

Tracing the development of language awareness in EFL teacher trainees

Autor(en): **Murray, Heather**

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Tracing the Development of Language Awareness in EFL Teacher Trainees

This article, really a report on work in progress, describes doctoral research undertaken to explore ways in which English teacher trainees think about language. Its perspective is essentially learner-centred, as it attempts to follow the development of trainees' thinking about language in language learning.

1. Research context

Teacher training – for teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) as well as others – has gone through a process of development over the past 20 years which in some ways parallels the changing concerns of foreign language teaching methodology in general. In the 1970's research methods designed to analyze the teacher's observable classroom behaviour offered hope of objective and quantifiable results, which could be further used in teacher training to model and evaluate effective teacher-student interaction.¹ However, disenchantment with the premises and focus of such methods as well as a growing awareness of the importance of teachers' (and learners') mental processes, led at the end of the decade to an expansion of research into teacher thinking. The bulk of this research has been done on elementary school teachers and has focused on differences in teachers' aims, judgements and perceptions.² A few studies, notably those by DINGWALL (1985) and BEN PERETZ (1984), have explored some of the perceptions, concepts and beliefs of EFL teachers and teacher trainees however.

Until the early 1980's the teacher was generally regarded as the major variable (aside from the learner's basic aptitude) in language learning success. Since then interest in the learner and the process of learning (as opposed to the teacher and the variables of teaching) has grown considerably. It now seems obvious that learners and what they actually learn or acquire in the course of instruction should be essential parts of any learning/teaching model. Learner language and how it is acquired has been and continues to be investigated in considerable detail, at least for the early stages of acquisition. Moreover the realization that the learner contributes

1 See ALLWRIGHT, 1988 for a review.

2 See SHAVELSEN/STERN, 1981 or HALKES/OLSEN, 1984 for surveys.

actively to the management of learning has given rise to the concept of learner strategies, a construct which necessitates the investigation of learners' cognitions and beliefs about learning.³

The idea of studying the learner in order to improve the learning, rather than studying the teacher to improve the teaching can quite naturally be extended to teacher training, for what are trainee teachers but learners? What sense do EFL teacher trainees make of a training course? In particular, what elements of the training course do they «take up» or «take in»? Before pursuing this line of questioning it is necessary to look briefly at what an EFL training course covers.

2. *Language Teaching and language awareness*

To describe them very simply, training courses include practical knowledge of teaching techniques and materials, as well as more theoretical knowledge of the methodology and principles of learning on which they are based. Language itself also plays an important role, and it is this portion of the training course syllabus that interests me here. What in fact should language teachers know about language? This is not as easy to specify as one might think. In addition to having explicit knowledge of certain rules and systems, teachers should be aware of how language is used to convey meanings in social contexts. Furthermore they should understand and be able to follow the development of learner language. Since all these areas are both vast and under constant investigation and revision it seems clear that a teacher training course could never impart everything that a teacher might need to know about language. EFL training courses therefore tend to aim at raising trainees' consciousness of language in language teaching, i.e. to promote *language awareness*.⁴

Language awareness in the context of EFL teacher training might be defined as *a teacher's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role and use in human life in general and in foreign language learning in particular*. Concretely speaking, language awareness components of a teacher training course might, for example, involve any and probably all of the following:

3 See WENDEN/RUBIN, 1987 for a good collection of articles, as well as KÜBLER in this volume.

4 The term «language awareness» also enjoys wide currency in British education circles in connection with the view that language is central to human learning, no matter what the subject (cf. DONMALL (ed.), 1985).

- testing the adequacy of grammatical explanations;
- discussing attitudes to language varieties;
- looking at actual language use in a number of contexts;
- analyzing learner language errors.

3. *Aims of the research project*

One constant issue in teacher training is the frequent disagreement between trainers and trainees as to the usefulness of theory. Trainers criticize trainees for lack of interest in theory, whether they are beginners or experienced teachers:

One of the biggest difficulties in the initial training of teachers is to persuade [them that] teaching techniques are inseparably bound up with issues of educational principle
(BRUMFIT, 1979, 1)

Teachers appear to be allergic to theory, especially when it is delivered in the lecture mode. . . . They consistently ask for practical tips and ready-made materials to be used as soon as they return to their classrooms. . . .
(KOURAOGO, 1987, 173)

Trainees often find the theoretical portion of a training course a «waste of time», complaining of the «irrelevance and jargonized complexity of the subject, as well as the indifference to language teaching of [applied linguistics] lecturers» (EDGE, 1988, 9). Trainers, on the other hand, complain that little of the theoretical component in a teacher training course finds its way into trainers' classroom teaching practice.

