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Plurilingualism in TESL Programs? Are we there yet?

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With the emergence of a plurilingual paradigm shift in language teaching, questions concerning the extent to which language teacher education programs are effectively preparing language teachers to teach in our messy, heteroglossic, and multilingual world (Pavlenko, 2005) have assumed immediate relevance in the training and education of teachers. Despite the considerable number of TESOL/TESL programs qualifying teachers around the world, little is known about how these programs have adapted their pedagogy to meet the current reality of a plurilingual paradigm shift in language teaching. This research investigated the curriculum and pedagogy of a TESL Certificate course in Canada.

Keywords: TESOL/TESL programs, language teacher education, teacher learning, plurilingualism

Introduction

In classrooms all around the world children, adolescents and adults are involved in the study of English (McKay, 2008). As such, English has become not only an issue of concern to educators, but also a matter of social and political relevance for countries worldwide (McKay, 2008). According to Burns & Richards (2009), in order for countries to actively participate in the global economy as well as have access to information and knowledge which provide the foundation for social and economic development, English language skills are considered vital. In this scenario, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)/Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programs have assumed a central role in qualifying English language teachers for the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry worldwide as they are an especially popular avenue of entry into the profession and attract thousands of people every year (Ferguson & Donno, 2003).

However, despite the considerable impact TESOL/TESL training courses have exerted on ELT globally, little is known about how these programs have adapted their pedagogy to the current reality of “rapid globalization of economic opportunities” and the “geopolitical changes” of increasing multilingualism, displacement and migration (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007), or if there has been indeed any adaptation at all. Each year, thousands of teachers are qualified to teach English in ever-increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse landscapes “as migrating populations bring with them a wealth of languages and cultures, which come into contact with the languages of their host countries” (Piccardo, 2013, p. 601). Even though there is a recognition of how relevant this diverse multilingual environment is for language teacher education,

mainly with calls for a plurilingual paradigm shift in TESOL (Piccardo, 2013), research in the field still needs to be further extended to include a plurilingual perspective.

In this paper, therefore, I investigate a TESL Canada certificate program and focus on its language learning and teaching theoretical underpinnings as well as on a trainee teacher's (Kate) learning journey during her coursework in order to find out how her past learning experiences and beliefs about language learning and teaching were reinforced or rejected/modified by the program. I use the term "plurilingual(ism)" and "multicultural(ism)" as Marshall and Moore use it, i.e., "plurilingual(ism) to refer to the unique aspects of individual repertoires and agency, and multilingual(ism) to refer to broader social language context/contact(s) and the coexistence of several languages in a particular situation" (2013, p. 474). I also use the term "trainee teachers" and "teacher trainer" due to the focus placed on training and the development of practical teaching skills in TESOL/TESL training courses.

I start this paper with a concise review of the literature on second language teacher education (SLTE), mapping the main paradigm shifts during its sixty-four years. I then focus on Kate and her learning in the TESL Canada course to examine how the program's theoretical underpinnings reinforced her prior learning experiences and beliefs. A discussion of such theoretical underpinnings is followed by a conclusion, in which I draw some implications for the future of TESOL/TESL training programs.

A Plurilingual Paradigm Shift in Second Language Teacher Education

The field of SLTE is relatively new, with its origins dating back to 1960s when short teacher training certificates began to prepare teachers to have the necessary practical classroom skills to teach English with new methods, e.g., Audiolingualism and Situational Language Teaching (Burns & Richards, 2009). Throughout the 70s, TESOL became a field of study, with higher education courses and degrees; disciplines such as linguistics, applied linguistics, second language acquisition and psychology were also incorporated into the field in attempts to provide a professional identity for language teachers and legitimise the teaching profession. (Freeman & Richards, 1996; Freeman, 2009). During the 80s, a new body of research, in which teachers' behaviors were shaped by their cognitive processes, i.e., the teachers' thoughts, judgments and decisions, came to be known as teacher cognition, teacher thinking, or teacher knowledge (Borg, 2006; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Shavelson & Stern, 1981).

It was in the 1990s, though, that the scope of SLTE moved beyond the language-learning-teaching framework and focused on not only *what* teachers should learn, but increasingly on *how* they should do it (Freeman, 2009). A shift from cognitive to situated, social views of learning consolidated and expanded the body of research on L2 teacher cognition, which began to conceptualise "L2 teacher learning as normative and lifelong, as emerging out of and through experiences in social context" (Johnson, 2009, p. 239). The advancements of the 1990s laid the foundations for a sociocultural turn in SLTE in 2000s. Developments in teacher learning since then have witnessed a concern within the broader context of community, institution, policy, and profession;

the reconceptualization of the knowledge base of L2 teacher education; the recognition of the legitimacy of practitioner knowledge; broadening the definition of language and SLA; teacher identity; and the changing the nature of what constitutes professional development (Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009).

