

TEACHERS' AND LEARNERS' THINKING AND ACTING

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***TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' THINKING AND ACTING
ON CHANGES IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION***

A case study on policy implementation and enactment

INTRODUCTION

According to Guskey (2002:381) “professional development programs are systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students”. These efforts may or may not result in actual educational transformation and change. In accordance with personal construct psychology it is suggested that when an individual discovers evidence that challenges his or her constructs, new constructs are formed and the construct system is re-organised accordingly. This transformation is irreversible, bounded and sometimes regarded as uncomfortable since it involves challenge to previously held world views (Pope & Denicolo, 2001). In addition, transactional constructivism holds that the knowledge construed by an individual emerges in the transaction between the individual’s activity and the environment for action (Biesta, 2014). This suggests that transformative experiences have to be understood in context or as Taylor & Cranton (2013:27) state “...it is imperative that researchers recognize the dialectical nature of experience and context—it is a reciprocal process of the sociocultural and historical setting, others (social recognition, relationships) and the personal interpretation of change”. However, it is likewise well known that curriculum developments rarely follow the rhetoric of change proposed in policy documents and rarely worked as they were intended (Goodlad,1988). In the area of teacher education, Beach (1995, 1997) has shown that reform in Sweden had little influence on practice, and that this seemed to be in part due to the gap that existed between policy makers and practitioners’ constructions, beliefs and attitudes. This chapter concerns the above mentioned gap, and presents a Swedish practitioner research looking at policy enactment in a department of education within a university college (Baldwin, 2013). It presents results from one of those studies that Taylor & Cranton (2013:42) believe are too few in relation to transformative learning: “longitudinal studies, studies done in the time when the transformative learning occurs, [...] studies that are in the critical paradigm (for example, participatory action research)”.

The case study setting concerns the introduction and implementation of The

Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) and learning outcomes into course planning as part of the 2007/8 implementation of the Bologna process in Sweden. More specifically the study concerns changes made to courses designed for prospective teachers of English as a foreign language as part of teacher training. In particular, the chapter aims at presenting teachers' and students' individual and collective voices and acting during a four year implementation of organisational changes in order to promote a transformative and student-centred learning culture.

BACKGROUND

European Policy Documents behind the Changes Made

The Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) was developed by the Council of Europe between 1989 and 1996. The CEFR aims to help describe the levels of language proficiency required by existing standards, tests and examinations in order to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualifications across Europe. Its aim is to provide a reference work that can be applied to any European language and that would present language professionals a basis for language teaching and learning as well as assessment. According to Trim (2012:14) the values and ideas of the CEFR can be traced back as far as to Comenius' *Didactica Magna* (1633) and the promotion of language learning that "should not be a matter of formal exercise, but should be built upon sensory experiences" and where the role of the learner is central. Policy documents related to the CEFR indeed stress the importance of learner-centeredness. In his recent book, Brian North (2014:107) states that:

The approach taken is an *action-oriented approach*. This propagates language learning for a social purpose, not as an intellectual pursuit. Language is seen as communication, as collaboration. This view suggests that language and skills should be taught because they are relevant to the needs of the learners. We don't learn 'a language', we learn the language and skills necessary for what we need or want to *do* in the language.

The above is reflected for example in the goal of self-assessment, which is presented as part of a more general goal of guiding students towards responsibility and independence in their language learning. In addition, the CEFR represents a language view where the target language functions primarily as a means to communicate. While students are seen to need knowledge about the forms to be able to use the foreign language, the focus and aim are communication in the target language (CEF 2001).

The changes made to local course organisation were influenced by the policy messages in documents on the Bologna process as well as those contained in policy documents on foreign language learning. Many of the messages in Bologna policy documents can also be found in policy documents on the CEFR; which was the main inspiration for many of the changes made locally.

One of the key aims of the Bologna process is to elaborate a method of knowledge organisation that would enable curricular and educational structures to be compared; both within and across fields, as well as in work places and the labour market (Gonzalez and Wagenaar, 2003, p. 25-25,54). The methodology adopted is based on the idea of learning outcomes and of competences. 'Learning outcomes' refer to knowledge, understanding and skills that a learner is required to know, to understand and to demonstrate after completing a longer or shorter period of learning. The introduction of learner outcomes into course planning is a key aspect of the Bologna process. Policy documents present the organization of courses around learning outcomes as representing a move towards a more student-centred approach to learning, suggesting that learning outcomes can lead to improved student learning as well as a basis for curricular re-organisation and a move away from traditional forms of teaching and learning.

