Overcoming the Theory and Practice Divide : a Perspective From the TESOL Plus Program

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Certificate programs such as Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) have burgeoned in our globalized world. They are usually offered and/or accredited by reputable educational institutions, such as University of Cambridge, University College London, Michigan University, as well as sanctioned by government bodies (e.g., TESL Ontario and TESL Canada in Canada, National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS) in Australia, New Zealand Qualification Authorities (NZQA) in New Zealand, & Accreditation UK in the United Kingdom). These accredited programs vary enormously in their design, ranging from short certificate courses to higher education degrees. The former have historically been known as *teacher training* courses, with the British ELT industry as a pioneer in the field, qualifying English language teachers for more than 50 years (Freitas, 2013). They generally seek to provide their student-teachers with essential knowledge and practical skills for the teaching of the English language. The latter have been typically offered by higher education institutions in the format of bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees focusing on academic disciplines. However, what the ELT field has considered to be *the content* (knowledge base) of these programs as well as *how this content* should be taught has significantly changed through the years.

The Origins of ELT and the Theory and Practice Divide

The roots of the ELT field can be traced back to the field of general education in the 1960s, when teaching was described as a set of behaviours and activities that could be assessed by learning outcomes (Freeman, 1996). The assumption was that students would learn if a set of quantifiable behaviours and activities were carried out effectively (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). It was thought that "teachers needed discrete amounts of knowledge, usually in the form of general theories and methods that were assumed to be applicable to any teaching context" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 399). In this context,

the field of ELT saw the emergence of English language teaching methods such as Audiolingualism, The Silent Way, and Suggestopedia and the creation of teacher training programs to train teachers how to deliver instruction using such methods (Burns & Richards, 2009). These programs aimed at giving student-teachers the practical teaching skills to deliver their methods. Concurrently, the ELT field also began to build its foundation on disciplines such as linguistics, applied linguistics, and psychology. Higher education courses and degrees were created and they focused on the delivery of these disciplines as well as others such as language acquisition and classroom methodology (Freeman, 2009). This academic focus helped to legitimise the ELT profession and give English language teachers a professional identity (Freeman, 2009; Freeman & Richards, 1996).

However, as a result of these concurrent educational focuses, the divide between theory and practice began to generate a long-lasting debate in the field, and the distinction between practical teaching skills and academic knowledge became even more prominent (Burns & Richards, 2009). Attempts to resolve such a debate drew a differentiation between teacher training and teacher development, with "the former being identified with entry-level teaching skills linked to a specific teaching context, and the latter to the longer-term development of the individual teacher over time" (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 2). As a result, teacher training qualifications have become synonyms to certificate programs such as the Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA), usually offered by colleges and other organizations, for example, the British Council, where practical teaching skills are emphasized and depth of theory is undervalued, while teacher development has become equivalent to master's degree programs, typically offered by universities, where theory or the mastery of applied linguistics disciplines are emphasised and practical teaching skills are undervalued (Burns & Richards, 2009).

Developments in 80s, 90s and 00s have set a new agenda in the ELT field, replacing the debate between training and development by the reconceptualization of the knowledge base and the nature of teacher learning (Burns & Richards, 2009; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Wright, 2010). This new research and professional practice agenda gave rise to a

body of research called *teacher cognition,* which emerged in the 80s and saw its consolidation through the 90s and 00s. It initially focused "on teacher decision making, on teachers' theories of teaching, teachers' representations of subject matter, and the problem solving and improvisational skills employed by teachers with different levels of teaching experience during teaching" (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 5), but then expanded to include the importance of context and the situated and social nature of teacher learning (Freeman, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991), a focus on reflective practice (Farrell 2008; 2009; 2012), teacher identity (Mantero, 2004; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & A. Johnson, 2009; Kanno & Stuart 2011) and action research (Burns, 2010; Borg, 2015; Wallace, 1998).

