

## FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE: CONSIDERING CONTEXT AND THE TEACHER AS THEORIST

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### Abstract

Language pedagogy has drawn on various disciplines to inform it, one of which is Second Language Acquisition (SLA). However, while considerable developments in SLA have generated more confidence in it, there are still those among SLA researchers who have been reticent in applying results of their research to language pedagogy. Perhaps the problematic relationship between theory and practice and between specialists and teachers need not in principle be oppositional, if we have a greater understanding of the complex nature of the language classroom, as Prabhu has suggested in “The Dynamics of the Language Lesson” (TESOL 1992). In this paper, I expound on two central themes earlier explored by Prabhu, namely the interplay between pedagogic and non-pedagogic dimensions that influences much of what happens in the classroom and the theorizing role teachers have to play if any change aimed at productive learning is to be realized, discussing these issues particularly in relation to SLA studies on interaction to promote L2 learning. In the process, I discuss the implications of the aforementioned points for language teaching, with reference to my teaching context.

### Keywords

English language teaching, language pedagogy, Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

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## INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with an anecdote. A few years ago, I suggested to my freshman class of about twenty students who were taking up a preparatory course in English that we arrange their seats in a semi-circle. I thought it would set the tone for a more informal and inclusive class discussion. To have twenty students in the classroom is a rarity even in a supposedly elite university like the Ateneo de Manila University and I thought of taking advantage of the situation to actualize in some way (even if, perhaps, superficially) a teaching philosophy to which I have always subscribed. And so it came to pass.

During the mid-term evaluation of the course though, a handful of my students expressed preference for the traditional classroom setup where they are seated in rows. When I asked why, they said that the semi-circle seating arrangement made them feel more distant from me given the physical space it left in the middle of the classroom.

In hindsight, I realized that maybe I was not pacing and using that spacious center aisle to bridge that physical distance between us during English class. Maybe too, although they did not articulate it, it must have been threatening for a number of my sixteen to seventeen year-old students who were on their first semester in college and did not know me, much less any of their classmates, to actually have to face not only me, their teacher (which might not have been so bad considering how as teachers we are naturally interested in, or at least are good at appearing interested in what our students have to say), but to have to literally deal face-to-face with the rest of the strangers in the classroom. In the seating arrangement I proposed, little room was left for saving face, so to speak, and that actually goes against the grain of the Filipino character.

Why do I share this anecdote? I mention it because I think it illustrates a point that we teachers have to be more cognizant of: that the particularity of our teaching context does challenge some assumptions and practices (in this case, a practice as simple as students' seating arrangement) that are supposed to positively impact our practice (in this case, to help create an atmosphere more conducive to learning). And so we cannot escape in the act of theorizing the context in which we operate.

Specifically as language teachers, we continually seek ways to develop a more effective language pedagogy so we can help learners develop their language skills. That is a goal I think we all share, though by no means the only one.

Language pedagogy as we all know has drawn on various disciplines to inform it, one of which is Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The study of SLA is hardly forty years old and yet, admittedly, a great deal of research has been done in this field, focusing mainly on the process of language learning and the factors which affect the language learner's language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman). Indeed, it has been noted by Larsen-Freeman and Ellis (*The Study*) that considerable developments in SLA research have been made, and thus, there is now greater confidence in SLA research.

Among SLA researchers, however, there are those who have been reticent in applying results of their research to language pedagogy, as Ellis later noted ("SLA"). These do not feel that there ought to be any relationship between the two. Tarone, et al. (qtd. in Lightbown) enumerated limitations to the classroom applications of SLA, among which are the restricted linguistic scope of the studies, the lack of data on cognitive process

and learning strategies, the limited information about the role of individual variables, insufficient information about the role of social and environmental variables, and the limited number of replicate studies. Hatch (qtd. in Ellis *The Study*) is similarly cautious about applying SLA research to language pedagogy: “[O]ur field must be known for the incredible leap in logic we make in applying our research findings to classroom teaching” (687).

The relationship between SLA and teaching has always been open to challenge for various reasons. Nunan, for instance, takes issue with the lack of SLA research in actual classrooms; and Bolitho (qtd. in Ellis *Studies*) is critical of the inaccessible presentation of SLA ideas to language pedagogy practitioners.

It seems to me that the relevance of theory to practice and the problematic, though in principle not oppositional relationship between specialists and teachers, is a matter worth revisiting.