In a similar way to how Bologna policy documents present learning outcomes as a basis for curricular re-organisation, it has been suggested that the CEFR can bring about curriculum reform; arguing that the 'can do' descriptors of the CEFR offer to bring curriculum, pedagogy and assessment closer to one another than has traditionally been the case, challenging us to rethink each from the perspective of the other two (Little, 2009; North, 2014).

Changes Made Locally

The changes made to course organization in connection with the implementation of the Bologna process concern attempts to change examination and assessment practice, as well as attempts to make students more responsible for their learning and to promote transformative learning.

A key influence on the changes made locally was the CEFR. As part of the change process, learning outcomes based on the CEFR were adopted as the starting point for the teacher to assess students' language proficiency in English. The communicative view of language learning behind the CEFR has influenced teacher education for EFL teachers in Sweden and how foreign languages are taught today in Swedish schools. However, its influence on higher education has been much less.

While CEFR policy documents do not prescribe certain methods of language learning, it has been suggested that the communicative orientation of the CEFR favours a task based approach to teaching and learning as well as the development of learner autonomy (Little, 2009; North, 2014). These ideas were also significant in influencing the changes made locally to examination tasks and attempts to make students more responsible for their learning.

A number of changes were made in an attempt to make students more responsible for their learning. Firstly, the students were allocated a supervisor who was responsible for helping students to reflect on their progress towards reaching the learning outcomes for the course. Secondly, the students were required to keep an electronic teaching /language portfolio as well as an on-line log book where they could raise issues with teachers and reflect on their own progress. The students received credits for their reflections. Thirdly, a new system of teacher feedback on students' written proficiency was introduced with the intention of

encouraging students to reflect on their work rather than simply rewriting their papers based on teacher's corrections. The system was based on the notification of errors and mistakes, and not inspired by the 'can do' approach of the CEFR descriptors.

Attempts to change assessment practice concerned attempts to connect assessment and feedback of student work in English to the wording of the CEFR descriptors and the CEFR's 'can do' focus. Standard assessment forms were introduced which attempted to connect assessment to the language used in the descriptors. The ambition was to provide feedback of a formative nature. Using the standard assessment forms and placing them where all the teachers could access them was presented as a way of allowing the teachers to be more consistent in the language feedback they gave to students.

As part of the changes made locally, some new examinations were added which can be seen as an attempt to introduce a more task based approach to teaching and learning. Firstly, a student run lesson was included as part of testing the student's grammar knowledge for the first time. Secondly, an assessment and grading examination was included where students were asked to discuss and assess examples of pupils' written and oral ability in English. Thirdly, a new Phonetics examination was added, which required students to record the English pronunciation of a young second language learner of English and write a report comparing the pronunciation of the individual concerned with the standard British or American model of pronunciation. Knowledge of Phonetics had in previous courses been examined by a sit down examination.

REACTIONS TO THE CHANGES MADE

As indicated in the Introduction, not all intended policy changes on macro and meso levels lead to changes at the micro level, that is, in the actual teaching and in the students' and teachers' practice and attitudes. In this following, the reactions to the changes made, both from students and teacher educators, are presented. The reactions are based on data that were produced through extensive data collection during four years: field notes, course documentation, teacher educator talk in planning meetings, written and verbal discussions with teacher educators and students, as well as course evaluations carried out by students (Baldwin, 2013). Bernstein's (2000) theoretical concept of recontextualisation was used to understand processes of curricular interpretation by both teachers and students. We found that Bernstein offers a defined framework for understanding how knowledge is translated, distributed and evaluated in pedagogic processes. The concept was used in a similar way to that of Ball (1998) and others to track the implementation of education policy at the local level and to show how policy discourses are contested and how local politics and cultures can mediate global and generic solutions. In addition, the theory of practice architectures, developed by Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) has been valuable in helping to understand the powerful norms which frame and construct the identities and subjectivities of actors and can work to help or mediate change. Practice is shaped by the practice architectures of

teacher education, and of language teaching and learning approaches which act to either enable or constrain the possibilities of change.

