
The Reflection of Past Language Learning Experience in ELT Approaches

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to determine the influence of teachers' prior language learning experience in their teaching approaches. It intends to describe the relationship between teachers' practical knowledge and their current practices. The conclusion indicates that teaching beliefs and practices differ for each individual and the differences may be attributable to the influence of their practical knowledge and experiences. As a result, the importance of teachers' self-awareness is strongly emphasized and recommendations are made to best utilize their prior knowledge and language learning experience in the learning environment.

Key words: learning, reflection, teaching approaches, practical knowledge

Reflection of Past Learning in Teaching Approaches

Every teacher has a different way of teaching and interacting with students. Some believe classes should be teacher-centered, where the teacher is expert and authority in presenting information. Others adopt a learner-centered approach, viewing their role as more of a facilitator of students' learning. Some prefer to control the environment. Others tend to be relaxed. Some believe lessons should be conducted in a serious manner. Others think lessons should be fun and enjoyable. Needless to say, there are also teachers who are under the influence of a combined approach.

A growing body of research suggests that in order to understand language teaching better, more emphasis should be placed on teachers' knowledge, how they obtain their knowledge and make use of it in the classroom environment. Since teachers acquire their knowledge through personal experiences, it is important to recognize and understand the impact of their experience on the formation of their professional knowledge, beliefs, and patterns of action (Goodson, 1992). Perhaps one of the factors that affect the adoption of different teaching approaches is teachers' prior language learning experience. Thus, it would be useful to shed some light on it in order to gain a better understanding of why teachers tend to opt for certain approaches.

As far as teachers' English language acquisition is concerned, we can talk about two groups of teachers; native speaker teachers who learned English as their first language in early childhood and non-native speaker teachers who had their English language learning experience through post-childhood. Also, non-native speaker teachers are considered as the learners of the language they teach. However, native speaker teachers who presumably began their acquisition from the moment they were born or even before. This learning process is considered by most

second language acquisition researchers to be of a very different nature from learning a second language as an adult.

A comprehensive study on teacher cognition performed by Ellis (2009) highlights the links between teachers' lived experience and the ways in which they form their beliefs about their profession. According to Ellis, Teachers can be categorized into three groups based on their past language learning experience;

1. Non-native speaker teachers: Those who have learned the same content (English) in the same way as their students.
2. Native speaker bilingual teachers: Those who know the same content (English) but have acquired it in a different way (first language acquisition), and have learned different content (a second language) in a similar way, to their students.
3. Native speaker monolingual teachers: Those who know the same content (English) but have acquired it in a different way (first language acquisition). The monolingual teacher's experience of learning any language is in babyhood, and the process of learning is not accessible for examination by the speaker.

As the study suggests that native speaker monolingual teachers lack the experience of the way students acquire their first language, which they intend to teach. There is virtually no other subject in which the teacher does not have the experience of learning the content in the same way as the student. As a result, the absence of the content knowledge may lead to a tendency to adopt more flexible teaching approaches. Research into grammar by academics at Northumbria University (2004) suggests that a significant proportion of native English speakers are unable to understand some basic grammatical structures. According to another research study performed by Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) native English speaker teachers are identified as being informal and flexible and have a tendency to use conversational English including various authentic phrases. They tend to provide positive feedback to students, and have communication as the main goal of their teaching. Based on the two studies, it wouldn't be wrong to say that native English teachers adopt a more lenient approach towards teaching the language as opposed to their non-native peers.

On the contrary, if teachers have learned English post-childhood, they have direct experience of what students go through, in task and content while they learn the language. The awareness of the content knowledge may result in a more controlled yet planned teaching approach. As they already experienced the hardships of language learning through their adulthood, they can turn this experience to their advantage and adapt their language choices to the levels of students.

Medgyes (1992) compares the efficiency of native and non-native speaker teachers in terms of linguistic competence and language learning. The objective of his study was to examine the differing levels of language proficiency and their effects on teaching practices. He places certain emphasis on the role of language learning experience in teaching and claims that non-native speakers are less competent in English does not mean that they are less competent as

English teachers. Besides, the fact that non-native speakers are generally less competent in English is paradoxically an asset as well. He lists six reasons for his assumption:

1. Only non-native teachers can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English. In contrast, though native teachers can act as perfect language models they can not be learner models since they are not learners of English in the sense that non-native teachers are.
2. Non-native teachers can teach learning strategies more effectively than their Native peers. Non-native teachers have adopted language-learning strategies during their own learning process. In spite of the considerable differences between them in degree of consciousness, in theory they all know more about the implementation of these strategies than native colleagues who have simply acquired English as their first language.
3. Non-native teachers can provide learners with more information about the English language. During their own learning process, non-native English teachers have obtained ample knowledge of and insights into how the English language works, which gives them the upper hand when providing information.
4. Non-native teachers are more able to anticipate language difficulties, which becomes more and more sophisticated with experience and enables non-native teachers to help learners overcome language difficulties and to avoid pitfalls.
5. Non-native teachers can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners. Since they never cease to be learners of English, they encounter difficulties similar to those of their students, albeit at an obviously higher level. As a rule, this constant struggle makes non-natives more sensitive and understanding.
6. Non-native teachers can benefit from sharing the learners' mother tongue. In a monolingual setting, the mother tongue is an effective vehicle of communication in the language classroom, which can facilitate the teaching/learning process in countless ways. (p. 346)

However, learning English as a second language also means being less competent than first language speakers of the language. As a result, non-native English teachers often lack confidence in their language ability. According to Kim (2004) many non-native English speaker professionals report suffering from an unnecessary level of emotional stress caused by language issues, which is detrimental to their confidence as teachers (p. 1). This occasional lack of confidence may sometimes lead to the adoption of a more controlled and authoritative approach in class teaching, which may result in a less communicative and more textbook centered teaching approach.

Through the results of the research performed by Samimi and Brutt-Griffler (1999) non-native teachers were perceived as relying on textbooks, applying differences between first and second languages, using the first language as a medium of instruction, being aware of negative transfer and psychological aspects of learning, being sensitive to the needs of learners, being more efficient, knowing the students' background and having exam preparation as the goal of their teaching.

Medgyes' reasoning can also be referred to those who speak English as their first

language but have acquired another language post childhood. If the teachers' first language is English, but they have learned another language post-childhood, they have the experience of learning a language as an adult. The ability to perform cross-linguistic comparisons gives the speaker insights into the similarities and differences between the two languages. Eventually, this leads to enhanced self-awareness and motivation towards teaching.

W.Powell & O.Powell (2010) suggest that teachers with high degrees of self-awareness know their strengths and their limits. They have an accurate appraisal of their respective talents and weaknesses. They are reflective and are able to learn from experience. They take responsible risks and when they fail, they treat the incident as an opportunity for growth and learning. (p. 1991)

Therefore, having certain degrees of self-awareness allows those teachers to make more informed choices about their teaching methods and strategies. This allows them to adapt their lesson styles to the needs and expectations of their students.

In the classroom environment, where teachers constantly practice their own beliefs and theories, their self-development mainly depends on their willingness to take risk. According to Dr. Dreger from Michigan State University (2005) risk-taking for most teachers implies they are doing at least one of two things:

1. Employing teaching strategies with which they are not familiar.
2. Employing behaviors that in some way break down traditional class structures, hierarchies, etc. in order to promote better student learning.

By employing the strategies above, teachers would take an unknown path that may sometimes leave them in difficult situations. Some of them may face the problem of excessive stress and eventually, opt for following traditional class structures that they are better acquainted with. However, some scholars even insist that “true” learning only occurs when there’s a little pain involved in the process. By taking the unknown path, teachers will eventually reach to the point that they can make more accurate judgments by reflecting their own self in their teaching approaches. They will acquire the ability to learn to turn chaotic situations into creative and more engaging activities. As a result, they will be able to determine how their own behaviors are facilitating or impeding their personal and professional growth.

Gold and Roth (1993:141) defined self- awareness as “a process of getting in touch with your feelings and behaviors”. Increased self-awareness involves a more accurate understanding of how students affect teachers' own emotional processes and behaviors and how teachers affect students. In order to cope with the challenges teaching and learning present, it is important for teachers to become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Richards and Farrell (2005) state that “Only the teachers that are able to monitor and assess themselves can achieve sufficient understanding and control over their own behavior” (p. 34). Once the teacher is aware of how their own behaviors are affecting their personal and professional growth, they will become more open and receptive to new ideas and have willingness to take risk.

Risk taking encourages experimentation with different ways of solving problems and allows teachers to develop a perspective that would help them become more independent in their choices in teaching. This perspective can also bring positive reflections on students' learning behaviors. In her own teaching philosophy, Dr. Deger (2005) strongly emphasizes the

importance of risk taking and makes the following recommendations for both new and experienced teachers;

1. Try new teaching approaches and assess “on time” their effect. Trust your students’ opinions. Share the evaluation process with them. Put their opinions in effect when possible.
2. Be willing to stop an activity (or a class) if it’s clear your students are not prepared.
3. You’re prepared. Engender in students a feeling that they have a responsibility to you and to each other to be prepared as well.
4. Use creative visual props to engage students in conversation. Be willing to give students space to learn.
5. Realize that you’re not going to be “great” most of the time.
6. It’s okay to have a bad day.

The basic principle of her philosophy is that by sharing success and failures with their learners, teachers can create a trustworthy environment with their learners.

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