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THE REFLECTIVE ASSIGNMENT: UNLOCKING PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' BELIEFS ON GRAMMAR TEACHING

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a call for teacher education programs to acknowledge student teachers' prior knowledge and personal understandings as having an influential role in developing them as teachers. This is important because in many countries around the world, the method of teaching English has changed over the years from an emphasis on overt grammar instruction in the past to a more communicative approach in recent times. However, many pre-service teachers have been educated in English by traditional methods of drill and memorization of grammar rules. So there can be a mismatch between what the students have learned in the past and what they are presented in the teacher education program. An important question then arises as to how these prior experiences, often tacit, can be made more conscious and integrated into the curriculum. This paper shows how pre-service teachers' beliefs in Singapore were unlocked by the use of a three-part reflective assignment. The paper starts with a brief discussion of teachers' beliefs. Next, the study is outlined, including the course, the assignment and the student teachers' past experiences. Finally, the student teachers' reflections of their actual teaching experiences are outlined and discussed.

Introduction

Recently, there has been a call for teacher education programs to acknowledge student teachers' prior knowledge and personal understandings as having an influential role in developing them as teachers (Almarza 1996). Thus, teacher education courses "should aim to provide space and means by which student teachers can bring up and examine their pre-training knowledge in order to see how it relates to teacher education knowledge, so that learning is more meaningful" (Almarza 1996: 73-74). This is important because in many countries around the world, the method of teaching English has changed over the years from an emphasis on overt grammar instruction

in the past to a more communicative approach in recent times. This communicative approach to the teaching of English suggests the omission of grammar teaching in favor of achieving proficiency in English through communicative type activities in class.

This is the case in Singapore too. The Ministry of Education in Singapore states: "Grammar should not, as far as possible, be taught in discrete sentences nor treated in isolation from other language components" (MOE Syllabus 1991: 61). Despite these methodological changes, most pre-service English teachers in Singapore have been educated in English by traditional methods of drill and memorization of grammar rules. Thus, they bring prior experiences of having been students in the system to the teacher education program. How valid are these prior experiences? The main thesis of this paper is that these prior experiences are valid. The problem is that there can be a mismatch between what the students have learned in the past and what they are presented with in the teacher education program. An important question then arises as to how these prior experiences, often tacit, can be made more conscious and integrated into the curriculum.

This paper shows how pre-service teachers' beliefs in Singapore were unlocked by the use of a three-part reflective assignment. The paper starts with a brief discussion of teachers' beliefs. Next, the study is outlined, including the course, the assignment and the student teachers' past experiences. Finally, the student teachers' reflections of their actual teaching experiences are outlined and discussed.

Teachers' Beliefs

Kagan (1992: 65) defines teachers' beliefs as "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught." Kagan (1992) points out that teachers' beliefs are generally stable and do not change; also, she says beliefs reflect the nature of the instruction the teacher provides to students. These beliefs develop over a teacher's career. Johnson (1994: 439) points that while beliefs are not easy to define or study, educational research on teachers' beliefs share three basic assumptions. These assumptions are (1) Teachers' beliefs influence perception and judgment. (2) Teachers' beliefs play a role in how information on teaching is translated into classroom practices. (3) Understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices and teacher education programs. Nespor (1987) also points out that beliefs are not open to critical examination or outside

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evaluation and they can include conceptualizations of ideal situations that differ from reality. This is the case for experienced teachers, but what about pre-service teachers — do they have existing beliefs about teaching and learning considering they have not taken teacher education courses and have never taught classes?

Shulman (1987) says that pre-service teachers also come to any teacher education program with prior beliefs. These beliefs have been accumulated from a variety of sources including their past experiences as students themselves and may act as filters (Lortie, 1975) to what they have been exposed to in the teacher education program. In TESOL, Richards, Ho, and Giblin, (1996) discovered that novice teachers' personal theories influence their perception and evaluation of their teaching. Furthermore, Burnes (1993: 63) says that these beliefs "remain hidden and implicit." Burns (1993: 63-64) calls for English teacher education programs to provide opportunities for teachers to "raise to consciousness the nature of the personalized theories which inform their practice." Richards, (1998: 71) says that the belief systems of preservice teachers "often serve as a lens through which they view both the content of the teacher development program and their language teacher experiences." Additionally, Joram and Gabriele (1998: 176) say that it is essential that "teacher educators take prior beliefs into account because any new material taught will have to compete with, replace or otherwise modify the folk theories that already guide both teachers and pupils." This was the case in a study by Alamarza (1996) when she discovered that preservice teachers interpreted the theoretical models they were presented in the teacher education program according to their own informally acquired beliefs. The four trainee teachers in this study responded differently to the method they were being trained to use in their teacher education program: one welcomed the method while the other three rejected it because it conflicted with their own beliefs about teaching.

