

Introduction: Teacher development through exploring classroom processes

Asking questions about teaching

This book explores the nature of teaching in second language classrooms, and introduces teachers and teachers-in-training to techniques which can be used to explore teaching. The book aims to develop a reflective approach to teaching, that is, one in which teachers and student teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching. Critical reflection involves asking questions such as the following, which form the focus of the individual chapters of the book.

- How can I collect information about my own teaching? (Chapter 1)
- What are my beliefs about teaching and learning, and how do these beliefs influence my teaching? (Chapter 2)
- Where do these beliefs come from? (Chapter 2)
- What kind of teacher am I? (Chapter 2)
- What beliefs do my learners hold about learning and teaching? (Chapter 3)
- How do these beliefs influence their approach to learning? (Chapter 3)
- What learning styles and strategies do my learners favor? (Chapter 3)
- What kind of planning decisions do I make use of? (Chapter 4)
- What kind of on-the-spot decisions do I make while I teach? (Chapter 4)
- What criteria do I use to evaluate my teaching? (Chapter 4)
- What is my role as a teacher? (Chapter 5)
- How does this role contribute to my teaching style? (Chapter 5)
- How do my learners perceive my role as a teacher? (Chapter 5)
- What form or structure do my lessons have? (Chapter 6)
- How do I communicate goals to my learners? (Chapter 6)

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Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart

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- How effectively do I utilize learning opportunities within a lesson? (Chapter 6)
- What kinds of interaction occur in my classroom? (Chapter 7)
- What interactional styles do my learners favor? (Chapter 7)
- What kind of grouping arrangements do I use and how effective are they? (Chapter 7)
- What kind of learning activities do I employ? (Chapter 8)
- What is the purpose of these activities? (Chapter 8)
- What patterns of language use occur when I teach? (Chapter 9)
- How do I modify my language to facilitate teaching and learning? (Chapter 9)
- What opportunities do learners have for authentic language use in my lessons? (Chapter 9)

In asking and answering questions such as these, teachers are in a position to evaluate their teaching, to decide if aspects of their own teaching could be changed, to develop strategies for change, and to monitor the effects of implementing these strategies.

Such questions are often asked by teachers when describing problems they face in their teaching. In discussing these kinds of questions, teachers often point out that many conventional approaches in teacher development rarely help them find answers which will give them practical help with their problems. In-service workshops designed to improve teaching skills often have only short-term effects and rarely involve teachers in an ongoing process of examining their teaching.

In order to answer questions like those listed here, it is necessary to look objectively at teaching and reflect critically on what one discovers. The information obtained through the process of exploring teaching can be useful in a number of ways. It can help achieve a better understanding of one's own assumptions about teaching as well as one's own teaching practices; it can lead to a richer conceptualization of teaching and a better understanding of teaching and learning processes; and it can serve as a basis for self-evaluation and is therefore an important component of professional development.

Discussion

1. Which of the questions listed in this section are of greatest interest to you?
2. What other questions do you think are important to ask about teaching?
3. Compare your answers to these questions with those of a colleague.

The assumptions underlying this book

This book takes teachers and teachers-in-preparation through a number of activities that focus on different dimensions of second or foreign language teaching. The questions it explores are not linked to a particular method or view of teaching, since teachers work in very different kinds of situations (e.g., some with beginning learners and others with advanced students), with different kinds of content (e.g., some teach reading while others teach writing or speaking), with different teaching methods and approaches, and have different amounts of experience and skill (some may be in pre-service programs and others may be experienced teachers). The book does not set out to tell teachers what effective teaching is, but rather tries to develop a critically reflective approach to teaching, which can be used with any teaching method or approach.

The techniques introduced for exploring teaching are based on the following assumptions about the nature of teacher development.

1. *An informed teacher has an extensive knowledge base about teaching.* Teaching is a complex, multidimensional activity. The teacher who has a more extensive knowledge and deeper awareness about the different components and dimensions of teaching is better prepared to make appropriate judgments and decisions in teaching.

2. *Much can be learned about teaching through self-inquiry.* For many teachers, classroom visits by supervisors are the main source of feedback on their teaching. While comments of a supervisor or other outside visitor can be a useful source of information about one's teaching, teachers themselves are in the best position to examine their own teaching. Rather than drawing on experts' opinions, theories, or external sources of knowledge as an impetus for change or development, the approach in this book involves teachers in collecting information about their teaching either individually or through collaborating with a colleague, making decisions about their teaching, deciding if initiatives need to be taken, and selecting strategies to carry them out.

3. *Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher.* Teachers are often unaware of the kind of teaching they do or how they handle many of the moment-to-moment decisions that arise. This is seen in the following comments, which were made by teachers after watching videotapes of their own lessons.

I had no idea I did so much talking and didn't let students practice. My pacing was terrible. I didn't give students enough time to practice one task before going on to another.

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I did a bad job on the group work exercises. The students didn't understand what they were supposed to do.

I seemed to ignore half the students in the class.

Since many things happen almost simultaneously during a lesson, it is sometimes difficult for teachers to be aware of what happens in classrooms and why. The activities used throughout this book are designed to help make teaching more visible, through collecting and examining data on many dimensions of teaching.

