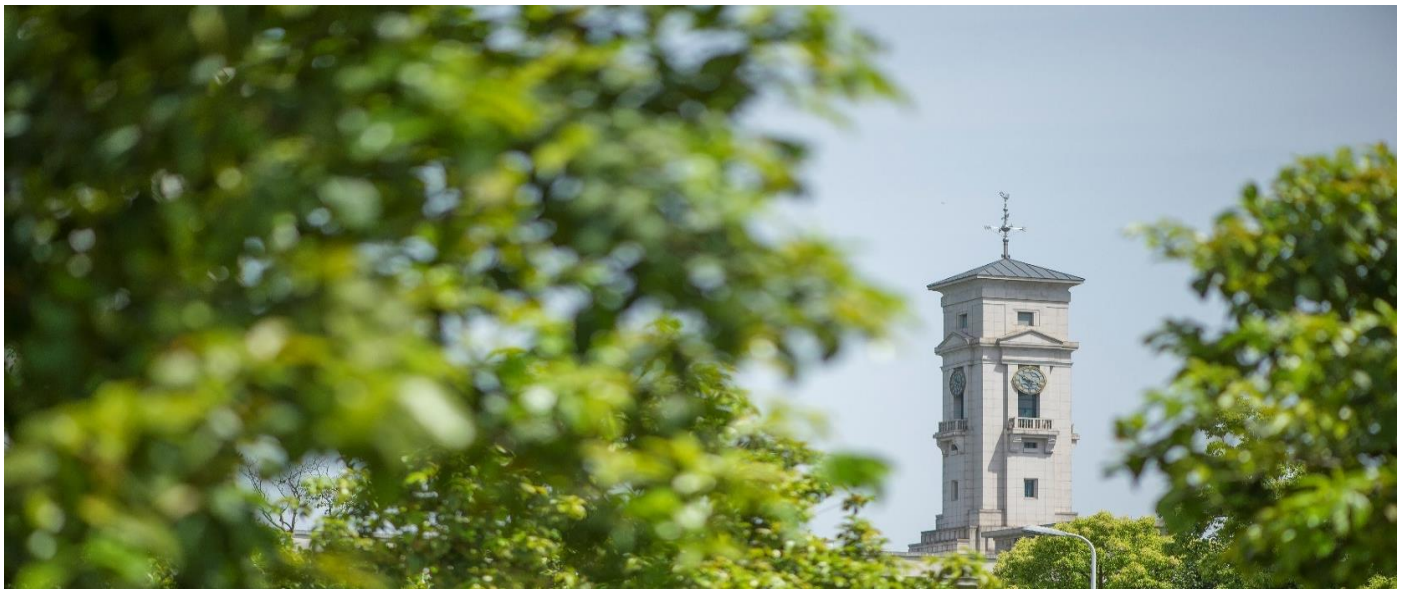

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Abstract

While there can be little doubt that taking part in an MA TESOL programme is likely to expose the participants to significant amounts of ELT theory, the learning that ultimately results from this may not always convert very well into ELT practice. This is particularly true for those who join a Masters' programme with limited previous teaching experience, especially if the programme itself lacks a practical teaching component. In such cases, unless students are encouraged to make their own explicit links between theory and practice, the didactic transmission mode of delivery commonly found in university lectures may further conspire to make the gap even wider. This paper describes an attempt to move beyond such a traditional MA lecture format and discusses an alternative pedagogical means of linking theory with practice on an MA TESOL programme delivered at an EMI branch campus in China.

KEYWORDS

English Language Teaching; theory and practice; MA TESOL; teacher development; classroom pedagogies

Introduction

Eventually, most people who have committed themselves to a career in ELT will start to think about doing a Masters' programme, typically in TESOL or a closely related subject area such as Applied Linguistics. Indeed, in some parts of the world, these qualifications are now gradually becoming a pre-requisite for ELT employment and are thus fulfilling a gate-keeping function for entry to the profession. This stands in sharp contrast to the approach of such Masters' programmes in the UK, entry to which usually requires applicants to have a minimum of two- or three-years' prior teaching experience, and which may also ask for the completion of a recognised initial teacher training qualification such as the CELTA or the Trinity College Cert TESOL.