For my purpose, I wish to begin by recalling some points raised by N. S. Prabhu in his discussion of the complex nature of the language classroom in his 1992 *TESOL* article “The Dynamics of the Language Lesson.” Particularly in relation to SLA studies on interactions that can promote L2 learning, I expound on his article’s two central themes: 1) the interplay between pedagogic and nonpedagogic dimensions influences much of what happens in the classroom; and 2) given that the classroom culture is based on stability, any change aimed at productive learning can only be effective to the extent that teachers are actively engaged in their own conceptual exploration. I contend though, for Prabhu stops short of saying this, that what the theorizing teachers need to do should not preclude a critical consideration of the wider milieu – that is, the socio-political context of the classroom. Indeed I take ‘theorizing’ to mean problematizing the broader context of our teaching situation as well. Finally, I discuss some implications of critical engagement on practice with reference to my own teaching context.

## THE DYNAMICS OF THE LANGUAGE LESSON: A SUMMARY

In exploring the complexity of the language lesson, Prabhu identifies four aspects of the lesson event that interact with each other in actual classroom practice: as a unit in a planned curricular sequence, a teaching method in operation, a patterned social activity, and a social encounter.

The first two aspects view the lesson as a pedagogic event, a perspective adopted by specialists on the language lesson, and one which teachers (and in rare cases, learners) may

share (228). Hence, seen as a teaching unit, a language lesson is to be understood in relation to other lessons that have been designed to supposedly match the learner's developmental stage. Seen as a teaching method, the language lesson is to be understood with reference to a theory of learning.

The next two aspects, on the other hand, view the classroom as an arena where social and personal factors meet, a perspective that is shared by teachers and learners but rarely considered by specialists. As a routinized social event, it provides its participants with a sense of security and stability arising from their shared expectations, thereby making possible the classroom lesson as a recurrent event. As a social encounter, it lends itself to human interactions that greatly influence both curriculum and method (227-30).

By highlighting the nonpedagogic dimensions, Prabhu cautions against prescribing any teaching method or curriculum for classroom use since it can be unsettling and therefore likely to be discarded in favor of the protective routines already established in the classroom. And where specialist inputs are adopted, eventually replacing old routines, he argues that they could very well provide little more than the satisfaction arising from the performance of such routines, devoid of any conceptual substance (235-6).

If that is so, how then can we accomplish pedagogically effective changes in classroom procedures? Prabhu makes a case for the following: first, that teachers be theorists, embarking on an intellectual exploration, engaging their own theories in the classroom, testing, refining, or rejecting them in light of their classroom experience; and second, that specialists take teachers' theories seriously and interact with teachers as fellow theorists (224). In particular, Prabhu suggests that it may be more worthwhile for specialists to explore ways of enabling teachers to function as theorists than to provide them with new methods to replace old routines.

## CULTURE AND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

As any teacher knows only too well, pedagogical plans, despite careful planning, do not always work out as originally envisioned. They are tempered, as Holliday reminds us, by the beliefs, attitudes, and expectations embedded in the classroom culture, and the tacit understandings about what source of behavior is acceptable.

As if the classroom context is not complex enough, we need to contend with forces outside the classroom. No classroom culture is after all isolated. As Holliday has argued, the attitudes and expectations people bring in are influenced by the social forces within and outside the educational institution (9).

That this should be the case ought to make teachers reconsider directly applying recommendations from the SLA field to classroom teaching, and caution specialists against urging teachers to carry out their recommendations.

Certainly, SLA research has contributed to our understanding of the language learning process, and this augurs well for language teachers committed to effective pedagogy. Descriptive studies of interlanguage development, for example, can help us better understand patterns of acquisition of a linguistic form so we can design instructional activities to promote its acquisition.

But the language classroom is not such an 'innocent' environment, and alas, the language classroom landscape painted by SLA research does not come close to the realities of the classroom. Scant attention has been paid to the classroom as a social context; instead, SLA has encouraged the view of the classroom as an experimental laboratory where the teacher ensures that the learner is exposed to optimal linguistic input that may be shown to correlate with desirable outcomes (Breen 137) rather than as an arena of complex human interactions (Prabhu "The Dynamics" 230).

Long (9), for instance, advances the psycholinguistic rationale and pedagogic advantages of task-group interactions, and lists among the pedagogic benefits of group work the opportunity to practice a wider speech repertoire and the affective climate it can provide to shy or linguistically insecure students especially.

However, it is I think a fair comment to make that the intimacy of a group work setting can be unsettling for some students who come from the same language background. I have had a number of students whose attitudes toward speaking English can be viewed as ambivalent. Although they are aware of the value society places on the English language and the access to socio-economic advantages it offers to those who are proficient in it, among classmates with whom they share a common first language, Filipino, to speak English can mean to risk ridicule because English is considered an elitist language, the 'they' code (see Gumperz). For adolescent learners in particular, a sense of belonging may be more valuable than becoming proficient in a second language.

