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Feeling the difference in the languages classroom: explorations of teacher understanding of diversity

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Abstract: In this article, the authors examine the fourth stage of their research into diversity in the language classroom, focusing specifically on the teacher perspective in planning for and managing diversity. The article discusses findings from a day with experienced Open University (OU) language teachers working together on lesson planning. It examines differentials in teacher sensitivity to diverse student needs, some participants demonstrating this as instinctive to their practice, others requiring more development to lead them to new-found understandings. It investigates key issues underpinning differentials within a teacher group, including the conviction of teacher as expert, understanding of the nuances of diversity, and pedagogic expectations.

Keywords: diversity, situated learning, stereotyping, CLT, teacher power, reflective practitioner,

Introduction

Our research focus in the fourth of a series of articles on addressing student diversity in language learning continues to be led by a commitment to improving student success and comfort in teaching sessions. Arguably, our interest in this arises from the sheer diversity amongst language students at The Open University (OU), wide-ranging in age, socio-economic, educational and cultural backgrounds, physical ability, language learning experience, and confidence levels. However, the view of diversity adopted here goes further: it relies on an understanding that whenever two or more people are present in a social context, there will be difference. In the classroom, diverse experiences and expectations will impact on interactivity. OU teachers will have received awareness-raising around certain defined categories of diversity, such as physical disability, mental health issues and dyslexia. However, a wider understanding of individual differences and how these manifest themselves via classroom interaction is desirable in any educational setting, but perhaps particularly so in the languages classroom. Teachers will, for example, have to grapple with diversity in student understanding of classroom procedures and methodological choices. There will be a variety of confidence levels about the classroom, language learning and language production and differing expectations about teacher and student role. Emotional states and reactions will vary. Reception of activity content or process may be vastly different depending on the position of the individual. Interpersonal links in interaction may work or not depending on mores and social norms and on the level of empathy between learners at a certain time in what Imai terms emotional intersubjectivity (Imai, 2010: 281).

From observations of Open University teaching sessions over more than a decade, Nicolson and Adams (2008), it was clear that discomfort arose because of *what* students were asked to do, *how* they were asked to do it, or *who* they had to do it with. Task¹ type, task content and task management appeared significant, but reactions varied for any one student from one session to another, one task to another, and one context to another, so was dynamic. Manifestations of discomfort were language anxiety (Horwitz et al 1996; Daly, 1991; Horwitz and Young 1991; Young 1991), communication apprehension (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994), or language shock (Holliday et al 2004), where student anxiety was so intense it resulted in an inability to function with some leaving the teaching session, not returning to subsequent ones or leaving the course altogether.

As Kumaravadivelu asserts (1991:98), the learning outcome can be 'the result of a fairly unpredictable interaction between the learner, task and the task situation'. Part of that unpredictability will depend on how human beings react in certain situations, and how, in working with others, personalities clash or chime. However, part will be linked, as Zepke and Leach (2007) referring to Saenz (1999) and Thomas (2002) note, to lack of socialisation into a learning culture. Against a methodological background largely dominated by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a participatory, task-based, communication-focussed ethos, relying on pair and group work, personal information and almost exclusive

¹ We use 'task' and 'activity' in the Coughlan and Duff sense (1994) where the task is the activity prior to students undertaking it.

target language use for instructions, then the interface between the student and the language work has room for pitfalls, particularly when student diversity is marked. We believe therefore that when Kumaravadivelu, referring to Breen (1987), Candlin (1987) and Nunan (1989), calls for a '*pedagogic perestroika*....a fundamental restructuring of the relationship.... between curricular content and classroom procedure; and between teacher and learner role in generating classroom discourse' (Kumaravadivelu 1991:99), he makes a valid exhortation to our profession.

Research Aims

In earlier research stages we outlined the potential impact of diversity with regard to personal information in tasks, target language use, pair/group work, and physical response (Nicolson and Adams, 2008). We examined quantitatively and qualitatively student experience in these four areas and two additional ones, student orientation and choice (Nicolson and Adams, 2010) and then looked at all six areas via student case studies (Adams and Nicolson, 2010). In this fourth stage we examine the teacher perspective.