Reactions to Changes to Examination Practice

There was a broad agreement within the teaching group that the teacher education subject curriculum should cover both knowledge about the English language, and knowledge about the teaching of the English language. However, the new examinations were seen as not allowing for the adequate coverage of content. Concerns were expressed that knowledge about the English language would not be covered adequately in the new examinations. One discussion concerned the new student run grammar lesson examination. It was felt that the examination meant that the students were not getting enough grammar study in the course. One teacher argued that “there is a risk that you end up doing a grammar exam that is suitable for grade 9 yourself and that your knowledge stops there ...the (exam) didn't cover you know the more advanced issues... they need to have tougher grammar tests. “ Another discussion concerned the new Phonetics examination requiring students to write a task based report, where it was felt that not everything that ‘should’ be covered was covered, and that the students were missing out as a result. As a result of discussions a written examination was re-added to the course at a later date, in addition to the task based examination.

As far as the student reaction is concerned, in course evaluations respondents were most positive about the new examination forms that were introduced and that were based on a more task based approach to teaching and learning. Sstudents were consistently most positive about the student run grammar lesson examination. It was felt that it was good to have “real” pupils to teach and many said that they wanted more of this kind of examination. Another student described the examination as positive and relevant to their future career because “..... it's not as theoretical as it is...actually being a teacher...and that is what I think is missing in some other courses...you just have all these theories that we are supposed to know and when we get out on our practicum we don't know how to use them....”.

The assessment and grading examination where students were asked to discuss and assess examples of pupils' written and oral ability in English was described by students as being particularly useful. One student described the examination discussion as “a real learning experience” which had given them more than lectures. In discussions with students the form of examination received particular praise. Students felt it was rewarding to have the examination as a group discussion and that they had learnt a lot from it. They appreciated looking at authentic examples of student work and some students wanted even more input and practice in this area.

Reactions to Changes to Assessment Practice

There were mixed opinions in the teacher educator group about using the CEFR descriptors to help assess the students' language proficiency. One teacher educator questioned the need for the change, reacting towards the assumption that teacher

educators had not been explicit and consistent in their assessment and grading of student work in the past.

Although there were some positive views, the teaching team expressed concern generally that students would have problems understanding the CEFR descriptors, as they ‘were vague’ and ‘saying the same thing’. All the course teachers felt that it was difficult to apply the framework descriptors when assessing examples of student work. One teacher was less positive, saying that “The descriptors had made assessment harder....that is the difficulty about introducing something which seems to be a real criterion instead of leaving it up to the teacher to mark according to norms and expectations”.

In order to see whether the new assessment forms led teachers to use more positive formative feedback on students’ language proficiency a random survey of 20 assessment forms used to assess five different written examinations by three different teachers has been carried out. The results of the analysis show that teacher feedback was far more expansive when focusing on deficits in students’ knowledge. Mistakes and errors were explained in more detail than positive examples of language use, which were not only mentioned much less frequently, but in a non-expansive way. Very little, if any, of the feedback given focused on the extent to which learners had mastered the proficiency in question, with no connection made to the various levels on the CEFR. The focus of teacher educator assessment was more likely to focus on grammatical errors rather than other aspects of language proficiency, such as sociolinguistic and strategic language competence and the general ‘can do’ approach of the learning outcomes connected to the CEFR.

A majority of the students responding to course evaluations felt that the new minimum standard of C1 level on the CEFR was the correct level for the pass criteria for students’ English language production. At the same time they were less positive about how assessment was carried out. Students expressed the view that they wanted more detailed and positive feedback on their written papers. One student wrote that “The assessments needs to be more expressive in terms of WHAT could be made better, and WHY something is not correctly written.” Of the students who responded to a course evaluation only a third felt that they had received sufficient feedback on their work, and 80% said that it had not always been clear what feedback had meant. Other students commented that they did not feel that the teachers were using the same criteria when assessing student work.