Hence, even where two-way tasks are designed to produce more negotiation work according to Long, there is no guarantee that negotiation is going to be done in the target language, an important issue to second language teachers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the teacher who sees the monitoring of students' language use important if only to help counter factors that might impinge on their decision to speak in the target language, can only do so much when managing a class of 50 students or more, arguably the norm rather than the exception in most public schools in Metro Manila.

So despite the perceived advantages of task-group interactions over teacher-fronted activities, those who are linguistically insecure but eager to learn may not particularly relish the sense of autonomy task-group interactions provide and consequently resist opportunities to speak English in such a set-up. Instead, they may welcome the 'obtrusive' presence of a teacher in teacher-fronted activities if only to legitimize, so to speak, their attempt to speak in English, no matter how haltingly, and to override peer pressure. The teacher, whose authority role in the classroom has been defined by shared expectations, becomes a safeguard against the hazards of speaking in English in this type of classroom setting.

For as experience bears out, there are students who do intimidate the less confident, or who do not have the patience to give others opportunities to self-correct nor the energy to make clarification requests and confirmation checks in a group work setting. And given an educational system that places a premium on grades, there will always be students who would take it upon themselves to accomplish much of the task at hand, believing they can do a much better job than others in their group who, anyway, would allow them to do just that if it would mean a favorable assessment of their group output.

I point this out not to undermine SLA research (or ESL research in general) but merely to underscore the need for context-sensitive pedagogy. While the potential value task-group interaction is worth exploring,<sup>2</sup> we should not lose sight of the fact that the complexity of classroom realities do impact the feasibility of applying pedagogic activities such as those that Long prescribes. Clarke (17) in fact suggests that teachers contend with other constraints not mentioned in Prabhu's characterization of the classroom, some of which are time, physical space, and availability of resources. The sanitized version, as it were, of the classroom situation presented in much of the SLA work is remote from the classroom of which teachers have intimate knowledge.

In the face of the complex realities of the classroom the language teachers confront every day, it might indeed be useful, as Prabhu suggests ("The Dynamics" 233), to examine how the teacher's own management of forces at play in the classroom might become pedagogically more constructive.

## THE TEACHER AS THEORIST

Prescribing procedures to reconcile conflicts arising from the varied demands pedagogic and nonpedagogic dimensions make on teachers and learners is not the answer. The classroom as a social genre varies across societies and cultures, after all. Nevertheless,

although the stability of a classroom culture affords teachers and learners a sense of security, no culture is rooted in absolutes (Murphy, qtd. in Holliday 26). Change is indeed possible but calls for an understanding of the culture and a willingness to work with it.

To begin to understand the classroom culture, teachers need to operate as theorists, drawing on their ongoing experience as they construct their own theory of practice. They have to continually test, develop, and modify their theories in light of their own context. Simply put, teachers have “to theorize from their practice and to practice what they theorize” (Kumaravadivelu 545) if classroom activities are to be more than protective routines and if any change to be introduced is sustained and not performed perfunctorily, as Prabhu has consistently argued.

Furthermore, a commitment to any innovation and to better language pedagogy can only be strengthened if teachers feel a sense of ownership. This sense of ownership can begin with what has been referred to as engaging one’s *sense of plausibility* (Prabhu “There is no”).

It is quite telling of the limitations and even biases of research that teachers’ pedagogic notions have hardly been investigated when it is these beliefs, whether they are articulated or not, that ultimately guide much of what they do in the classroom. Teachers, after all, are not “conveyor belts delivering teaching practices” mechanically (Larsen-Freeman “On the Need” 26). It seems to me that in maintaining that hard information about the activity one is performing is more useful than intuitions and personal theories about the activity, a number of researchers undermine teachers’ capacity for thoughtful evaluation of pedagogical practices. It is an impoverished view that ignores teachers’ own engagement with their practices on the basis of their own knowledge, even if largely tacit.

Indeed, language teaching has been misrepresented as a client activity and language teachers, as mere consumers of the findings of research, thereby undervaluing the nature of teaching as a domain of theory and research in its own right (Widdowson “Discourse” 47). However, it is the teachers who deal with surprises that arise from their routines, who are faced with moment-to-moment decision making in the classroom encounter and are responsible for creating learning conditions. And so, it is they who must necessarily determine what it is they will be able to use in their own classrooms.