In our endeavour to ensure that student diversity is empathetically considered, we recruit to our own teams language teachers who demonstrate some pre-disposition to understanding the implications. We expand their understanding of the full range of diverse needs while they work with us. However, we wanted to explore the extent to which teachers outwith our teams take socio-cultural and psycho-linguistic issues taken into account in their planning and teaching? How aware and reactive are they to the diverse 'cultural, psychological and generational factors [which] will... manifest themselves in a rich range and variety of ways of behaving and thinking' amongst the student body? (Adams and Nicolson, 2011). To what extent might peer influence and individual and group reflection impact on existing views and approaches?

Research Influences

Our work is motivated by Firth and Wagner's belief (1997) that a better balance has to be struck between the social and the cognitive in researching language learning success. It has also been underpinned by theories of situated learning where context is all-important (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Also key is Dörnyei's assertion (2005) that, in second language acquisition, context overrides factors such as personality, aptitude, motivation and learning styles and strategies in contemporary individual difference and that identity factors need to be considered within 'the situational parameters rather than cutting across tasks and environments' (2006:62). We furthermore share Dörnyei's belief that 'the future of L2 study in general lies in the integration of linguistic and psychological approaches in a balanced and complimentary manner...' (2006:62).

Learning is not simply reliant on knowledge presented in a particular situation but also on *how* it is represented, as well as on social relations between protagonists within the context, including the teacher (Eraut, 2003). Auerbach (2000:144) talks about the inevitability of teachers holding powerful positions: '[It is their] conception of education that shapes how the learning community develops. They have their own goals, their own understandings of effective L2 pedagogy....'. This links with Yero's warning (www.teachersmind.com) that to ignore teachers' thinking would deprive us of a layer of understanding about the learning process. Also, Zepke and Leach remind us, (2007:656), referring to Astin (1993), that the greatest effect on outcomes is determined by teaching approaches and the way students feel about teachers.

We align ourselves with Howard (1996) and Guangwei (2002) who suggest that a particular methodology cannot be applied wholesale to all contexts, since, as Kumaravadivelu's concept of particularity suggests, it should be '...sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu' (2001:538). Such a level of sensitivity to context also requires, as Blommaert asserts (2005), that teachers need to evaluate their practice continually so they can develop what Usher and Bryant (1987:201) term a 'practitioner theory... concerned with judgement and understanding'.

Stratton's concept of pre-understandings (2005) is equally important to us with regard to teacher behaviour as it was in examining student experience. This helps us to understand how fixed beliefs from past experiences are imported into new situations and can impact negatively on expectations and behaviour in new experiences unless new values and behaviours are stated and encouraged.

We agree with Ellis (2010) that the divide between research and practice has to be better breached and concur that researchers like ourselves, who are also teacher developers, can assume a pivotal

role by ‘ [facilitating] the process by which technical knowledge about SLA can interface with teachers’ own practical knowledge of teaching...’ (ibid:197). The concept of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) has been significant in this study, along with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1986) in examining how a constructed opportunity for peer reflection influences teachers’ subsequent methodological choices. Byrne et al (2010:217) conclude that a *group* setting ‘provides a useful opportunity for ‘individual reflection on one’s own practice’. Reflection through dialogue also prevents it from being ‘limited to individual insights, self-confirmation or self-deception’, as Murphy (2007:2), referring to Brookfield (1987) and Brockbank and McGill (1998), suggests.

Our ultimate aspiration for the languages classroom is influenced by Bhaba’s Third Space (Bhaba and Rutherford, 1990), a creative and comfortable place of congruence where people interact without fear or unnecessary judgement.

Research Model

Our model was broadly based on one used by Kramsch (1993), where teachers planned teaching sessions and amended plans after peer discussion (see below). Ten OU teachers from different languages and backgrounds were invited to participate. They were either not on our teaching teams or more recent recruits to our teams so were less familiar with our research and teacher development in this area. We hoped this would bring an uncontaminated viewpoint to the research questions. As a result of drop-outs two experienced participants from our teams opted in. Ultimately, this proved beneficial for comparisons. All sessions were recorded and then later transcribed by an independent transcriber.