After time, and as a result of teacher discussions, the assessment checklists used to give feedback on oral and written examination tasks were modified away from closely following the wording of the language descriptors in the CEFR towards more simplified descriptions and with more focus on grammatical accuracy.

Reaction to Changes Making the Students More Responsible for Their Learning

As part of the attempts to make the students more responsible for their learning students met their supervisor to reflect on their progress towards reaching the learning outcomes for the course. However, this new system was felt to be time

consuming and it was generally felt that it was better if the teacher who had assessed written work gave the students feedback informally and face to face with the student. The teacher educators were not in agreement as to whether the students should receive credits for their reflection requirement in the course and the learning outcomes and credits were subsequently removed from the course.

The changes made to how written proficiency feedback was given were not seen generally as an improvement to existing practice. One teacher, however, was positive, suggesting that “it makes...the student’s weak sides, or the parts of the language where he or she needs to focus, rather clear ... you can see whether its vocabulary or grammar...that needs to be improved and you can see it rather clearly”. However, most discussions amongst teachers concerned whether the students had understood the method used or not. There was concern that the system was not going to help the weaker students and whether using the system was going to help the students in their future careers. The teacher also questioned the idea that the teachers had to use the same system of giving feedback. Teachers expressed concern that the new method of feedback made it difficult for them to be able to carry out their responsibilities of passing on knowledge that is academically felt to be essential for the students to obtain before entering the profession.

The use of the new feedback method also led to discussions in planning meetings about the role of the teacher and that the teachers were not able to carry out their work in the way they should. One teacher educator, for example, questioned the amount of responsibility students could take for their own learning, stating that “there comes a point where I feel that I haven’t been doing my job, becauseyou need to comment.... I want to give them a bit more because you feel this is not getting anywhere if you are not allowed to guide them”.

The students were generally positive about attempts to get them to take more responsibility for their learning, with 80 % of those responding to course evaluations feeling that in the course the teachers encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning. Students responded most positively to writing the reflection documents and their meetings with their supervisor, with over 75% of respondents replying that the meetings had helped them to reflect on their progress towards reaching the goals for the course. One student wrote that “I think that the meeting with the supervisor is a great opportunity to really feel if I am, if I get better or if there is something I have to struggle with ... you get feedback, and I feel that you push me in the right direction and give me confidence so that I feel yes I can do this and that is very important, which we have not had during earlier courses.”

As far as the new method of written proficiency feedback was concerned, in course evaluations the majority of respondents felt that the feedback they had received on their written work had helped them improve their writing in English. One student wrote that “I am not very good at the grammar but since we get this feedback from you ... that is a great way of really understanding why this is wrong , what I have to do to correct it ... I like that way it’s very pedagogical and yes it’s very easy to understand.” Another student felt that “...it is a very good systembecause it makes you aware of what areas you have the most problems with.“ Other students were less positive. One wrote that “It brought me down when I saw all the marks....Some of the mistakes are completely careless mistakes so that

annoys me. Other mistakes I can't figure out what to write instead. Not even my study group could help me there, so that annoys me as well. I have to ask you for some help there.... “.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As indicated in this chapter, the reality of policy implementation is more complex than suggested in policy discourses, where learning outcomes and the CEFR are presented as a basis for curricular re-organisation. The findings presented here show that while students were on the whole positive towards the changes made, teachers were more negative. Doubts were expressed as to whether new examination forms covered the learners' needs. Concerns were also expressed about using the CEFR descriptors to assess the students' language proficiency. The adoption of the CEFR descriptors had a minimal influence on assessment practice. Assessment was more likely to focus on grammatical errors rather than the general 'can do' approach of the learning outcomes connected to the CEFR. However, this is not unique for the Swedish context, it is in line with recent European reports where rejection and resistance of what could be interpreted as 'political pressure' are to be found in several countries (Byram & Parmenter, 2012). Feedback and assessment of the students' language proficiency continued to reflect the liberal tradition (Quist, 2000) typical of modern language teaching at university; where the focus has traditionally been on written, rather than oral production, and where the main focus has been on language content and structure. The resistance to change is also a challenge to individual teachers' beliefs and experiences of teaching and learning – it hits their core constructs and as Trim points out (2012:18): “the differences are profound and far-reaching”.