If pre-service teachers enter a teacher education program with an accumulation of prior experiences, in the form of beliefs, that may be resistant to change (Pajares, 1992), then the question begs as to what impact the teacher education program has on these trainees? For example, Hollingsworth (1989) found that preservice teachers, rather than restructuring their beliefs as a result of taking a course, may only fine-tune their preprogram beliefs. Calderhead and Robertson (1991) have suggested that this inflexibility may be due to pre-service teachers' lack of knowledge about how to adjust their beliefs about teachers and teaching. The question in this paper is how to incorporate

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self-reflection in pre-service teachers so that these prior experiences can be brought to the level of awareness. These prior beliefs can then be evaluated in light of alternative views presented in the course.

The Study

Context

Singapore has a multilingual population of slightly more than three million people in which English is used as a first language with varying degrees of proficiency from native speaker level to English as a foreign language level. For the vast majority of Singaporeans, English is not their mother tongue but represents only one language in the speaker's multilingual verbal repertoire. Even though English has been spoken on the island of Singapore since 1819 (where it was used for commerce), it became the major working language only after independence in 1965, and only since 1987 has English been made the main medium of instruction in the school system (Xu and Tan 1997).

The course that the pre-service students in this study were taking was a Grammar Methods course that Bachelor of Arts year four students are required to take at the National Institute of Education in order to complete their requirements for a BA Degree in English. The six-week (two hours per session/week) course includes the following topics: planning grammar lessons based on sound linguistic principles, assessing learners' grammatical skills, selecting and adapting suitable published English language teaching materials (ELT) and authentic materials for teaching grammar and developing a personal philosophy of the place of grammar in English language teaching.

The course starts with a definition of grammar; we use Cross's (1991: 26) definition of grammar as "the body of rules which underlie a language." This includes rules which govern the structure of words and rules which govern the structure of clauses and sentences "that are acceptable to educated native speakers" (Cross 1991: 26). One of the sessions includes a detailed discussion of the main approaches to teaching grammar. Included in this session is a discussion of the inductive and deductive approaches of teaching grammar with the advantages and disadvantages of each approach discussed.

An inductive approach to teaching grammar is defined as one "in which the students' attention is focused on the structure being learned and the

students are required to formulate for themselves the underlying pattern" (Schaffer 1989: 395). She defines a deductive approach to teaching grammar as one "where, regardless of the timing relative to the practice part of the lesson, students are given an explanation" (Schaffer 1989: 396). Deductive teaching of grammar, then, refers to giving the students rules of the grammar item before they are given examples in actual usage (see Appendix A for examples of both approaches).

These were the two approaches that we focused on in the course and the trainee teachers had to make up their own minds which approach would be most effective for their teaching situations. In order to give them a better understanding of the complexities of choosing an approach for teaching grammar, they were given an assignment that would enable them to reflect before, during and after experiencing a real teaching situation. This would also make them consciously articulate and examine their beliefs about the role of grammar in English lessons.

Reflective Assignment

Pre-service teachers have more time and experience in a classroom setting as students than they do as teacher trainees. This experience has influenced their perceptions of what good teaching is. Bailey, Bergthold, Braunstein, Fleischman, Holbrook, Truman, and Waissbluth (1996: 11) have said that "if it is true that 'we teach the way we have been taught,' rather than as we have been trained to teach, then we are bound to perpetuate the models we have learned in our own teaching." They suggest one method of breaking this cycle: "One way to begin is to bring our past experience to the level of conscious awareness" (Bailey et al: 11). The purpose for this reflective assignment was to make the students more aware of their own approach (philosophy) towards teaching English grammar, where this philosophy originated and if it was effective (based on the experience teaching grammar to actual students). The students were required to present their findings to the class during the last session.

Assignment

This assignment is in three parts. The first part of the assignment is to write your past experience of learning English in Singapore and your personal approach to teaching English grammar in English lessons in Singaporean secondary schools. Please include references to material we have covered

in the course if this was an influence. Second, write a DETAILED lesson plan on any grammar structure and teach it to some secondary students in a school, or elsewhere. Third, the final part of the assignment is to reflect on your class: would you change any of your techniques of teaching grammar? If so, why? If not, why not? Any other reflections you would like to make on your experiences? In other words, I want you to reflect before, during, and after the lesson. The assignment should be a minimum of five double spaced pages with the actual lesson plan and teaching materials in the appendix at the back. Please give references (the rationale for teaching a particular method); these pages are not counted in the five pages.