In 2013, a seminal article by Piccardo advocating a plurilingualism paradigm shift in TESOL laid the groundwork for embracing plurilingualism and plurilingual pedagogies. In a special Plurilingualism issue of TESOL Quarterly, Piccardo (2013) challenged traditional views of language, learning and teaching, claiming that a paradigm shift from pureness to plurality is supported by three theoretical domains, i.e. psychocognitive, sociocultural, pedagogical. Since then, Piccardo's call for the adoption of plurilingualism and plurilingual pedagogies has been embraced by several scholars (Abiria, Early, & Kendrick, 2013; Cenoz & Gorter, 2013; Ellis, 2013; Lin, 2013; Lotherington, 2013; Marshall & Moore, 2013; Silver, & Bokhorst-Heng, 2013; Stille & Cummins, 2013; White, Hailemariam, & Ogbay, 2013). However, there is still a dearth of research focusing on plurilingualism in TESOL/TESL programs. Therefore, this paper intends to contribute to the body of research focusing on plurilingualism in the TESOL/SLTE fields.

The Research Methodology

As Johnson (2006) suggests, an interpretative paradigm is now viewed as better suited to investigating the complexities and various dimensions of teachers' professional lives. Thus, this research adopts a qualitative orientation, grounded in an interpretivist worldview, and uses a case study methodology "to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" in the activity of second language learning and teaching (Merriam, 1998, p. 19).

The data set used as the basis of the analysis for this paper was drawn from a larger set -over 200 hours of audio- and video-recorded interviews and classroom observations from the author's MA thesis. In addition to the recorded material, I collected data from assignments, lesson plans, lesson plan evaluations, post-lesson reflections, diaries, and informal conversations. In this paper, I focus on Kate, a trainee teacher in a TESL Canada course in Southern Ontario, Canada.

The certificate course was a 4-week full-time program, recognised by the TESL Canada Federation and internationally accepted. The program content was delivered mainly in a lecture format by one teacher trainer, and Jeremy Harmer's *How to Teach English* manual was adopted as the course book. It was particularly common for the teacher trainer to assign substantial amounts of worksheet exercises to cover language content, i.e., grammar, pronunciation. Sporadically, student-centred classroom activities such as lesson planning would be carried out. Trainee teachers were expected to take notes of a considerable amount of input during the lectures.

Language Learning and Teaching in the TESL Canada Course

According to the syllabus of the program, trainee teachers had to adopt Harmer's (2007) engage, study, activate (ESA) approach for the practicum lessons. During her lectures, the teacher trainer, Juliana, constantly referred to Harmer's book as her guide. She explicitly prohibited L1 use in her classroom as she adopted the school's English Only policy. She also required trainee teachers to follow the school's policy during their practicum lessons, that is, to prohibit students from using their L1s. In addition, throughout the course, the use of L1 in the classroom was presented as a hindrance, and a variety of techniques was taught in order to avoid its use. For instance, trainee teachers were taught to pair students from different nationalities together so they could not use their L1s in class. Juliana also held strong views about the best way to learn English. In her words, "they [students] have to practise it; use English as much as they can and avoid speaking with their friends in their own languages" (Informal conversation, 10/09/12).

Trainee teachers also learned about first and second language acquisition (FLA & SLA) during the program. In particular, Stephen Krashen's theory was presented in a handout as "widely accepted in the language learning community" and a discussion about his quotation, i.e., "In the real world, conversations with sympathetic native speakers who are willing to help the acquirer understand are very helpful" took place to explain second learning acquisition.

Kate's Past Learning Experiences and Beliefs

Kate held strong views about language learning and teaching. She constantly referred to her past learning experiences as a French learner to make sense of what she was learning in the course. In her diary, she wrote, "I'm so grateful that I still speak some French. It lets me understand some of the obstacles that ESL students have and the general differences between English & other languages" (Diary, 30/08/12). As she learned French in school, she identified with her students and knew exactly what they should do in order to learn a language. When asked about the best way to learn a language, she answered,

...kind of shutting down your brain to your first language and letting this new second one flow into your brain, and it's almost like you have to become obsessed with it to almost perfect it. If you're willing to put the time into it, it can be done, there's no reason not to, but if you keep flip flopping between your first, you know, trying to learn your second language, it will be just like mishmash of the two. I think that it was like from my personal experience, that was the biggest thing, just shutting off my brain in English and really opening up to the French... (Interview, 22/08/12; italics my emphasis).

