

A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF AN ESP TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to look back at a teacher education programme carried out in the 80's as part of the Brazilian National ESP Project¹ and reflect on its nature in the light of current ideas on teacher education. After a very brief description of the context of the programme, the paper concentrates on the features of the teacher education component, emphasising its developmental, reflective nature and trying to examine it in the context of reflective learning as understood today.

Key-words: *teacher education; reflective learning; participation and creation; awareness raising.*

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é lançar um olhar retrospectivo a um programa de educação docente desenvolvido como parte do Projeto Nacional Ensino de Inglês Instrumental² na década de 80 e refletir sobre sua natureza à luz do pensamento atual sobre educação docente. Após breve descrição do contexto no qual o programa se inseria, o artigo se concentra nas características do componente de formação docente, enfatizando sua natureza processual, reflexiva e tentando examiná-la no contexto de aprendizagem reflexiva como entendida nos dias de hoje.

Palavras-chave: *educação docente; aprendizagem reflexiva; participação e criação; conscientização.*

¹ For a description and an evaluation of this project see Celani et al. (1988) and Alderson and Scott (1992).

² Para uma descrição e avaliação deste projeto veja-se Celani et al. (1988) e Alderson e Scott (1992).

1. Introduction

The Brazilian National ESP Project was carried out from 1980 to 1990, having as its aims to improve the use of English of Brazilian researchers, science teachers and technicians especially with regard to reading specialist and technical publications. The enabling objectives set for the Project were to achieve that aim by improving the professional abilities of Brazilian ESP teachers working in Brazilian Universities and Technical High Schools. The special emphasis on the reading ability was the result of a needs analysis carried out at the outset, which also confirmed the view that in most university courses English is seen as a "library language" (Swales, 1985:45) giving access to scientific and technological information. The priority areas established for the project were materials preparation, setting up a national resource centre, development of research and teacher education. This last area was at the very core of the Project and was particularly relevant given a) the nature of what was to be taught – English for Specific Purposes not English as part of a B.A. in English – and b) the previous type of education that the vast majority of teachers had been exposed to. Change was going to be required and attitude regarding change was envisaged as being one of the crucial aspects of the whole operation. The change required involved moving from a training product oriented set up to a developmental, reflective, process oriented one.

Twenty universities were involved in the Project when it started in 1980 and twenty-four technical high schools joined in 1986³. They were located in eighteen different Brazilian states and included teachers with the most varied kinds of background.

2. Teaching ESP: changes in the teacher's role

Changing is always difficult for a variety of reasons. It involves adjusting to altered conditions in our environment; it also

³ The Project, which has evolved into a self-sustained programme, now includes forty universities and thirty-four technical and non-technical secondary schools, located in twenty-two states.

involves trying to alter who we are and how we interact with those around us. Change is not some material object or process out there waiting to be discovered. It is rather what *we* make of it (Pradl, 1993). So, it depends ultimately on our social construction of it. It depends on adjusting role relationships with people: students, colleagues, boss; but that demands effort, because attitudes, beliefs, myths are inevitably affected, very often also involving questions of face and status.

Resistance to change is natural, as change brings with it uncertainty, anxiety, surprise, puzzlement and even perplexity. It may mean living with indeterminacy. The teacher who is changing is clearly at risk and must be prepared to take risks, must be prepared to take responsibility for decisions which affect the social universe of the classroom, thus avoiding the risk of becoming the victim of the demands of others, such as methods, fads, textbooks, etc.

Previous experience is perhaps one of the most powerful factors in hindering change. In the case of the ESP teachers, previous experience had one common denominator, and that was having been a teacher of general English. But that was no guarantee that we were starting from common ground, as attitudes towards moving from general English teaching in the B.A. course to teaching ESP in foreign grounds, i.e., in engineering, medicine, biology, or law departments might be, and certainly were very varied. Some teachers faced the new challenge with interest, perhaps because they felt the need for change in their practice, but others would feel that after all they had been prepared to teach literature or language to future teachers of English and were not interested in this apparently more limited and restricting teaching context. Others yet might feel that they had chosen an arts degree and were now being thrown into a hard sciences context which they did not particularly like or even feared.

Varied also were the concepts regarding language learning given the personal learning histories of the hundreds of teachers who were connected with the Project. Long established traditions, particularly regarding methodology, leave their marks among

teachers and students. In the 80's the majority of teachers would have been trained within an audio-oral tradition of English language teaching with the implications regarding language and language learning theory that that particular kind of methodology brings with it. Furthermore, fear of "technical" subjects, leading to fear of losing face, would inevitably make teachers feel threatened and unsettled when running counter to tradition and previous experience. In teaching general English teachers generally felt as providers of knowledge, with students playing the role of receivers. Teachers felt secure, as they possessed knowledge which the students did not have, i.e., they had English. In ESP teaching, however, the student has the knowledge of her/his subject, which is very often totally unknown to the teacher. This situation requires a shift in teacher-student relationship: the teacher plays the role of mediator, of a more experienced other, in making the foreign language accessible to the learner. An additional difficulty was the widespread prejudice that teaching ESP was a somewhat demeaning, less noble activity than teaching general English or literature.⁴ This stood as a strong belief to be changed not only among teachers but also in the academic community as a whole.