However, despite the emergence and consolidation of this exciting and flourishing body of research and professional practice, Wright (2010) points out that more research is needed to shed light on how this new agenda has guided practice in the ELT field. This means that the question of to what extent TESOL / TESL / TEFL programs have adapted their curricula to include these new developments merits significant attention. One example of such an attempt is the [TESOL Plus Graduate Certificate program from Sheridan College](). Below, I describe how it has proposed to deal with the issues raised and adapted its curriculum to deliver innovative and state-of-the-art pedagogy.

A Perspective from the TESOL Plus Program

The TESOL Plus is a new graduate certificate program from Sheridan College, which will be launched in January 2018 and offered at the Hazel McCallion Campus in Mississauga, Ontario. It is unique in its context as it is accredited by TESL Canada, TESL Ontario, and the University of Cambridge, accreditations which allow its graduates the opportunity to obtain three different qualifications, i.e., TESL Canada, TESL Ontario, and CELTA. Its two-semester curriculum includes eleven courses, with focus on educational technology, social and cultural perspectives of language learning, reflective practice, teacher identity, and professionalism, as well as focus on both depth of theory and practical teaching skills using student-centred, communicative, and action-oriented methodologies, which were all designed to reflect the new developments of the ELT field. Its goal, therefore, is to deliver innovative and state-of-the-art

pedagogy as well as address the shortcomings encountered in short teacher training courses and in college- and university-based TESOL / TESL certificate programs.

As mentioned in the previous section, the issue of how the theory vs practice / training vs development debate has been dealt with in TESOL / TESL / TEFL certificate programs still merits attention. In particular, how these programs have addressed the shortcomings found in short teacher training courses, which emphasise practical teaching skills to the detriment of depth of theory, and in college- and university-based programs, which do the opposite, is of great relevance for the ELT field. In the TESOL Plus program, these concerns have been addressed with the synthesis of the CELTA curriculum, which places a greater focus on practical teaching skills, and the TESL Ontario and Canada curricula, which emphasise theory and methodology. By providing its student-teachers with a practical teaching focus, present in the CELTA, and depth of theoretical knowledge, present in the TESL Ontario and Canada, the TESOL Plus program attempts to overcome the aforesaid debate.

It is crucial to mention, however, that the focus on its practical teaching skills has been understood in light of a reconceptualized knowledge base where student-teachers are seen as learners of teaching and where the situated nature of teacher learning is emphasised. This means that the idea of "good teaching", espoused by "competency models" where the mastery of strategies and techniques is the end goal teaching, is *not* how the TESOL Plus has conceptualized its curriculum as it understands that "learning to teach is a long-term, complex developmental process that operates through participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 402). Moreover, because, in the TESOL Plus, the situated nature of teacher learning is key, context plays a vital role. Student-teachers are exposed to a wide variety of contexts, not only in observing more experienced instructors, but also teaching in General English, English for Academic Purposes, and English for Specific Purposes classrooms. As Richards and Burns (2009) highlight, "Teacher learning is situated, that is, takes place in specific settings or contexts that shape how learning takes place" (p. 4). Such a variety of contexts is also observed in the hands-on, practical learning that takes place in the classroom. Through a student-centred,

communicative, action-oriented approach to language teacher education, student-teachers put into practice the theory learned in the classroom by engaging in micro-teaching, case studies, project work, online tasks and other activities. As a result, greater learning takes place as student-teachers engage in a wider range of contexts to learn how to teach.

Additionally, it is also essential to highlight that the depth of theoretical knowledge the TESOL Plus has proposed to deliver to its student-teachers was conceptualized to reflect the new agenda in the ELT field. As a consequence, a concerted effort was made to develop courses through the lens of a reconceptualized knowledge base, courses which encompass critical issues dealt with in the ELT literature. Exploring the topic of technology, for instance, the course Methodology and Educational Technology in ELT approaches how technology can be used to effectively design, deliver and evaluate language teaching and learning. It was developed to not only provide student-teachers with knowledge of how to teach with technology, but also to equip them with the skills to integrate technology into methodology such that they are able to apply technology meaningfully in their future classrooms. As Reinders (2009) observes, "the success of new technologies in the classroom depends in large part on the teacher's ability to apply them meaningfully" (p. 233). By working, for example, with a case study in which an English language teacher is tasked with the job of implementing extra online homework activities in her classes, student-teachers will have the opportunity to meaningfully apply the knowledge learned in class to a real life scenario, one which they might face once they start teaching.