The benefits of only starting a Masters' programme after a certain level of practical experience and expertise has already been achieved are obvious. Such teachers have stood in front of a class of students and have taught the subject. They will therefore already be familiar with things like lesson planning, ELT materials and classroom management and thus have a practice-based contextual peg on which concepts that are more theoretical can later be hanged. For those joining an MA TESOL programme as the first real step in their ELT career, the situation is clearly quite different. With little or no prior teaching experience, such individuals typically face a very steep learning curve, in which they not only have to get to grips with what can often seem quite abstract theories and paradigms, but then also link these with strategies for classroom practice. This problem is often then compounded by the fact that many MA TESOL programmes do not

include a practical teaching component, nor necessarily encourage their students to make *explicit* links between what the ELT research says and how this might then translate into what happens in the classroom. From my personal involvement in the delivery of MA TESOL programmes, often with quite experienced students, a very common complaint from participants is that even after having successfully passed their Masters, they sometimes fail to see the *practical* relevance of what they covered on the course or apply this learning to their daily lived-in realities. In its extreme form, this is analogous to the English language learners who perform well in discrete-point grammar tests and can achieve high examination results, but then struggle to communicate when they find themselves in an English-speaking environment.

Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

A further issue, which can serve to widen the gap between theory and practice, are the types of teaching and learning which typically prevail in Higher Education. 'Traditional' approaches to university-based teaching usually rely on the delivery of lectures and seminars, neither of which are necessarily conducive to *active* learning. This is particularly true when applied to vocational subjects, the mastery of which may ideally require a more hands-on, experiential element. The perceived shortcomings of the university lecture model have been well-documented in the recent academic literature (French and Kennedy 2017) with some writers proposing that lectures have long outlived their usefulness (Bates 2014) and others arguing that they should be got rid of all together (Clark 2014). While it is not necessarily my intention here to denigrate the value of lectures as an educational tool, it is worth considering how teaching and learning in university contexts has typically been conceptualized, as this can also help to shine a light on the sometimes-fragmented relationship between theory and practice.

Drawing on some of the earlier work by Samuelowicz and Bain (2001; 1992), Eileen Carnell (2007) outlines seven different conceptions of teaching in Higher Education. These are summarised in the bullet-point list below:

- Imparting information
- Transmitting knowledge
- Facilitating learning
- Changing students' conceptions
- Supporting student learning
- Negotiating meaning
- Encouraging knowledge creation

As Carnell (ibid) explains, the first two items on this list are essentially quantitative in nature. According to these conceptualisations, the teacher is seen as central to the learning process and the emphasis is on instruction (information transfer). By contrast, the remaining five bullet-points are qualitative. Here, the teacher is seen as a facilitator of learning and the emphasis is placed on construction (information creation).

Under an information transfer model of teaching, learners tend to be passive recipients of knowledge. The teaching curriculum is fixed, the teacher is pivotal, the roles of learners and teachers are kept distinct from one another and critical thinking is not encouraged. However, when teaching is conceptualized as information *creation*, learners are

encouraged to become individual sense-makers, the teaching itself emphasizes activity and collaboration, teachers and learners share the responsibility for teaching and learning, and the ensuing knowledge is co-constructed (Carnell and Lodge 2002; Watkins et al 2002; Chalmers and Fuller 1996).

If a core objective is to get students making stronger links between theory and practice, then it seems clear from the above that an information creation model of teaching is the approach most likely to work best. However, it is also clear that the traditional university lecture format owes more to information transfer. As a means of reconciling these different outcomes, might it therefore be time for a change?

The Context

The MA TESOL at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) is a 180-credit 12-month full-time programme of study consisting of six 20-credit taught modules (students take three core modules in Semester 1, then three elective modules in Semester 2) followed by a period of independent research, which culminates in the submission of a dissertation worth 60 credits. The structure and academic content of the MA TESOL at UNNC largely reflects the brother and sister programmes currently in operation at the University of Nottingham, UK and on the University of Nottingham Malaysia campus, although there are some slight variations to cater more explicitly for the local Chinese context, such as the inclusion of a specific module on teaching observation and practice. This latter module is particularly valuable at UNNC, as around half of the MA TESOL applicants admitted to the programme each year have little or no previous teaching experience. From the earliest days of the programme's delivery, it was strongly felt by the course designers that without such an explicit practical component, the overall value of the MA for such participants would be significantly diminished.