Such was the background regarding teachers' attitudes and problems at the outset of the education programme. It must be said, however, that the problems referred to above are not typical of Brazilian ESP teachers; they seem to be problems encountered in other contexts as well (Robinson, 1991:79-96).

3. A developmental versus a training approach

The assumptions at the base of the education programme in the Project I am reporting on were two:

- a) the educational component is to take precedence over the purely training component;

⁴ Comments frequently appearing in interviews were of the kind: I agreed to teach ESP classes, as I am just beginning a career, but my main aim is to eventually become a teacher of literature.

- b) the educational goal can best be achieved in a context which allows for the acquisition of independence, so that participants can organise their own learning;
- c) independence can best be achieved by experience in action with reflection⁵, with feedback coming not only from specialists but mostly from peers.

The first assumption implies the idea that offering principles is more productive than offering rules; the second that awareness raising is a necessary condition for any kind of learning and the third that development is to be socially constructed.

The theoretical framework for the programme derived from Freire (1972,1985) with certain adaptations, from Scott (1986) and from Holmes (1986). Freire's "bank deposit" view of education and of the teacher's role was influential in setting up the philosophical basis for the programme. Scott's view of *conscientização* (Scott, 1986:2)⁶, meaning no mere absorption of information (the head), but involvement of self in actual doing and experiencing as part of learning (the heart) led to the actual design of the organisation of the development programme. Within this view of awareness, responsibility is placed on participants, but the WHY and HOW of decisions, actions, etc. is made explicit to them. The head is necessarily involved. Through experience involving action and reflection, change can be introduced. Conditions for reflection both in action and on action will be enhanced by feedback deriving from exchange of experience with others (Schön, 1983:141). Effective results, however, will only be attained if the process involves the heart as well. This view of teacher education necessarily implies assigning the teacher the role of researcher of what goes on in the teaching/learning situation in her/his classroom. Trying to establish this kind of attitude among

⁵ Reflection is taken here in a broad sense as a specialised form of thinking (Dewey,1933) and in a narrower sense as understanding why an activity runs the way it does when thinking about it retrospectively ("on action") and while doing it ("in-action"), in isolation or in interaction with others (Schön, 1983, 1987).

⁶ For a more detailed account of the role of the concept of *conscientização* in the Brazilian ESP Project see Scott (1991).

teachers (Holmes, 1986) was a clear goal from the beginning of the project. As the Project progressed, in fact, looking at their own classrooms with researchers' eyes was to become a common practice for most teachers involved, as can be seen in Project publications (Deyes, 1981; Kennedy, 1985; Maciel, 1986; Garrido, 1988; Oliveira, 1988).

Thus, the Project can be seen as having been developed within the framework of action research as understood by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, apud Nunan, 1992:17-20): it was carried out by practitioners (the ESP teachers), it was a group activity (seminars - local, regional and national - being its backbone) and it aimed at changing things (the kind of English teaching being offered before it started).

The rationale for the organisation of the development programme for ESP teachers in the Brazilian National Project can be summed up in Fig. 1.

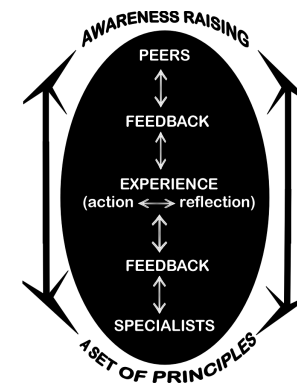


Fig.1: Rationale for Organisation of Development Programme for ESP Teachers in Brazil

At the very centre is EXPERIENCE involving action \leftrightarrow reflection. These are fed by conversations (interchange of various kinds) with peers and specialists. The whole approach is based on a set of principles put into practice by means of awareness raising:

awareness raising as to the nature of ESP teaching in particular, but also of foreign language teaching in general; awareness raising as to the nature of teaching in general; awareness raising as to the role of the teacher in general, but particularly of the ESP teacher.

In order for teachers to become agents of their own development, a heuristic approach to learning – learning to become ESP teachers, in this case – was offered as opposed to a prescriptive approach consisting of the setting out of rules. This route moves away from the duplication of knowledge received to the acceptance of responsibility for the building up of one's own learning. This was also one of the reasons why, contrary to general practice in other similar projects at the time, it was decided not to produce a Project textbook. Producing one set of materials to be used by all Project teachers throughout Brazil would run counter to the philosophy of the project, which, as has already been mentioned, was to provide opportunities for ESP teachers to be agents of their own development by means of looking with searching reflective eyes at their particular situation and deciding what was best. It also meant being prepared to change at any time. Data in the Project evaluation (Celani et al., 1988:46, 56, 57) show that the great majority of teachers did not perceive the approach adopted by the Project as being imposed on them by the coordination. It also became apparent that materials, in consonance with the Project approach, were constantly being modified as a result of feedback from the classroom rather than from sheer habit.