4. *Experience is insufficient as a basis for development.* While experience is a key component of teacher development, in itself it may be insufficient as a basis for professional growth. Many aspects of teaching occur day in and day out, and teachers develop routines and strategies for handling these recurring dimensions of teaching. However, research suggests that, for many experienced teachers, many classroom routines and strategies are applied almost automatically and do not involve a great deal of conscious thought or reflection (Parker 1984). Experience is the starting point for teacher development, but in order for experience to play a productive role, it is necessary to examine such experience systematically. For this, specific procedures are needed: these are introduced in Chapter 1.

5. *Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching.* Critical reflection involves examining teaching experiences as a basis for evaluation and decision making and as a source for change (Bartlett 1990; Wallace 1991). It involves posing questions about how and why things are the way they are, what value systems they represent, what alternatives might be available, and what the limitations are of doing things one way as opposed to another.

Teachers who are better informed as to the nature of their teaching are able to evaluate their stage of professional growth and what aspects of their teaching they need to change. In addition, when critical reflection is seen as an ongoing process and a routine part of teaching, it enables teachers to feel more confident in trying different options and assessing their effects on teaching.

These assumptions reflect the fact that if teachers are actively involved in reflecting on what is happening in their own classrooms, they are in a position to discover whether there is a gap between what they teach and what their learners learn. This process of reflection is a particular kind of research, which Cross (1988: 3) describes as

the study by classroom teachers of the impact of their teaching on the students in their classrooms. The basic premise of classroom research is that

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teachers should use their classrooms as laboratories to study the learning process as it applies to their particular disciplines; teachers should become skilful, systematic observers of how the students in their classrooms learn.

The systematic exploration of classroom processes forms the theme of this book.

Discussion

1. Review the five assumptions about teacher development listed in this section. Do you agree with these assumptions? What assumptions do you hold about the process of teacher development? What factors have influenced your development as a teacher, or are likely to influence your development in the future?
2. If you are already teaching, can you identify changes you have made in your own teaching or in your approach to teaching? These could be changes in your view of yourself as a teacher, your approach to students, or the method or techniques you use. Why did you make these changes and how did they come about?

1 Approaches to classroom investigation in teaching

The assumption underlying this book is that in every lesson and in every classroom, events occur which the teacher can use to develop a deeper understanding of teaching. Teachers sometimes fail to exploit these events, letting momentum of all the other events of the day take precedence. And yet these experiences can serve as the basis for critical reflection, if teachers can find ways to capture the thoughts of and reactions to these events, as well as ways to gather fuller information about the events themselves. From this basis, teachers can develop strategies for intervention or change, depending on their needs. In this chapter, a number of simple procedures are introduced that can be used to help teachers investigate classroom teaching. Each procedure has advantages and limitations, and some are more useful for exploring certain aspects of teaching than others. The reader will have to decide which procedures are useful and for what purposes.

The procedures discussed here will be referred to throughout the book and consist of:

1. *Teaching journals*. Written or recorded accounts of teaching experiences.
2. *Lesson reports*. Written accounts of lessons which describe the main features of the lessons.
3. *Surveys and questionnaires*. Activities such as administering a questionnaire or completing a survey, designed to collect information on a particular aspect of teaching or learning.
4. *Audio and video recordings*. Recordings of a lesson, or part of a lesson.
5. *Observation*. Tasks completed by a student teacher observing a cooperating teacher's class, or peer observation (i.e., tasks completed by a teacher visiting a colleague's class).
6. *Action research*. Implementation of an action plan designed to bring about change in some aspect of the teacher's class with subsequent monitoring of the effects of the innovation.

Journals

A journal is a teacher's or a student teacher's written response to teaching events. Keeping a journal serves two purposes:

1. Events and ideas are recorded for the purpose of later reflection.
2. The process of writing itself helps trigger insights about teaching. Writing in this sense serves as a discovery process.

Many different topics from classroom experiences can be explored through journal writing, for example:

Personal reactions to things that happen in the classroom or in the school.

Questions or observations about problems that occur in teaching.

Descriptions of significant aspects of lessons or school events.

Ideas for future analysis or reminders of things to take action on.

Some teachers prefer to audiotape their responses to teaching, keeping an "audio journal" rather than a written journal.

Bartlett (1990: 209–10) gives the following suggestions for what to write about (or record).

Our writing will be about our routine and conscious actions in the classroom; conversations with pupils; critical incidents in a lesson; our personal lives as teachers; our beliefs about teaching; events outside the classroom that we think influence our teaching; our views about language teaching and learning.

Appendix 1 at the end of this chapter contains a list of reflection questions that can be used to provide a focus for journal writing. Readers should review these questions as they read the book.

The following procedures are recommended for keeping a journal (Bailey 1990; Porter et al. 1990; Walker 1985).

1. Make entries on a regular basis, such as once or twice a week, or even daily if possible. It may be useful to spend five or ten minutes after a lesson to write about it or record it.
2. Review your journal entries regularly. What might not have been obvious when written or recorded may later become apparent. As you review your journals, ask yourself questions like these:

What do I do as a teacher?