Kate was also adamant about how students should strive to learn pronunciation to sound like native speakers. She believed the best way to do so was to be immersed in the language and interact with native speakers. However, according to Kate, such immersion could not be in any place where the language is spoken, as there are a lot

of places with native speakers with “bad” accents. In an informal conversation, Kate strongly advised the author not to go to Quebec in order to learn French as theirs is a terrible accent and also have a mishmash of English and French words. She mentioned the author should go to France as their French is perfect and she would learn it correctly. Kate was at one time an exchange student in France and believed that her experience there helped her to improve her pronunciation a great deal.

Discussion

The data presented above reveal the language learning and teaching theoretical underpinnings of the TESL Canada program investigated in this paper, that is, a standard notion of language and a monolingual model. It also illustrates how Kate’s prior learning experiences and beliefs were reinforced by this standard view of language and this monolingual approach to teaching.

The course material and the teacher trainer’s input clearly show that language was seen as a stable and homogenous system governed by a set of rules which individuals are born with (innate). Views of language learning and teaching can also be seen by the explicit prohibition of L1 use in the classroom and the adoption of a teaching methodology which neglects the role of L1 in class. In addition, a monolingual disposition (Gogolin, 1994; Piccardo, 2013) is clearly observed on the emphasis placed on the dichotomy between native and non-native speakers throughout the course, mainly with the idea that children acquire a language by listening to the native speakers around them and the idea of sympathetic native speakers who can help learners. As Ludi and Py (2009) observe, this is a twentieth century monolingual model of language “based on... individual languages considered on their own terms” in which “the boundaries of each language seem clear, allowing organised forms to be brought together within one homogenous system” (p. 154). The logical consequence of seeing languages in this way is that any deviations from the stable and homogenous system are considered errors or “bastard forms” that must be resisted or fixed (Ludi & Py, 2009), and the use of L1 is seen as a deterrent to the language acquisition process. Therefore, language is viewed as a uniformed, fixed and pure entity that is spoken by a homogenous speech community, and language contact and variation as a hindrance that must be overcome. As a result, the monolingual individual who knows and speaks this standard language becomes the norm, and their language the object of study.

However, as Piccardo (2013) points out, “[w]e are now increasingly aware that such a perfect individual does not exist, no more than a stable and perfectly known language exists” (p. 604). More current views of language have rejected the notion of a standard language and offered the notion of variation. Variation occurs in the way speakers use the language, e.g., sound (phonetics), structural (grammar), and social variation (men v. women). This means that languages are no longer considered stable and pure entities, but “composita” (Piccardo, 2013; Wandruszka, 1979), that is, multi-layered sites of linguistics resources. Language variation is then seen in the way these

multiple layers overlap or superimpose each other, forming one dynamic, heterogeneous, and in-constant-process-of-modification totality.

This more current conceptualization of language clearly rejects the monolingual model and opens up a space for “the normality and inevitability of plurilingualism” (Piccardo, 2013, p. 605). A plurilingual model of language is, therefore, able to account for language variation and demystify “the false vision of linguistic homogeneity and pureness” (Piccardo, 2013, p. 605). Moreover, it conceptualizes language as a repertoire of language varieties composed of an endless and open set of grammatical and syntactic microsystem, which can derive from “different varieties of a language from various languages, as well as from diverse discourse experiences” (Ludi & Py, 2009, p. 157). In this way, a plurilingual model of language does not consider L1 “interference” as an obstacle to the acquisition of languages since “every (new) language acquisition modifies the global language competence of individuals and shapes their linguistic repertoires” and “pre-existing linguistic knowledge and competence is taken into consideration” (Piccardo, 2013, p. 603). On the contrary, L1 plays a crucial role in the language learning and teaching process in that the transfer of knowledge, skills and metalinguistic awareness not only enhances learning, but can also be encouraged and taught in the classroom.

Conclusion

The importance of TESOL/TESL programs in qualifying English language teachers to the ELT profession can no longer be considered marginal. Even though these training programs have been qualifying English language teachers for the ELT industry for more than 60 years, research studies exploring such courses are rare (Ferguson & Donno, 2003; Freitas, 2013). This study is an attempt to address the scarcity of literature on TESOL Canada programs by investigating the underlying theoretical foundations about language learning and teaching behind such a course. The analysis of the data revealed how the program supported its trainee teacher’s past French learning experiences and also reinforced her strongly held monolingual beliefs about learning and teaching. Kate’s success in the course can also be seen as evidence of how her prior learning experiences and beliefs were in agreement with the course underpinnings.

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