Analysis

Thirty-four pre-service teachers were given this assignment in the fall semester of 1997. Because of limitations of space, a detailed analysis of five pre-service teachers' responses is presented. These five students were deemed as being representative of the class as a whole. Their prior experiences (their responses to the first part of the assignment) are outlined first. Then the same student teachers' reflections after teaching in a real context are outlined.

Past Experiences

Benjamin, a Bachelor of Arts (BA) year four pre-service teachers at the National Institute of Education (NIE), expresses his prior experience as follows:

> In Singapore's education system, grammar is taught in both primary and secondary school. When I was in Primary school, a lot of emphasis was placed on grammar. I still remember how my English teacher used to drill my class in all aspects of grammar. First, she would provide us with rules such as when we have nouns starting with 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o' and 'u', we should use the article 'an' instead of 'a'. After providing us with the rules, she would then give us lots and lots of exercises to do.

Even though he did not enjoy these classes, they, nevertheless, enabled him to pass examinations in the competitive Singaporean system. Benjamin writes:

> I must admit that her method [overt teaching] of teaching
> grammar did produce results — my English results were always
> among one of the top few in my school. On the other hand,
> her method of instruction also made me feel that grammar is
> a very boring component of English. As a result, my interest
> in grammar slowly diminished. There was a period of time
> when grammar became my most hated component in English.
> However, I still managed to perform quite well in English.

Thus, Benjamin's prior experience of 'boring, yet effective' (to pass the required examinations), grammar classes has left him with the dilemma of how he should include grammar in his lessons now that he has to incorporate a communicative approach (an inductive approach). The reason, thus, for the first part of the reflective assignment was to make this tacit knowledge explicit so that its meanings can be subjected to analysis and through scrutiny find justification (Bullough 1991). What follows are accounts of five of my pre-service students' approaches towards teaching grammar as documented in their written assignments.

All five student teachers decided to use an inductive approach to the teaching of grammar but for different reasons. Two students, Benjamin and Syarifah, decided to adopt an inductive approach because of a strong belief that this was the best way to get students to learn English. This belief was based on their experiences as students in the system. The other three students, Jason, Nora and Teck Siong, decided to try the inductive approach but were not fully convinced that this was the correct approach because of prior experiences of being a student and readings from the course itself.

Benjamin decided to use an inductive approach to teaching grammar because he was passive and bored in class. He writes: "I chose to conduct my lesson using the inductive approach because a deductive approach leads to passive learning; an inductive approach encourages the students to think for themselves. I don't deny that this is partly due to my past experience."

Syarifah, on the other hand, is going to use an inductive approach because this is how she learned English at home and in school. She writes:

> My philosophy of how grammar ought to be taught is largely
> influenced by the manner in which I myself learned it: through

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abundant immersion from parents, teachers, and peers and the media. To teach grammar effectively then, a teacher should provide students with as many examples of situations in which a certain grammatical structure is used, without first expecting them to construct a similar structure almost immediately, nor by pointing out the structures.

Contrary to the above accounts of a strong defence of an inductive approach to teaching English grammar, Jason, Nora and Teck Siong have reservations about using this approach. This reservation is based on past experiences and a perception that the new communicative approach is not working.

For example, Teck Siong's past experiences learning English grammar has made him uneasy with making his choice of teaching grammar method. He writes:

My past experiences have pre-conditioned me to choose a deductive method as my usual teaching strategy. I guess I am predisposed to choosing the latter method because I feel more secure with it for various reasons: it is more straightforward to teach it this way (like a lecture), it is easier to test (we just give them exercises to complete), and we can get immediate feedback.

However, because of his readings during the course, he has decided to try an inductive approach to grammar teaching, but he remains uncomfortable about having made such a decision. He writes:

I would expect that if I use an inductive method, I would not be able to tell at once whether students have indeed understood what I have taught, as the target items are supposed to be internalized, whether it really is only the students will know. As a teacher I can only wait for their next mistake to discover that I have failed on that occasion. And if I do not see their mistakes, my natural tendency would be to wait for that mistake to happen to prove my failure-living on tenterhooks practically.

Nora, too, has been influenced by the readings during the course, but she experienced a deductive approach to learning grammar. She writes:

> My philosophy of teaching grammar has been shaped, to a
> certain extent by the way I was taught in school. It is inevitable
> because I had been conditioned as such; where my teachers
> presented and explained the underlying rules and we, the
> students, practiced applying the rules orally and in the writing.