Ethical considerations

Our research is underpinned by a strong commitment to educational relevance and social responsiveness and in this respect our research content is itself ethically motivated. We aim to practise what we preach as teacher developers, so it was important for us to attend to the cognitive and the affective states of participants, acknowledging the interrelationship which is at the heart of our research. For example, we informed participants in advance how the day would be run and ensured they were happy to be recorded. We enabled them to travel the day before, so they could start refreshed and without long travel time, given the geographical spread. Participants were enabled to have a meal together the night before, even if residing locally, to allow them to socialise, but without compunction so to do. We tried to make our role in plenary sessions as objective as possible, that of researchers rather than teacher developers or managers, although in reality all were aware of our positions and this may have influenced reaction at times. We posed key questions rather than stated views and gave the majority of the talk time to the participants, so that we were not ‘leading’ thought at that point. We admit that in contentious issues we achieved less success on occasion. We have changed teacher names to protect identities.

Tasks

The day consisted of five sessions:

- first brief plenary to outline the group discussion work, also supplied in written form
- first small group discussions to plan a beginners’ language teaching session
- second plenary to discuss plans
- second group session to review plans and make changes in light of plenary discussion
- final plenary to discuss changes to plans

We stressed that consensus was not required and that disagreements about choice, nature or management of tasks should be brought to the plenary, even if they had been amicably resolved. In the small groups we tried to achieve a mix of languages and of provenances so that differing approaches might be brought to bear. The small groups had to work together without necessarily knowing each other in advance, except for those who had met the previous evening, but this is common in OU working, so perhaps less problematic than in other contexts.

Discussion of data

Our focus for data collection was on the six areas pertinent to our research: student orientation, personal information, pair and group work, target language, physical issues and student choice/opting out. However, the data revealed additional areas worthy of exploration which will also be discussed. The data presentation is split into two parts. First are the points emerging from the first group session. We offer this data in isolation because it reflects the views of the participants at the start of the day *before* peer reflection or plenary discussion impacted on views. Second are significant points from all subsequent discussions when peer reflection and discussion had impacted.

Data from first group session

General Points

Participants took considerable time to undertake the task as we had outlined it. All groups spent substantial time working out task timings and language points, including comparing how things worked in their own languages. This took time away from the six specified discussion areas and how student diversity impacted on planning. Groups also spent more time on *what* they were going to do rather than on *how* they were going to do it, from which we conclude that this is not a usual part of their planning procedure. Each area will now be examined in turn.

Student orientation: By this we refer to communicating and consulting with students before and during the teaching session about what is going to happen and how. Our previous research had shown that students find this important in enabling them to know that nothing overly unexpected or uncomfortable will happen important with any group of students if one is to foster their ‘internal sense of security’ (Pellegrino 2005: 136). It also allows them to contribute to shaping the session.

With regard to *advance* orientation it became clear that teacher understanding differed. Some referred to aims and objectives, some to specific tasks, and others to materials to be used. There were also mixed views about the usefulness to students of advance preparation, ranging from some teachers sending nothing at all to others sending students everything. Jacques did not send out preparation documents, preferring to assess group composition and mood on the day before deciding what he would do. He suggested that tasks are dynamic and need to be explained on the spot. However, too much of the unknown is difficult for some students and might deter them from attending. It also places the power in the teacher’s hands, both in advance and at the session. Jean-Pierre felt that offering too much student preparation can create *greater* diversity, even disparity, as some students arrive having prepared everything while others have done none. Carlos, on the other hand, found that by sending tasks to weaker and less confident students in advance ‘they were not thrown in at the deep end once they got into the classroom...they get a sense of achievement and that builds their confidence up’. However, this was at odds with his suggestion that those who were ‘weak’ never prepared anything anyway.

Little group discussion happened around aims and objectives orientation. It appeared obvious to participants that they would have these for their own purposes but only some would communicate them to students, including Natalie, ‘so students can prepare themselves for the teaching session...it’s to do with confidence...’.

There was a majority view that orientation at the sessions *was* required but views on what form this should take varied. Claudia associated orientation with emotional and psychological comfort: ‘[it] is scary...these people haven’t seen each other, sometimes never or for months...they travel often two or three hours to get there. They come into a room and I think first they just need to feel the emotion’. Jacques favoured humour and a socialisation task requiring no language input at all as an orientation task: ‘Something not too involved because it is the first point of the tutorial.’ His exemplar activity required students to disentangle a ball of string, his rationale being that the random nature of pairing up and humour would help students. However, the activity could well pose as many problems as a language-focussed socialisation task. Natalie suggested: ‘...find something they have in common so they have to talk about themselves in different areas: family, car, house, where they live.’ This focus on personal information can be contested as will be discussed later.