There are a number of possible explanations for this failure to transfer training course theory to classroom practice. BRITTEN (1988) attributes it to a basic resistance to new ideas. ELLIS (1986) and EDGE (1988) among others attribute non-transfer of theory not so much to resistance as to non-perception, i.e. insufficient awareness of the importance of theory in classroom practice. They propose combining awareness activities (theory) with experiential activities (practice) instead of keeping the two components separate. This is probably a good idea, but it does not solve one of the basic problems of consciousness-raising in teacher training courses, which is that we do not know and have few ways of finding out how and when it takes place. We concentrate on the design and content of language teacher training courses, the proportion of theory to practice, etc. although at the moment we have no way of assessing their effect.

It seems to me that in order to begin to gain greater understanding of the problems and open issues in teacher training we need to know more about trainees' beliefs and thought processes. If we had a way of finding

out about cognitive processes which take place during a training course we might, for example in the area of language awareness begin to answer the following questions:

What sorts of beliefs and concepts about language and language teaching do trainees bring to an EFL teacher training course?

Do trainees with similar pre-course experience share the same linguistic beliefs and concepts?

To what extent do trainees' linguistic beliefs and concepts change during training courses? Do trainees change or develop in the same way during a course?

What triggers or favours belief change and conceptual development?

To what extent are the linguistic beliefs and concepts of trainers and trainees similar at the end of a training course?

Answers to questions such as these would eventually lead to better-designed teacher training courses and perhaps more perceptive trainers. The problem is that at the moment we do not even know where or how to address them. It was with this problem in mind that I designed my investigation.

4. Methods and Research Design

Since the open-endedness of the notion «language awareness» and a dearth of relevant exploratory data preclude a hypothesis-testing type of research design, I decided to use exploratory methods from the fields of cognitive psychology and ethnography and restrict the investigation to a series of in-depth case studies of a group of 11 trainees undergoing the same EFL training course.⁵

The main method of data collection was a semi-structured interview designed to elicit individual trainees' personal psychological constructs related to the types of language occurring frequently in EFL contexts. Called Personal Construct Analysis (PCA), this method was chosen because of its reputation as a useful instrument in tracing cognitive and emotional change and development in such fields as sociology, psychology and education.

⁵ The course followed the syllabus for the internationally recognized RSA/Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Adults, a pre-service qualification for native speakers of English, awarded to about 1800 trainees annually.

Basically, PCA interview procedure consists of giving subjects pairs of significant items or «elements» to evaluate by describing their similarities and differences.⁶ These bipolar evaluations provide information on how subjects interpret and conceptualize a certain part of their experience, i.e. how they define their personal constructs or concepts. Because this project is an investigation of EFL teacher trainees' language awareness, the following types of elements were chosen: short samples of learner language, textbook language and native speaker language. Figure 1 shows one of the element pairs used.

Figure 1

PART OF A TELEPHONE CONVERSATION:

«Sorry, didn't get that.»

«The point is that my children – are going away for the weekend –»

«Yes.»

«– and it was going to be *THIS* weekend and now it's going to be the *NEXT* and –»

AND PART OF A LETTER:

I am afraid I will not be able to come as the children, who *were* going to be away *this* weekend, have now changed their plans and are going to be away next weekend instead.

While PCA was the principal investigational method, it was not the only one used. Samples of trainee written work, from diaries to language analysis assignments, were systematically collected, chiefly in an attempt to triangulate the PCA interview data. In addition a video-based experiment involving trainees' perception of learners' errors was carried out twice between the beginning and the end of the study. This was an attempt to elicit and trace changes in trainee perceptions and categories of error in learners' spoken language – a particularly critical area of teacher language awareness.

Data were collected throughout the 7-month training course. Each of the 11 trainees was interviewed 3 times, in the first, fourth and seventh month. After preliminary categorization of language constructs from the interviews has been completed both synchronous and diachronous comparisons will be carried out according to the plan in Figure 2. The diachronous aspect will naturally be of primary importance.