Another example of how the TESOL Plus program has attempted to incorporate the new developments in ELT is through its Assessment and Professional Practice course. Although the relevance of assessment for teaching and learning is widely recognized in the field, more often than not, TESOL / TESL / TEFL certificate programs only approach it as an afterthought. In the TESOL Plus, however, it is dealt with thoroughly, aiming to provide student-teachers with the ability to critically integrate the theoretical and practical knowledge of the different assessment types, tools, concepts, frameworks and principles in order to monitor, evaluate and facilitate language learning. Moreover,

this course also intends to equip student-teachers with knowledge of professional support systems so that they can investigate further professional development, employment resources, relevant associations, and journals and publications for new language teachers. Its focus on action research as a form of professional development is an innovative feature, one which is greatly supported by the ELT literature (Burns, 2010; Borg, 2015; Wallace, 1998). In their classes, as an example, student-teachers will put their knowledge of professional support systems into use by creating a professional practice development plan to be used in their future careers. Therefore, the course's intention is to enable these student-teachers to use such knowledge of professional practice as a vehicle for improving their classroom practice. In the ELT literature, the importance of professionalism is underscored by Burns and Richards (2009), and Leung (2009) claims that professionalism "is a particularly important issue for second language teachers working in the diverse field of English language teaching (ELT) in different world contexts" (p. 49).

In addition, the TESOL Plus has included in its curriculum instruction on Portfolio-based Language Assessment (PBLA), "a teaching and assessment model designed to enhance nationwide consistency and standards of quality in English as a Second Language (ESL) training for adult newcomers to Canada" ("On PBLA", 2017). Learning about PBLA is of great relevance for any language teacher in Canada, particularly teachers who will be teaching in Adult Non-Credit Language Training Programs, as PBLA is the model currently used in such programs. In this regard, the TESOL Plus has innovated in its pedagogy as it offers a course where PBLA instruction is integrated with the practicum, allowing student-teachers to not only learn the PBLA theory, but also immediately put such theory into practice during the practicum.

Conclusion

This paper, therefore, provided a quick overview of the ELT origins, shedding light on the long-lasting debate of theory vs practice / training vs development, and discussed the recent advancements which have taken place in the ELT field in order to bring to the fore the issue of how TESOL /TESL / TEFL certificate programs have dealt with this debate and adapted their curricula to reflect this new ELT agenda. Attempting to

contribute with a practical example, the paper displayed how the TESOL Plus graduate certificate program from Sheridan College has integrated theory and practice and incorporated the new ELT agenda into its curriculum in order to provide its student-teachers with innovative and state-of-the-art pedagogy.

Biography

Danielle Freitas is a professor in the ESL and TESOL Plus programs at Sheridan College. She was involved in the development of the TESOL Plus program and helped to design its curriculum. She has obtained many Cambridge teaching qualifications, including ICELT, CELTA and DELTA and holds a master's degree in Second Language Education with a specialization in Comparative, International and Development Education from OISE, University of Toronto, a master's degree in TESOL from IOE, University College London, and is completing her PhD in Language and Literacies Education with a specialization in Comparative, International and Development Education from OISE, University of Toronto. Danielle has been academically involved and professionally working in the field for over 11 years. She is a CELTA, TESL Ontario and TESL Canada trainer, who has taught and trained in Brazil, Canada, US and the UK. Her research interests include: language teacher education, language teacher learning and development, assessment, language learning and teaching, and Vygotskyan sociocultural theory of mind.

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