For others, initial orientation at the teaching session was linked to not over-stretching students linguistically. Claudia suggested that: 'Speaking has a lot to do with confidence and feeling comfortable... five minutes to get them settled to know who they are dealing with, to overcome all their worries ...to do something that everyone can do'. For others, such warm-up tasks were also a diagnostic tool to assess students' ability and prior learning. Lucia usually found out 'if they all know vocabulary and the grammar structures as well...'. Her assumption was that extra input would be required if knowledge gaps became apparent. Brainstorming work was a linked point here. Some inserted it as a levelling exercise, yet as Jean-Pierre pointed out, it can cause disparity and demotivation in highlighting to some students how much they do not know compared to others.

It could be argued that such icebreakers and warm-up tasks are part of a method-centred approach and teacher-determined rather than predicated on catering for diversity. For example, no participants in this group asked students in advance or in the opening stages of the teaching session what would make them feel comfortable: for example whether they preferred to start speaking the language straightaway so fear didn't build up or whether an initial plenary activity was preferential to splitting immediately into pairs or groups; whether in terms of independent study progress icebreaker or warm-up work was actually required by them.

Personal information: CLT methodology has advocated that students are more engaged when talking about themselves (Klippel, 1984; Nunan, 1998). However, the development of CLT happened mainly with younger learners in mind and at a time when lifestyles were perhaps more uniform. With the speed of societal change and the absence of a single traditional lifestyle, this territory can be a minefield with a diverse group of students and our previous research (Nicolson and Adams 2010; Adams and Nicolson, 2010) demonstrated that the discussion of personal information in tasks had been painful for some.

In each group teachers had differences of opinion, from acknowledging that talking about family can result 'in all sorts of messy situations' and that 'people can get emotional' to indicating they regularly ask students to bring in, for example, family wedding pictures. All groups offered the possible alternatives of photos of famous people, although one person's famous person is not known necessarily to another and, as Claudia stressed, this can cause as much anxiety as talking about one's own family in certain circumstances. Making up information was also offered by all groups as a way round this but feedback from a previous study, indicated that this will not always work. A student there indicated for example how compromised he felt in not wishing to reveal his sexuality in his student group; neither did he feel comfortable giving fictitious details about himself: 'you can't really say "my wife and I" but I feel you can't really be honest about the reality' (Adams and Nicolson, 2010:114).

Pair/group work: Recent approaches in education and in workplace training have relied on pair/group work to maximise participation. This is construed as a place of physical and psychological safety as participants do not have to expose thoughts and feelings to a larger audience. We adopted small group work in this research and, in an interesting modelling exercise for ourselves, saw at firsthand the pitfalls. For example, one group did not gel because of personality, something we had not been able to take into account, not knowing all participants in advance. Nicola, for example, became ill-at-ease and sidelined in her group with Jacques and Claudia, two strong personalities giving her little space to talk. This was noticeable to us in the recordings but Nicola also revealed this directly to us as she was unused to experiencing this.

Again, in this area, there were mixed views. Jacques told students how to pair up, expressing that 'students are adults, they should be able to cope', a view challenged by Claudia who instead favoured student choice. Jacques' view may relate to his strong belief in the teacher as expert which will figure later (see p.8). Nicola took personality into account when designating pairings/groupings, as did Elisabeth, who thought this as important as competence level in determining who should work together. She also wanted students 'to be comfortable...' and believed that, for the initial activity, students should be left where they are on the assumption they have sat beside someone they know or feel comfortable with. Corrine agreed, but for further activities, would justify new pairings/groupings to students as the necessity to gather information from someone they didn't know. If a student openly expressed a wish not to change partners she would accept that. Other participants focused on designating groupings relating to language ability.

After reflection during the group discussion, Jacques appeared to change his mind, accepting students could have a degree of choice. However he was concerned about any 'loners' who, without teacher designation of groups, could end up with no partner. Nicola said she kept a check to ensure this would not

happen. One suggestion was to have shorter activities so that if pairings did not work the impact is lessened.