In my role as the Course Director, and academic convener of several modules, I naturally have a major stake in the success and future direction of the programme. However, from my more personal perspective as a Professor of English Language Education, I also have an ongoing professional interest in how our MA TESOL students make sense of and ultimately apply the different kinds of learning to which they are exposed. Observing the progress of successive student cohorts, I have become increasingly aware of what I see as a considerable gap in their understanding of how to apply ELT theory to ELT practice. In recent years, this has prompted me to consider the delivery of our MA TESOL from wider pedagogical perspectives and to reflect on ways in which such a gap might be effectively bridged.

The Experiment

Having decided that there would be several benefits to making some of the links between theory and practice on the MA TESOL more explicit, I found myself pondering the following questions:

Could I find a way of delivering my input sessions which would

1 Give students a **stronger purpose** for doing some background reading? i.e., they would need to use any knowledge they had gained immediately.

2 Have students **engaging with theoretical issues in practice**? i.e., rather than simply learning about theory passively, they would get to experience it first-hand for themselves.

3 Create ample opportunities for **authentic** interaction and peer learning? i.e., the reasons for interacting should be real and involve meaningful exchanges of information.

4 Allow for some **genuine** and **highly personalised** critical reflection and introspection? i.e., the subject for reflection should be related to the students' own lived-in experience; they themselves should have a personal stake in things.

One of the core modules I convene is called 'Developments in Language Teaching Methodology'. The purpose of this module is to provide students with an overview of the main methodological advances in ELT and in so doing raise their critical awareness of how successive methodologies have grappled with similar dichotomous challenges. Examples of this typically include an exploration of issues such as the role and purpose of L1 vs L2; whether classroom pedagogy should be teacher or student-centred; inductive vs deductive approaches to the teaching of grammar and how to balance the demands of student fluency vs student accuracy. Two of the 3-hour input sessions on this module deal specifically with Communicative Language Teaching and I decided that I would re-badge the second one of these as Communicative Language Teaching *Applied*. As an experiment to see if I could make the links between ELT theories and practice more explicit, I also decided that I would depart from my usual PowerPoint slide-led interactive lecture format and instead try to come up with a pedagogical approach, which would allow me to engage more directly with the four questions outlined above.

As already mentioned, individual MA TESOL input sessions last for three consecutive hours. After reading through the material that I wanted my session on CLT to cover, I ultimately settled on a seven-stage model for delivery. This is detailed below:

1 Get the students thinking first about the nature of communication in general, then ask them to consider how this might manifest in the ELT classroom.

2 Provide the students with a theoretical model from the early days of CLT and invite their critical reflection and evaluation.

3. Expose the students to some practical exercises to help them make links between the theoretical model and what they might encounter in ELT practice.

4. Provide the students with a more recent theoretical model for CLT and as in stage two, invite their critical reflection and evaluation.

5. Ask the students to compare and contrast the two different models of CLT and identify any similarities and differences.

6. Require the students to take part in an extended learning task which would itself be highly communicative, and which would inherently espouse some of the

theoretical principles they had been considering (I would only draw the students' attention to this *after* the task had been completed)

7. Have the students critically reflect on their participation in the extended learning task and consider the extent to which this task, as a potential ELT activity in its own right, conforms to the proposed theoretical models for CLT.

In Stage 1, one of the first questions I asked students to ponder was whether some activities might be considered more communicative than others. As an extension, I further asked the students whether they could identify any key principles, which might be used as criteria for measuring this. My intention was that this would pave the way for Stage 2, in which I would then invite them to consider some early theorising about CLT.

In an article dating back to the time when CLT was still relatively new, ELT stalwart Jeremy Harmer (1982: 166) had suggested that a key hallmark of communication is that the speaker/writer should genuinely want to say or write something, and that the listener/reader should genuinely want to listen to or read this. Expanding on this point, Harmer (ibid) further postulated that for an ELT activity to qualify as *truly* communicative, it should ideally meet five key criteria:

- Students must have a **desire** to communicate.
- There must be a **purpose** for communication.
- Attention will be on the **content** rather than the form.
- The teacher will **not intervene.**
- Materials will **not control or restrict** the language.