6 That is, they have the basic form: A is similar to/different from B in respect of X, Y, Z. . .

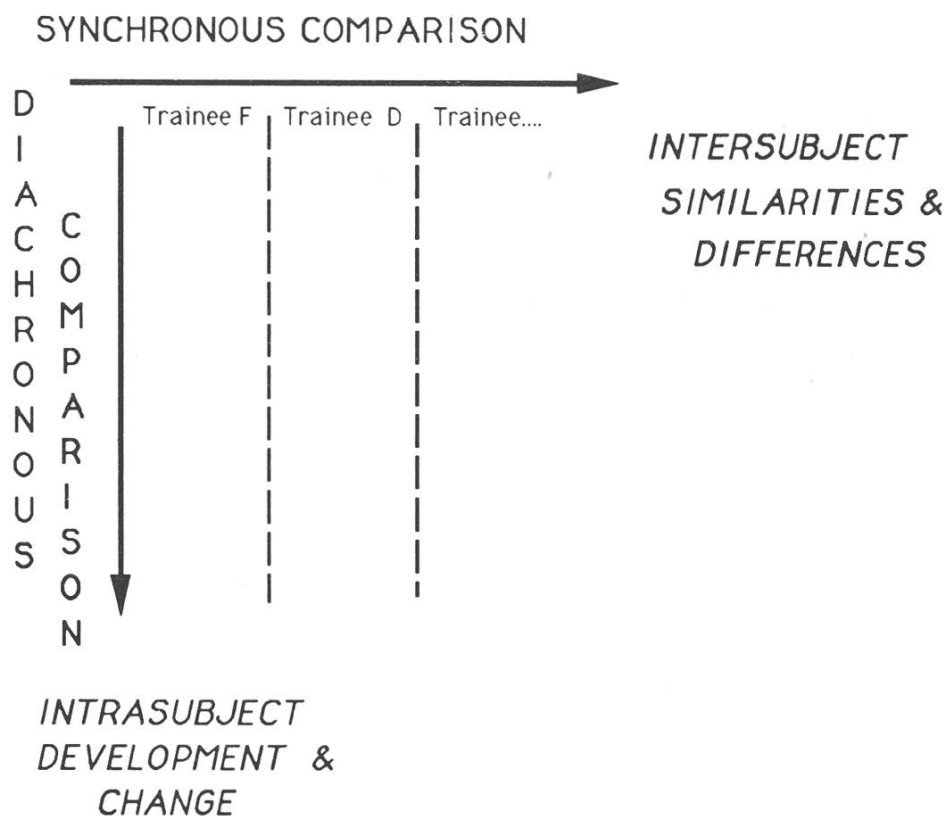


Figure 2

5. Data sample and discussion

Since the present article is submitted as a report on work in progress rather than as a summary of a completed research project, this part of the report will merely present some sample data and briefly discuss their possible significance. The raw data consist of 33 recorded and transcribed PCA interviews (approx. 100 000 words), 22 error analysis reports, and some 300 pages of training course diaries, essays and other language-related assignments. Analysis to date has been largely restricted to the PCA transcripts.

A number of the interview protocols show fairly clear changes in language awareness. In the following samples, the same trainee, D, construes the elements shown in Figure 1 (telephone conversation and letter) at the beginning and end of the training course.

Pre-course protocol

D: Er the first person here seems to be rather nervous – doesn't quite know how to get out what they want to say – whereas the second person seems ah more+ able to to say what she wants to say in a clearer way. erm+++

I: Mhm. What do they have in common? Anything . . . ?

D: Well they are both trying to say the same thing er actually that it can't be this weekend + + and + should be next weekend. [mhm] But er certainly the second person seems to be able to put it in a better way than the first person, who seems to be rather muddled. [mhm] Seems they can't say it so clearly, the first person (D/1/3)

Post-course protocol

D: Well this one about the telephone conversation, I mean it's just obviously the difference between speaking and writing. I mean the written version is much better because it – she thought about it more, whereas here it just was coming and it's a bit more sort of nervous-sounding, but I mean not really nerv- I think I said «nervous» before but in fact it isn't really. It's just the way you speak I suppose when you're + + + I mean + + + (D/3/3)

We can see from these two short samples that D seems to have acquired a sort of superordinate concept, i.e. there is a «difference between speaking and writing», as well as the subordinate concepts which supply the reasons for this difference: «the written version is much better because [the writer] thought about it more» and the spoken version «was just coming and [is consequently] a bit more sort of nervous-sounding». There is no pre-course/post-course change in her value judgement that the written version is in some way «better», possibly because it is clearer.

It looks as if D's language awareness has widened to include the meta-linguistic concept «spoken vs. written language», at least in part. But what of the value judgement «better»? How will D approach teaching the spoken language if she holds the two beliefs that (a) spoken language can by nature sound «rather muddled» and «sort of nervous-sounding . . . but . . . isn't really» and (b) written language is «clearer» and «better»?

Everyone holds beliefs which differ in conceptual level, generality, or modality. These beliefs may be congruent or contradictory, conscious or subliminal. From the sample above, it looks as if trainee D (who is now a teacher) may not have come to terms with what she sees as the apparent inferiority of spoken language.

WAGNER (1984) calls teachers' unresolved contradictory beliefs «knots» and suggests that teacher training does not help teachers enough unless it helps them to start untying the «knots». For trainees like D, this would perhaps mean not only talking about the differences between written and spoken language, but also using this and related concepts to practise evaluating learner and coursebook language. Perhaps this is what trainees mean when they demand more stress on practice in training courses. At any rate it is hoped that when the present exploratory study is complete,

researchers will have some interesting hypotheses to test and EFL teacher training will be able to reap the benefits.

Universität Bern
Abteilung für angewandte Linguistik
CH-3012 Bern

HEATHER MURRAY

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