Target Language: A practice has emerged from CLT of near 100 per cent TL in teaching sessions. Previous research demonstrated that students felt most affected by this, being ‘anxious, overwhelmed, nervous, dismayed, frustrated, excluded, embarrassed, stupid...’ when confronted with TL only (Nicolson and Adams, 2010:48). As teacher developers, we have modified our views and now stress in line with Kumaravadivelu an approach of principled pragmatism (1994:31) to TL which focuses on meeting the needs of any one group and the individuals within it at any one time. All groups agreed a mix of TL and English was best, although views varied about the amount of TL to be used. Claudia felt that teachers need to ‘give instructions first in the target language and then repeat in the source language’. Nicola repeats instructions three times, starting with the TL, followed by English and then again in the TL. Natalie linked her decisions to when students seem tired, at which point she switches to English. Carlos felt that ‘wherever possible [the teaching session] should be conducted in the TL’ supported by ‘a lot of body language and moving my hands all over the place in the belief that greater use of English would inhibit learners in using the TL’. There was no real discussion about how this tied in with psychological comfort. Claudia and Carlos did however refer to the need to allow students to ‘really let out their frustrations in their own language’ or tell the tutor of their frustration at not understanding what the teacher says. In two groups there was agreement about the need for use of the lingua franca when explaining cultural conventions of TL countries.

Physical issues: Physical movement in language classrooms has ranged from circulation round the room in marketplace tasks to Total Physical Response (TPR), where physical action is an integral part of the task, for example catching a ball to speak. This can be problematic at any age but particularly for students who have physical disability, poor motor skills or less-than-accurate hand-to-eye co-ordination. The fear of the physical aspect can also impinge negatively on language production. All participants were used to moving students around but there was respect for students with declared disability. However, this undermined the fact that those without disclosed disability can also have problems, as highlighted with a stroke victim in our previous study who didn’t go back to teaching sessions because of the movement involved. The teacher had not noticed his problem and he did not want to reveal it to her (Adams and Nicolson, 2010).

Student choice and opting out: Whilst the teacher sets the task, students should realistically be able to decide within reason how they want to approach it or adapt it to suit their needs. Occasionally, they may also need to opt out of an activity if it risks putting them into a real discomfort zone. Only one group tackled this topic during group discussions and, even there, not all participants were convinced of the value. Heidi had experience of students saying they didn’t want to do something and ‘accept it’s [because] they are grown people.’ At the same time she felt this can ‘create that I don’t-have-to-do-it culture which is not helpful’. Carlos said he would feel uncomfortable if he ‘had someone sitting in one corner of the room just looking and listening’. In expressing his own discomfort he seemed to deny the right to students to express theirs. For Natalie it was better if the students left rather than ‘staying there and not taking part’ which she thought was ‘actually rude’.

Data from subsequent sessions

We had anticipated that reflection during participant dialogue in subsequent plenary sessions would have more impact than individual or small group insight and bring about openness to change through reasoned argument. We were surprised when this did not develop as expected. In general few changes to plans were enacted and in some cases there was a strong call to reject change. For example, Jacques and Claudia strongly resisted student-led decision-making in the subsequent small group review session. They also strongly challenged researcher views, tending only to accept change that relied on language aspects of the plan. Although Nicola tried to convince them otherwise and raise the particularity issue, she was not able to impose her view so diversity again failed to be fully discussed. They did however concede that communicating and reviewing aims and objectives with students could be helpful. The other two groups also reaffirmed their original morning session approaches, although perhaps with less vigour. One group were prepared to adjust the plan in theory but in reality brought about little practical change.

In assessing why there was resistance to change, we identified a number of discussion areas which we discuss next.

Understanding the range of diversity

It emerged that where teachers did not recognise how a wider range of diversity issues might impact on practice, this was because they tended to limit diversity markers to discernible or disclosed inscriptions mentioned earlier, such as dyslexia, disability, mental health, race, gender and age. This is perhaps not surprising given the institutional training on such aspects of diversity. In fact Claudia, talking about how adaptation in teaching sessions might happen, began to substitute 'disability' for diversity: 'It could be quite inhibiting ... we have to take too many disabilities into account, of potential disabilities, or unknown disabilities at the planning stage...'. This may link to legislative and institutional foci for diversity being firmly linked to protected categories, rather than to more creative definitions (Adams and Nicolson, 2011). The consequences of not understanding the nuances of diversity are that teacher choices and actions create an environment un conducive to student comfort and to language learning success. We do not adopt a utopian stance here and acknowledge that catering for diversity may be difficult. However, a greater awareness level is to be advocated. As Mary suggested: 'I think it's just growing sensitivity to who you've got there, their needs and their inter-relationships. I think it's something that's absorbing more and more and more... it's sort of finer and finer tuning all the time'. A number of linked areas emerged.