Some conditions are necessary for a programme of this nature to be successful. Principal among them is that participants must be made fully aware of the principles underlying the approach proposed, while, at the same time organisers find out what ideas participants bring with them. In the ESP context in the 80's, as it has already been indicated, it was particularly important to find out what representations had been built by tradition and/or by previous experience including finding out how they saw their role as ESP teachers. For all this to be possible, support had to be ensured.

How was this put into practice? A favourable feature of the Brazilian National ESP Project was its grass-roots nature. It did not result from any institutional decision or imposition. It started from the identification of a perceived need by the participants themselves. There was a lot of give and take in planning, in getting involved, thus creating an atmosphere of participation and creation. As one of the priority areas for the programme was materials preparation, it soon became apparent that this was to act as a catalyst for the development element in the programme. Direct experience of the new situation without ready-made models or rules was supported by discussions with peers and specialists-cum-teacher educators in the form of small group discussions, seminars and materials preparation sessions. Very often this happened after the experience had taken place, i.e., after the materials had already been prepared and used, thus involving self-evaluation related to the work of individuals and/or teams in departments. The reflective element in these evaluation exercises ensured that participants understood why and how they were taking certain decisions or were managing a particular teaching operation in a particular way and to what extent it was effective.

The aim of this approach was to assist teachers in exploring the origins of their practice by providing opportunities for conversations of different kinds: conversations with peers, with specialists, but most and foremost with themselves. It was expected that these conversations would lead to asking questions which would provide a basis for self-examination, for self-enquiry, either individually or in collaboration with peers. A community of ESP teachers working together, telling their stories and experimenting with alternatives would create the supportive structure required to reduce and perhaps eventually eliminate fear, anxiety and resistance, since options, not judgements should be the result of these conversations. Teaching can be a stressful and lonely activity. Reflective discussions, no matter what the form, can relieve the tension and the isolation.

Reflective discussions took place in scenarios with varying degrees of privacy, from the very private reflection with self to the

decreasingly less private atmosphere of talking to a peer, reflecting with a peer group in a local seminar or reflecting with peers from all parts of the country in regional or national seminars. Reflection always stemmed from practice and took into account the intentions of the classroom actors, integrating different areas of knowledge and practice. There was always a great effort to transcend technicalities, trying to disregard HOW and concentrate on WHAT and WHY. Reflecting within these parameters was not easy at first, but with time it yielded to teachers a fuller and richer understanding of teaching. Actually, in the evaluation of the Project (Celani et al., 1988:83, 84, 85,184) the vast majority of teachers felt that the local seminars first and foremost, followed by regional and national seminars, did effectively contribute to their professional development because of the possibilities offered for exchange of ideas in direct contact with peers.

It was important to make clear, however, that possible solutions arrived at for the directly experienced situations had to be seen as tentative and subject to further examination. There was important work to do in awareness raising as to teacher education being a long-term process, with no short-cuts to it. Teacher education is a never-ending process, involving growth; consequently, it must be understood as a dynamic process.

An adaptation of this quotation from Bonser (1992)

Quality improvement is a journey, not a destination.

seems apt to close these remarks. Reflective teacher education is a journey, not a destination. This should not be interpreted as a pessimistic view of reflective teacher education as being utopian. Quite the contrary, it expresses the dynamic nature of this approach.

4. A retrospective view

On looking at the Brazilian National ESP Project in retrospect as to the rationale for its organisation and approach it is

comforting to see that the decisions taken then were not too far away from the tenets of teacher education theory prevalent in the present decade. It is true that the work of John Dewey in relation to teacher education within a reflective paradigm has been known for several decades (Dewey, 1933), but it is also true that it has been only in the past fifteen years that the concept and practice of reflective teaching have created more widespread discussion, as can be seen in Schön (1983, 1987), Smyth (1989), Zeichner (1996), among others. Although reflective teacher education was not a phrase used in the project, and although there seems still to be little shared agreement as to what characterises reflective teacher education, on looking back, we can say that its principles were at the base of the project. The teacher education component of the Brazilian National ESP Project relied heavily on critical reflection springing from experience - particularly experience in materials preparation -, and on interaction with peers and with more experienced interlocutors, i.e., the Project's team of specialists. It was set up from a totally social and humanist perspective, thus being consonant with reflective teacher education theory, which sees education not as a matter of mere adding to one's knowledge, in this case knowing more about ESP, in a top-down formulaic directive scheme imposed from outside, but as the building up of awareness as to what is involved in facing the particular problems that a particular teaching situation offers. And this is best achieved through social interaction with others.

The fact that teachers have been taking up responsibility for their own development can be seen in the number of papers presented in national seminars, nearly ten years after the end of the officially supported project, in the number of locally developed projects, in the cross-fertilisation resulting from interchange between teams in different parts of the country. In the case of the Brazilian National ESP Project the role of the specialists has been taken on not by a handful of orthodox counterparts, but by the large numbers of ESP teachers in most universities and secondary schools who start their own local ESP teacher development groups.

The dynamic, cyclical nature of reflection can be said to account for the changes that the Project has been constantly undergoing in the present decade in order to make it suitable to changes in circumstances.

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