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A Case Study of Developing Student-teachers' Language Awareness through Online Discussion Forums

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Given the value of online discussion forums, there has been growing interest in the use of electronic discussion platforms to support teaching and learning. Significant reported advantages of online discussion forums include learners being engaged effectively outside the classroom and learners being encouraged to participate actively in higher-order thinking and reflection processes (Thomas, 2002). While statistical analysis of hit counts plays a major role in studies investigating the effectiveness of an online forum, research shows that qualitative approaches such as content analysis of the discussion posts could help to reveal important aspects of the forum like learners' social presence in online discussions (Swan, 2003). Through context analysis, this case study investigated the extent to which an online discussion forum was successful in achieving the intended learning outcomes of a language awareness course.

The teacher language awareness course, which was part of an initial teacher education programme in Hong Kong, aimed at developing student-teachers' language awareness as it relates to different language systems. According to Thornbury (1997), teacher language awareness refers to the knowledge that teachers have of the 'underlying systems of the language [i.e. English in this case] that enables them to teach the subject [i.e. English Language] effectively' (p.x). There are thus two main dimensions of teacher language awareness. The declarative dimension refers to language teachers' knowledge about language, that is, their explicit knowledge about how language works. The procedural dimension refers to language-aware L2 teachers reflecting on their knowledge about language, and their knowledge of the learners, and drawing appropriately on their knowledge about language in all aspects of their pedagogical practice (Andrews, 2007).

The present study aimed to address a specific research question: To what extent do the student-teachers taking the language awareness course engage in reflection of the declarative and/or procedural dimensions of teacher

language awareness as manifested in the online discussion forum? The majority of the student-teacher participants were genuine novice teachers of L2 English with no formal English language teaching experience. All of them were products of the local education system, that is, an EFL context. The eighteen posts they initiated in the forum during their teaching practice, which the research team considered their foci of reflections, were the primary data of the study. The findings of the analysis of the messages were triangulated and discussed with other representations, for example, student comments collected in a feedback session on the forum, to achieve a better understanding of the operation of teacher language awareness of these student-teachers.

The content analysis reveals that the forum engaged, to different extents, the novice teachers of L2 English in reflection on the declarative and/or procedural dimension(s) of teacher language awareness, bridging the gap between the two. While some student-teachers posted only comments and questions concerning explicit knowledge about language, hoping to obtain input from their fellow group members through the e-learning platform, others asked follow-up pedagogical questions in addition to language questions, in other words, moving from knowledge about language to content-related pedagogical decisions. Only one post showing a move from the procedural to the declarative dimension of teacher language awareness was identified. In the informal feedback session on the effectiveness of the online forum, some student-teachers pointed out that they were well aware of the move from the declarative to the pedagogical dimension of teacher language awareness in their reflections. A few of them stressed that the other way round--coming to realize their lack of knowledge about language from their teaching--would simply imply inadequate preparation for classes, which, according to them, should be avoided.

The findings also reveal that the language-aware student-teachers played a significant role in structuring the language input for their students (Andrews, 2007), and their focuses varied during the different stages of the practicum. For example, the first five messages posted by the student-teachers in the early stages of their teaching practice, during which time they were believed to be heavily dependent on the teaching materials they had been given, were all initiated by their reflections on the language found in the assigned teaching materials. The online forum reveals that towards the second half of the practicum, many of the student-teachers began to notice the patterns and problems in their students' language output and asked for advice in the forum to resolve their students' language problems.

What they did shows that 'the linguistically aware teacher can spot opportunities to generate discussion and exploration of language, for example, by noticing features of texts which suggest a particular language activity' (Wright, 2002, p. 115).

The study, though exploratory, has opened up a small window for people to understand the operation of teacher language awareness of this group of student-teachers during their teaching practice. Although at times these student-teachers were caught out by their own and/or students' questions on the language, the data show that their teacher language awareness had an overall positive impact on a number of pedagogic tasks including evaluation and adaptation of teaching materials, and assessing learner performance (Wright and Bolitho, 1993).

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