Stereotyping

A respondent in Zepke and Leach's study on aspects of diversity in education in New Zealand, suggested that a failure to recognise diversity could lead to stereotyping (2007:665). Reference to stereotypes did in fact occur to some degree in our groups with regard to gender, age, nationality and cultural expectation, competence and confidence levels, teaching approaches and student needs.

Claudia, for example, linked teaching methods and student need to preconceived ideas about cultural approaches and nationality:

'I am just wondering if there are two chords of culture here, the molly-coddly English and the much morecontinental tough line..I am just wondering if there's a gap here because most Univ X teachers are from the continent and the researchers tend to be...adopting all this English fancy'

During her group's follow-on discussion there was realisation that neither researcher was English, one being Scottish and one Austrian.

Jacques and Claudia did employ the use of stereotypes at times in their small group discussion. From listening to the recordings it was difficult to come to the conclusion as to whether this was usual for them, part of a challenge to perceived expectations, or simply an attempt to deal with issues and bring understanding to them in a humorous way. It did seem to lead to a form of point-scoring, (probably also humorous in intention?), Jacques linking his decision not to have breaks in teaching sessions to a stereotype about German efficiency, although he was not German: 'I think I am more German than you...'. He went on to say: 'Don't mention the war'.

Nicola linked problems with language learning to nationality and culture 'In Britain it's particularly bad learning a FL'. Claudia gave a cultural rationale for the avoidance of numeracy skills in a language task around shopping saying: '... how many people can budget, that's why this country [the UK] is in such a mess....they can't budget...'. She also felt that 'The Germans are very direct. They don't mean it in a nasty way but they say what they think...English people don't criticise.' It was therefore important to her that students adopt a German name so that they are better able to construct a mindset akin to the 'direct German'. Students should try to be 'a brass neck German'.

Lucia linked consulting books to age, when it may have simply been a student-specific issue: 'You've got a 75 year old lady... You ask her a question - she is in her books ...looking for something written'.

Participants appeared to assign labels rather readily and favoured preconceived essential attributes such as 'weak' and 'poor' without distinguishing whether the student was simply experiencing difficulty at

a particular time or in a certain skill. Claudia used ‘weaking’, for example, to describe less linguistically competent students. There was also a tendency to equate weakness in language skills with greater emotional need.

With additional needs students, some participants attributed all issues to the disability, such as dyslexia or schizophrenia. The fact that someone may simply be a bit uncomfortable or not good at a skill, irrespective of other conditions they may have, did not figure in their discussions. This labelling also led to some fairly extreme preconceived views, for example equating schizophrenia with violence. Creating such a clear set of parameters around individuals in this way may be preventing engagement with nuances and therefore access to a third space.

Pedagogic expectation

Expectations of what should happen in teaching sessions were linked to pre-understandings shaped by participants’ experience of living and working in another country, or what they believed being a language teacher entails, as a result of education, teacher training or the teaching culture in which they work. Claudia believed that interaction in the foreign country may be uncomfortable and challenging for those learning the language and that teaching sessions should therefore mirror that experience. There was also a pre-understanding that learning to cope is part of the ‘deal’ and students have to get on with it. This correlates with earlier findings from students themselves and what we have termed the ‘cod-liver oil syndrome’ (Nicolson and Adams, 2010:43).

This view of the classroom also assumes that everyone learning a language does so to cope in the TL country, which is not the case. It may also stem from an interpretation of CLT methodology, about the quasi-authentic experience the language classroom should offer. Claudia’s assignment of German identities to students fits as part of this. For diverse adult learners, their language learning motivation may not be predicated on a desire to visit the country but on a love of learning languages, to read literature or watch films in the language, rather than to develop speaking competence. There were also assumptions about student lifestyles based on a stereotype of language learners, that they would have visited a foreign country and be able to bring photos or postcards to sessions.