When teachers, for example, are inconsistent in correcting learners’ errors, it may well be, as Larsen-Freeman (“On the Need” 267) suggests, that a teacher willfully rejects correcting errors for it might threaten the social climate. After all, part of our job is to address not just the language and cognitive needs of students but their affective needs as well. When teachers apply research findings with caution as Hatch (qtd. in Widdowson

*Aspects*) counsels, or not at all as Widdowson suggests (*Aspects* 26), it well may be that the teacher's own experience has taught him or her that to do otherwise is to ignore the students' experiences and belief systems.

That said, we need to go beyond critically examining both present and prescribed classroom practices and seeking alternatives to them. For how can we fully understand our practice if we abstract it from its larger context? In my view, our role as educators demands that we problematize L2 education itself, recognizing that it is intimately tied to a broader social, economic, and political environment.

A number of studies done on the socio-political context of ESL actually demonstrate the political dimension of educational practices, how they reinforce implicitly or explicitly a particular social order. Let us take the area of curriculum. In his analysis of competencies listed in the Refugee Processing Center curricula, Tollefson found that these competencies "attempt to inculcate attitudes and values that will make refugees passive citizens who comply rather than complain, accept rather than resist, and apologize rather than disagree" (657). Similarly, in her study of adult ESL literacy, Auerbach (417) found that students are socialized "for a limited range of working-class roles", and are often taught explicitly "those behaviors required in menial jobs" (418).

We need to understand the greater forces outside the classroom because they influence the decisions we (that means teachers and students) make and have wide implications for the kind of society we want (whether or not we choose to articulate our vision of society). Thus, we need to ask questions ranging from: *Do our English curricula help our students make more sense of their current conditions? Do they equip them with the skills to assert their rights?* to questions like: *When a play gets banned from a university campus, whose interests (or sensibilities, for that matter) are actually protected? And why? When powerful stakeholders are more generous in funding sports development rather than faculty development, what value system is actually perpetuated? And why?*

In other words, we should concern ourselves with examining the extent to which outside forces are either benefiting or harming both teachers and students. Otherwise, we might as well surrender our minds and perhaps even our dignity to the powers-that-be.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROFESSION

Teacher education is going to be crucial in enabling teachers to develop the confidence and the skills to function as theorists then. The contributions of several TESOL specialists to the field of teacher education are noteworthy. For example, Nunan (qtd. in



Clarke) talks of the teacher as an action-researcher. Richards and Lockhart advocate a reflective approach to teaching in the second language classroom that takes into account the roles and beliefs of teachers and learners and teacher decision making. These approaches to teaching affirm the central role of teachers in examining their own assumptions about learning and 'dialoguing' with their own teaching context. For if research is to truly have something more useful to say to language educators who are immersed in the real world, it will need to confer on teachers the privileged status they deserve.

Admittedly, the very affirmation of the teacher's role in making pedagogic decisions calls for the institutionalization of supporting structures that would make the classroom conducive to thoughtful practice. For schools with limited resources, that may be a tall order but not necessarily impossible. An obvious starting point is the examination of existing policies (e.g. budget allocation, hiring policies, code of behavior) and how they either expand or limit teachers' and student's choices.

Finally, although there is a growing body of ESL literature on critical pedagogy, it will serve us well to explore more fully how relations of power both inside and outside the ESL classroom impact interaction and learning.

## CONCLUSION

ESL research can provide insights into language teaching, but innovation in the classroom can never be a matter of direct implementation of the findings of research. The acquisition of a second language, after all, is more than a psycholinguistic enterprise, and attention must be paid to the sociocultural context in which the learning of the language is supposed to take place. There is then no single recipe that can solve pedagogical problems across all classroom situations, considering the often overwhelming phenomena of classroom dynamics that teachers have to work with.

Although it has been proposed that theorists and classroom teachers need to genuinely collaborate with each other (Larsen-Freeman "On the Need;" Prabhu "The Dynamics;" and also Clarke), teachers would always do well to engage their own theories in the classroom so they can continue to grow professionally. Teaching that is a kind of intellectual exploration can do much in transforming classroom routine events into learning events for students and teachers themselves.

In the end, however, because we are educators, we ought to be held not only "technically accountable but educationally [and] morally answerable as well" (Schwab qtd. in Carr 5). Hence, to theorize practice is to theorize our teaching situation as part of a broader socio-political context. The extent to which we are able to do this is a measure of our commitment to a more equitable society.

## NOTES

- 1 Despite little information available regarding the desirability of using L1 in the L2 classroom, L1 may be useful in explaining unknown words or grammar rules (Ellis *Second Language*).
- 2 Although there is some support for the claim that interactional modifications (e.g. clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, etc.) assist comprehension, there appears no clear empirical basis for the claim that interactional modifications promote acquisition (Ellis "Researching").

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