Even though she is more comfortable with a deductive approach to
learning grammar, she, nevertheless, tried an inductive approach for this
assignment because she says, she is, "greatly influenced by my readings,
especially Shafer (1989) and Cross (1991)."

Jason supports a traditional deductive approach in grammar teaching but
for a different reason from the other five; he thinks the communicative method
has failed in Singapore and he has linked an inductive approach to teaching
English grammar as being the main culprit. He writes:

> The inductive approach came [to Singapore] with the advent
> of the communicative approach and stresses meaning over
> form. Is it working? My answer is a big, resounding 'No'! Why?
> Singapore is not a native English speaking country...in the past,
> before the communicative approach was implemented in
> Singapore, prescriptive grammar in the traditional deductive
> approach, was widely taught. Even though oral proficiency was
> not very high, the written proficiency was of a decent and
> comprehensible standard. Now they cannot write or understand
> explanations when grammar mistakes are pointed out.

Hence, notwithstanding Jason's reservations, the five pre-service teachers
decided to attempt an inductive approach to the teaching of a grammar
structure. Also, all five were influenced by their past experiences as students
in the system. The second part of the assignment required these pre-service
teachers to teach a group of secondary students. They were then asked to
reflect on their classes.

Students' Reflections

Benjamin found that even though his lesson went well, this was because
his students' proficiency levels were high enough to learn from an inductive
approach. He writes:

> On the whole, I would say that the lesson went quite smoothly.
> I used riddles to stimulate the students' interest. At the same
> time, the riddles could also get the students familiarized with
> the wh-question format. I wonder about my students' different
> learning abilities and the inductive approach. The standard of
> the students will differ in the future. Sometimes, I think I should
> think about using the deductive approach.

Now he thinks that there is no one approach to teaching grammar for
every context. He writes: "In my reflection, it dawned on me that there is
no one fixed method of teaching a grammar lesson. As teachers, we should
be flexible and always be ready to modify our plan when the need arises."

Jason, who was adamant that a deductive approach was best for teaching
grammar in Singapore, writes:

> Much to my surprise, the students were able to grasp the
> concepts of the present progressive and the past tense during
> the explanation stage faster than expected. It does seem that
> the inductive approach of letting the pupil discover the grammar
> structure works, to some extent. It aided them in understanding
> by providing them with actual situations of seeing language
> work in 'real life'.

However, he hedges his enthusiasm for this inductive approach with what
he perceives to be the reality of Singaporean classrooms:

> Even though the inductive approach was effective in the initial
> stage, yet it still was necessary that the deductive approach
> of explicit statement of the rules and their application was
> essential. Of course, by using the inductive approach, the lesson
> would be more interesting. But what is the use of interest if
> the pupils are not able to benefit from it due to poor
> understanding. Grammar skills must be taught well, explicitly
> or implicitly according to the context.

Nora was surprised at her students' and her own responses to the class.
She writes:

My attempts to induce the students to realize the grammar rule without any prior explanation received different responses from the students. Some students did attempt to formulate the underlying pattern of the structure. Some were too lazy to think-from previous experiences, they know that teachers will eventually provide them with the answers. I enjoyed the lesson.

However, like the others, she also does not rule out a deductive approach:

I feel that this approach [deductive] can be useful at times. This is especially true when students are confronted by a grammar rule that is complex. Teachers will also find this approach useful where time is short and they need time to cover a difficult grammar point in the syllabus. Thus my philosophy embodies both approaches-deductive and inductive. The most important thing is to cater them to the needs of my students at a particular point in time.

Teck Siong found that both he and his students had problems with an inductive approach. He writes:

I discovered that this method is more complicated than I thought. I found that I actually had no idea how to conduct a grammar lesson in this manner. In the past, I had always employed the deductive method, giving the rule first, then giving lots of examples and lots of practice. Now I have to come up with the examples. The students did not manage to verbalize the grammar rules. I was made more insecure as I could not tell whether the form and its use had been internalized. All I can say is that after I have tried the inductive method, I am more confident in using it again.

Also, Syarifah was surprised with her students' reactions to the class because she was convinced that this was the correct approach. Her biggest surprise was her students' perceptions that knowledge of grammar rules is very important for them. She attempted to teach tag question formation: She writes: "The students could not produce tag questions in their conversations or writing. It was during the picture card activity that I realized some students

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found difficulty in asking the tag question correctly." She now realizes that it may be necessary to incorporate a deductive approach into her grammar lessons, as her students are more secure with this approach.