Attempts to make students more responsible for their learning by changing the way feedback was given on student work challenged existing pedagogic practice. The new methods of feedback made teacher educators feel that it was difficult for them to be able to carry out their responsibilities of passing on knowledge that was felt to be essential for the students to obtain. The changes were not seen as an improvement to existing practice, but rather regarded as 'unprofessional' and unnecessary. The ability of students to take onboard the feedback given was questioned and the lack of help given by teacher educators was felt to be part of the reason why students were not succeeding. Rather than using the CEFR descriptors to carry out their work, teacher educators resisted and mediated the change by continuing to use their professional experience and knowledge to judge the students language proficiency.

The findings of this chapter are similar to those of previous research on the relationship between policy making and educational policy implementation (e.g. Goodlad, 1988; Beach, 1995 and 1997, Spillane et al, 2002; Supovitz and Weinbaum, 2008; Maguire et al, 2010; Bailey 2012). They illustrate the strong role of disciplinary discourses in resisting change in education; a conclusion found in previous research looking at the Bologna process by Shaw et al (2011). They found that teaching was central to the instructors' professional identity and this affected the process of implementing the Bologna process at the institutional level.

In this case the Bologna process reforms did not connect with the local concerns of practitioners and as a result they were absorbed instead into an existing field of practice containing discourses concerning appropriate curriculum knowledge and teacher and student identities. Within this discourse teachers prefer to have a strong degree of control over the selection and assessment of course content. Individual teachers attempt to preserve and promote their own areas of interest and induct students into the curriculum knowledge that is seen as essential for them to acquire. The student identity is part of a traditional, powerful disciplinary discourse, characterized by vertical relations between the teacher educator and student, and where the rules of curriculum content are in the hands of the teacher educators.

The local pedagogic discourse mediated attempts to change language teaching and learning practice. Rather than using the CEFR descriptors to carry out their work, teacher educators resisted and mediated the change by continuing to use their professional experience and knowledge to judge the students language proficiency. McNamara (2011) has argued that the use of the CEFR reduces local variation and ignores other accounting systems, or sets of cultural values, or formulations of the goals of language education, which cannot be directly translated into the language of the CEFR. The reaction to using the CEFR descriptors locally can be seen as an expression of the cultural values and goals of the traditional liberal approach to language teaching and learning at university level (Quist, 2000) which has been shown to be in strong contrast to those represented by the CEFR's communicative approach.

In hindsight, we can see that many of the changes that were made were symbolic only and did little to alter existing praxis. Fullan and Miles (1992) have described such a process as the adoption of symbols over substance. In looking at the reasons for why many change processes fail, they suggest that in many cases, educational institutions will adopt external innovations with only symbolic benefit and that while 'symbols are essential for success' (p.4), they will often fail if there is not enough grassroots support for change. In a recent Australian study (Briant & Doherty, 2012) it is suggested "teacher educators will use the freedom in the discursive gap to promote professional knowledge and skills of the discipline that they considered important but that might not have been selected into the Australian curriculum". These conclusions confirm our results where we found that there is not only a gap between policy intention and enactment, but also between teachers' and students' reactions and attitudes to the proposed changes.

In this chapter we have exemplified local developmental work and attempts to change practice through policy implementation. In an ideal world intended policy leads to implemented policy, where the policy is enacted in line with the intentions and where this transformation is grounded in teachers' and students' core values and actions. In the real world, we have shown that "voices of passionate teachers" rooted in specific disciplinary epistemologies have contested the intended policy changes. As a consequence both the Bologna process and the CEFR had, in this study, a minimal influence on practice, which is problematic considering the positive responses to the changes from the students. However, it could be argued that, although not in line with the intended changes, transformative learning had occurred in the teaching and learning in the study presented here. During the time

frame, the teachers critically examined their practice and developed new perspectives to understand their practice. By gaining awareness of their own personal and professional teaching theories and critically examining the assumptions that underlie their practice, there were consequences for their assumptions which in turn had an impact on their practice. In addition, the change could also be said to be transformative as regards the students and their experiences, as the voice of one of the students indicates when she talks of one of the new examinations as being: “a real learning experience”.

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