(Harmer 1982: 166 my emphasis)

As I have discovered on more than one occasion, there can sometimes be a danger of my MA students seeing things in very black and white terms, so I stressed at this point that they should resist the temptation to categorize CLT as 'good' and more traditional methodologies such as grammar translation as 'bad', and instead try to embrace the idea that teachers need to be discerning in their pedagogical approaches and choose whatever works best for a given situation. As indeed, Harmer had originally proposed:

> The job of a syllabus or course designer is surely to work out an efficacious balance between non-communicative and communicative activities, and the many possibilities between these extremes…. (Harmer 1982: 168)

It was now time to give the students some practical exercises, which would hopefully augment and consolidate the theoretical model they had just been considering. For this, I showed them a slide displaying a randomized selection of 15 typical ELT activities. This included items such as writing a letter to a pen friend; giving instructions on how to do something; reciting a jazz chant; playing a game; taking part in an interview; solving a problem and reading a magazine. I then asked the students to work together in pairs and

position each of these activities on a horizontal cline stretching from non-communicative on the far left to highly communicative on the far right. After sharing their answers with the class as a whole and engaging in some open discussion, the same pairs were then asked to consider if there was any way in which a patently non-communicative ELT activity such as a drill or jazz chant might be adapted, so that it would become communicative. This not only provided an opportunity for some creative thinking, but also further consolidated the students' understanding of the theoretical principles, which must be satisfied for an activity to have genuine communicative merit.

In Stage 4, I decided to move from the practical back to the theoretical and showed the students a more recent academic model, which also purports to summarize the underlying principles of CLT. For this, I turned to Dörnyei (2009) and Arnold, Dörnyei and Pugliese's writing on what they call the 'Principled Communicative Approach' (2015) and invited my students to critically evaluate the writers' eight stated principles:

1 The input should be meaning-focused and personally engaging.

2 The input should contain an early and explicit focus on declarative knowledge.

3 There should be controlled practice activities to promote automization.

4 The controlled practice activities should be as motivating and meaningful as possible.

5 There should be a balance struck between meaning-based activities and form-focused activities.

6 The input should include a focus on formulaic sequences.

7 Learners should receive extensive exposure to L2 input in order to cater to their implicit learning mechanisms. However, this should be scaffolded with pre-task activities.

8 Learners should be given lots of opportunity to participate in genuine L2 interaction.

The resulting discussion segued into Stage 5, in which I decided to provoke some controversy and critical thinking. Having now exposed the students to two separate theoretical models for CLT, I presented them with a critique of the more recent model by Scott Thornbury (2016) and invited their consideration of whether the Principled Communicative Approach has told us anything about CLT that we did not already know. As part of a slide titled, 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?' (The more things change, the more they stay the same?), I asked the students to consider whether any of the core principles reminded them of any other theoretical models that we had already covered in the module. The ensuing discussion on issues such as language acquisition vs language learning, Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis and the merits and defects of PPP served as good consolidation for material already learnt, whilst also reminding the students that the history of ELT can often present its practitioners with a very strong sense of déjà vu.

At this stage in proceedings, I was now about a third of the way through the 3-hour input session and after a short break, it was time to move on to what was arguably the most valuable part, Stage 6: the students' participation in my extended learning task.

When designing this task, my intention was to invoke the principles of loop input (Woodward 1986) and provide the students with an activity, which would simultaneously operate on two levels. On the one hand, I wanted the task to be a meaningful activity in and of itself and something that would deepen the students' understanding of the designated content. On a separate level though, I also wanted the task to be highly representative of the principles that we had been considering. I hoped that in taking part in an activity like this, my students would experience a deeper level of understanding. In other words, rather than *passively* learning about CLT theory, they themselves would be enacting and experiencing it. This linked back to the second question I had earlier pondered.