Discussion and Conclusion

It should be noted that the module outlined in this paper was not 'pushing' inductive approaches to the teaching of English grammar at the expense of more deductive approaches as this would be a simplistic view of teaching grammar. Rather, what this reflective assignment was attempting to do was unlock the tacitly held beliefs of these pre-service teachers of English and the influence these beliefs may have on their teaching of English grammar. As these five representative pre-service teachers have only experienced a deductive approach to learning English grammar in the Singaporean context (most of the students in the class have been educated by deductive approaches to learning English grammar), they were not aware of alternative approaches (including inductive approaches) to the teaching of grammar. I did point out during the course that no one approach to the teaching of grammar will cover all situations, and that sometimes deductive approaches are necessary depending on the context. The fact that these five representative pre-service students came to the same conclusion after trying an alternative approach to teaching grammar than what they experienced when they were learning English grammar is a testament that the reflective assignment was useful as a tool for them to question their prior beliefs and experiences as students of English.

Pre-service teachers prior experiences are valid because "prior knowledge serves as a filter through which the student responds to teacher education" (Bullough 1991: 43). Also, Almaraz (1996: 73-74) says that one of the functions of teacher education courses is "to provide space and means by which student teachers can bring up and examine their pre-training knowledge in order to see how it relates to teacher education knowledge, so that learning is more meaningful." One method of making this tacit prior knowledge explicit is the use of a reflective assignment.

The reflective assignment in this Grammar Methods course has made these pre-service teachers more aware of their past influences as learners of English in the Singapore school system. This awareness, together with the course readings, has led them to question these past influences. Specifically, these pre-service teachers now realize that they should not remain fixed in their

approach to teaching grammar; rather they need to be flexible and teach to the needs and level of proficiency of their students. They also discovered that reflecting on their prior experiences of learning and actual experience of teaching can be a powerful method of shaping their own development as teachers.

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Appendix A: EXAMPLES OF DEDUCTIVE AND INDUCTIVE APPROACHES TO TEACHING GRAMMAR

Deductive

Example 1.

Tag Questions

(1) A tag is a question added to the end of a sentence which makes that sentence into a question-

Mary went shopping—
Mary went shopping, *didn't she?*

The boys aren't playing—
The boys aren't playing, *are they?*

(2) Making tag questions is not difficult if you follow these rules:

(a) If the sentence is positive, add *not* in the tag question.
Example: She *went* to the store, *didn't she?*

If the sentence is negative, remove *not* from the tag question.
Example: He *didn't drink* too much last night, *did he?*

(b) The pronoun in the tag must match the noun in the subject.
Example: Steve is coming to the party, *isn't he?*

(c) If there is a helping verb in the sentence, use it in the tag.
Example: The calendar *is* on the desk, *isn't it?*.

If there is no helping verb, use *do*.
Example: Mr. Jones drives a Toyota, *doesn't he?*

In the letter below, all of the tag questions are wrong. Circle each tag question and then explain what is wrong with it. Look at the rules if you have any trouble.

Friday, May 13
Dear Suzie,

I got your letter in the mail today and I couldn't believe what you'd written. You really haven't decided to move out of your parents' house, did you? Your parents didn't really say I was no good, is it? You haven't really

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started dating another man, haven't you? Your new boyfriend doesn't really want you to marry him, don't you? You haven't forgotten our engagement haven't you? My mother didn't really tell you to return the engagement ring, was she? I haven't made you that angry, did I? We are going to be lovers again, aren't they? You will come and talk to me about this little problem, can't I? Please write back as soon as possible.

Love,
Fred

p.s. You do still love me, do you?

Inductive

Part I

Work with your partner. Read the sentences on the cards (numbered and in bold) to each other and try to make a story from them. Be very careful about the order of the sentences. When you decide on the order, write down the story. Pay careful attention to the use of *a* and *the*. Do not show the cards to your partner.

One day in English class, the teacher (Mrs. Lou) had to leave the classroom for a minute. Before leaving, she told the class to study the textbook while she was gone. But, the students did not study. Here's what happened as soon as Mrs Lou left.

(1) A boy wearing a striped shirt went to the door to watch for Mrs Lou.

(2) He threw the airplane to a friend who was standing at the chalkboard.

(3) Suddenly the boy at the door saw Mrs Lou coming and he shouted.

(4) The friend who was drawing on the chalkboard picked up a towel.

They all quickly sat down. When Mrs Lou came back, she saw all the students studying very hard. She was very pleased with her good students.

Part II

**Again, work with your partner. Look at the sentences you wrote in part
1. What do you notice about the use of *a* and *the*?
Can you write two rules?**

Rule 1: We use *a* when_____

_____

Rule 2: We use *the* when_____

_____