What principles and beliefs inform my teaching?

Why do I teach the way I do?

What roles do learners play in my classes?

Should I teach differently?

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Keeping a journal can also be beneficial when one or more colleagues share their journals and meet regularly to discuss them (Brock, Yu, and Wong 1992). Appendix 2 shows a case study of three teachers involved in collaborative journal writing.

The following is an example of a teacher's journal entry.

Today I gave my class a reading activity which focused on skimming. I gave them an article to read called "Study Paints Grim Picture" and asked them to skim through the article to identify the social problems mentioned. After a few minutes, I checked the answers and asked the students to number the paragraphs. They had to find the paragraphs which contain information on each of the social problems. Then I checked the answers and explained some difficult vocabulary. Then I gave one handout which contained five paragraphs and another handout which contained five headlines. Students had to match them.

Afterthoughts

Timing again was a problem. I originally planned to check the answers of the matching exercise, but there was no time.

Less time should have been spent on explaining expressions as it defeated the objective of my lesson – skimming.

I should have allocated a specific amount of time to practice skimming.

I should have opened the lesson with a discussion of social problems so that students could compare their answers with what they found in the article.

This teacher's journal entry reveals how she has used her journal: to describe how she presented a teaching activity, to identify some concerns she had about the lesson, and to remind her of alternative procedures to use in the future. It also reinforces the unique function of journal writing – it enables a teacher to examine teaching in a way that is unavailable through other means.

Discussion

1. Have you or any of your colleagues ever kept a journal? What kind of journal was it and for what purpose? What did you learn from your journal-keeping experience?
2. What kinds of issues and concerns are useful to focus on when keeping a journal about your teaching?
3. Who do you think is the most suitable audience for your teaching journal? How does the intended audience affect the way you write or record your journal?

Lesson reports

A lesson report is a structured inventory or list which enables teachers to describe their recollections of the main features of a lesson. The purpose of a lesson report is to give the teacher a quick and simple procedure for regularly monitoring what happened during a lesson, how much time was spent on different parts of a lesson, and how effective the lesson was. Whereas a lesson plan describes what a teacher intends to do during a lesson, a lesson report describes what actually happened from the teacher's point of view.

While a lesson report is not a completely accurate account of what occurred during a lesson, it often serves as a useful record of many important features of the lesson and can hence be used to help monitor the teacher's teaching. Published lesson report forms are available for many aspects of ESL lessons (Pak 1985).

To be effective, lesson report forms should be prepared by a teacher or group of teachers to match the goals and content of the particular course they are teaching. The following procedures are recommended in preparing self-report forms:

1. First, identify in as much detail as possible the philosophy underlying the course and the different kinds of teaching activities, procedures, and resources that you expect to use in the course. For example, a group of teachers teaching a grammar class would first discuss their approach to the teaching of grammar, clarify their assumptions about the goals of the course, and identify the kinds of classroom activities, procedures, and resources they plan to use.
2. Next, prepare a lesson report form. The grammar teachers discussed earlier, for example, would prepare a checklist which could be used to collect information about how grammar was presented and practiced during a lesson. The checklist should be pilot tested to improve its design. (See Appendix 3 for a sample form.)
3. Use the lesson report form on a regular basis to record the activities, procedures, and resources used throughout the course.
4. Meet periodically to review and compare lesson reports with those of other teachers teaching the same course. As you do so, discuss any differences that are emerging in the way you teach the class and the reasons for these differences. If necessary, rethink and modify the teaching strategies and materials you are using. Alternatively, you may wish to monitor your own teaching using self-report forms, thus gathering important information that will be useful the next time you teach the same course.

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An alternative approach to lesson reporting is simply for the teacher to spend a few minutes after a lesson writing answers to questions such as the following:

- What were the main goals of the lesson?
- What did the learners actually learn in the lesson?
- What teaching procedures did I use?
- What problems did I encounter and how did I deal with them?
- What were the most effective parts of the lesson?
- What were the least effective parts?
- Would I do anything differently if I taught the lesson again?

Discussion

1. What kind of information do you think should be included in a lesson report?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing a lesson report in the form of: (a) a checklist and (b) a response to questions like those above?

Surveys and questionnaires

Some aspects of teaching and learning can be investigated through carrying out a survey or administering a questionnaire. For example, a teacher may wish to investigate students' attitudes toward group work. A questionnaire is administered to the class which asks students to indicate how useful they find group work activities, what they think they learn from them, and for what content areas or skills they think group work is most appropriate. Surveys and questionnaires are useful ways of gathering information about affective dimensions of teaching and learning, such as beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preferences, and enable a teacher to collect a large amount of information relatively quickly. Appendix 4 is a questionnaire which elicits learners' preferences for different kinds of learning activities. Examples of different kinds of surveys and questionnaires are discussed in later chapters of the book.

Discussion

1. What are some aspects of teaching or learning that could usefully be investigated using a questionnaire?
2. How could the information from question 1 be used? Who should have access to this information?