The task I had ultimately settled on to help me achieve these aims was a semi-formal debate. Given that we had spent most of the session up to now discussing different aspects of CLT, I decided that I would divide the students into teams and ask them to debate the following motion: **'This house believes that CLT is not suitable for use in China and should be banned'**. As preparation for this debate, each team would be directed to pre-prepared folders in Moodle (institutionally we are very fortunate in that all classrooms are internet-ready, and students can easily access supplementary materials posted in the university VLE) which contained a broad selection of journal articles, blog discussions and book chapters arguing either FOR or AGAINST the proposed debate motion. Students were thus given an immediate purpose to guide their academic reading. This satisfied the challenge that I had set myself earlier when thinking about question one, as the students would now need to read and make sense of this material as a direct and immediate preparation for the arguments they would muster in the debate. It also met my criteria for question three, as in deciding which ideas to use and who would say what, the students would have a genuine reason for interacting with their peers.

In terms of the timing, I told the students that they would have about an hour in which to read the resources and then work in their teams to decide who would speak first and how the ensuing debate might most effectively be structured. In my instructions, I made it a clear pre-requisite that **all** team-members had to contribute to the debate, but they could decide for themselves the order in which they would speak and how they might deal with any counterarguments. Beyond this, I offered no further guidance and left each team of students to their own devices. They were free to remain in the classroom while making their preparations, go to the library or even work from one of the campus coffee shops, but everyone had to be back in advance of the designated debate start-time.

While the students were busy getting themselves ready, I rearranged the classroom seating so that each team of students would face the other. I also set up a video camera so that there would be a recording of the proceedings, which we could later watch and learn from together.

The Outcome

I formally opened the debate by stating the house motion and then invited the supporting team of students to present their case. Beyond this, I reverted to the role of observer and deliberately had no other involvement than occasionally checking the video camera. Thanks to their pre-task reading, each team of students were able to draw on a series of examples to support their arguments and after some initial hesitations and false starts, it became evident that they were starting to take things quite seriously and wanted to win points for their team. Indeed, once the arguments and counter arguments began to flow, some students had clearly started to personalise the activity, the task was no longer something contrived and artificial, but had become a genuine debate in which they were keen to express their own thoughts and opinions. Mindful of wanting to leave at least thirty minutes of the session for some critical reflection and a de-briefing, somewhat reluctantly, I stopped the debate after about half an hour, declaring a winning team based on my evaluation of the overall fluency, persuasiveness, and logic of their arguments.

As soon as the debate had finished, I moved to the final stage of the session, Stage 7, the purpose of which was to have the students reflect on what they had just experienced and consider the debate task itself as an example of a potential CLT activity in action. I was somewhat surprised to find that until it was directly pointed out for them, most of the students had not in fact 'twigged' that this activity had been deliberately chosen to mirror some of the principles we had earlier been discussing about CLT. Once their critical reflection started in earnest though, the students were soon able to identify that the debate had in fact conformed to all of Harmer's original CLT principles from 1982 but had violated several of the more recent tenets put forward by Arnold, Dörnyei and Pugliese (2015), such as the matter of teacher intervention, whether to include an explicit focus on language and the role of controlled practice. This provoked a lively discussion on the pros and cons of CLT's 'strong' and 'weak' forms and as they had literally been living some of these theories while they took part in the debate, students were now able to talk from first-hand experience on which approaches they personally felt would be most effective for English language learners and why.

Conclusion

While I am not about to claim that PowerPoint slides and lectures no longer feature in my repertoire for MA TESOL delivery, I remain convinced that my decision to try and make the links between theory and practice more explicit by doing something a little different to the pedagogical norm was valuable on several counts. The feedback from the students about the session was uniformly positive, with many of them commenting on how doing the pre-readings, discussing that content with their peers and then taking part in the debate had really made them think about how CLT is supposed to operate. While some remained sceptical about whether they would be able to apply a similar activity in their own ELT classrooms, given the logistical challenges with large class sizes and their need to follow a fairly rigid syllabus, each of the students agreed that the session on CLT Applied had been much more enjoyable and motivational for them than sitting through a 'standard' MA lecture. Happily, they also agreed, as I had originally hoped, that taking part in the session had made them think much more explicitly about the relationship between ELT theory and ELT practice.

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