While understanding different motivations, Jean-Pierre nonetheless stressed that virtuality is present in all language learning. Lucia however countered with the limitations of such virtuality: she indicated to students that she couldn’t prepare them for all Italian dialects and felt her job was to highlight classroom limitations. Corrine also accepted that the classroom is an artificial setting and teachers have to adapt accordingly.

Pedagogic expectations could be modified where teacher sensitivity and awareness, either intrinsic or brought about by teacher development, allowed greater understanding of diversity. Mary and Nicola clearly demonstrated this. Pedagogic expectations were also modified by teachers who had experiences as students and were able to transfer knowledge to their teaching. Nicola, for example, understood why group work could be problematic as she herself didn’t like it, preferring one-to-one work. She also felt that exclusive TL use does not work for her. All of this reinforces Ellis’ point that micro-teaching is useful in teacher development as the teacher experiences the student position again. (2010).

Teacher as expert

The idea of the teacher as expert, and, by implication, power-holder, may have been a factor in reluctance to change plans and in practice approaches. The view of ‘teacher as expert’ may well hinder a deeper understanding of the situated nature of learning or the social dynamic inherent therein, presupposing a fixed entity with only the teacher knowing what is needed, irrespective of the context.

‘Teacher as expert’ was a recurring refrain from Jacques: ‘... if you want I am very much against, resistant to student-led stuff. I think you have got to leave the teaching to the hand of the experts - what do students know?’ Despite Nicola having disagreed in the group, he nonetheless designated himself as the group’s single voice on this: ‘we started on the premise that the teacher is the expert, so we were... resistant to all this choice, student led, I-don’t-want-to-do-this activity atmosphere. So we didn’t change anything in our plan’. Did Jacques’ view emerge from a feeling that the sole responsibility for what happened in the classroom was his? We were unable to ascertain this from the recordings but, historically, teacher education and development has tended to promulgate this view of the teacher. Corinne further demonstrated how powerful a teacher’s position can be in the eyes of students. Despite being a teacher herself, in a *student*

role, she had felt unable to challenge the teacher-designated pairing, despite its negative effect: ‘I was ...getting very very poor [as a result of this pairing]’

The view of teacher as expert undermines creation of the third space (Bhaba and Rutherford, op.cit.) as it is difficult to achieve congruence if the validity of both parties’ positions is not accepted and if teachers don’t allow student cultural capital to emerge as valid. Nicola did suggest that ‘[students] all have their own experiences and expertise.... We could learn from this’, but this was not widely supported. Any formal learning environment is also based on a particular cultural construct about the interface between activity, teaching and learning (Ollin 2008: 265, 271) and can be related to Bourdieu’s ‘cultural capital’ which comprises the norms, values, and practices of the particular context (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). If the teacher tries to impose their own cultural capital onto students then Zepke and Leach’s adaptation model (2007:656) is in operation and in direct opposition to their ‘integration model’ where the diversity of students’ culture is integrated into the learning situation (2007: 656). For example, Ollin cites that the current western cultural construct will value talk in the classroom as much for its social commitment to the group as for its intellectual value. This may not coincide with the values and pre-understandings of someone from an older western education background who has been schooled didactically and is used to teacher talk, someone from a culture where silence has more value in learning, or someone who has had less educational input and less knowledge of the system. As we have outlined before however, if all students know the ‘rules of the game’, irrespective of their provenance, they can operate within the language classroom more easily and without damage to their self-worth (Nicolson and Adams, 2008: 111). We acknowledge that determining the rules of the game is a changing process particularly in the world of adult education, but also arrived at in different ways. Some teachers may always believe that it is their role to determine what and how things happen, while others may accept that a more nuanced approach is needed. As we know from previous research (Adams and Nicolson, 2010), the latter may in fact enable students to co-construct the rules in a way that maximises engagement, irrespective of the nature of that engagement.

Discussion Points

First, we ascertained at least three different approaches amongst the participants. One group comprised teachers whose approach was linked to mainly to subject and methodology, perhaps because of how they have been initially trained. The act of comparing what happens in the different languages in the first group session may be evidence of this. This also shows that teachers are eager to establish their own provenance and credibility e.g. “in French it is like this...”. As Kubanyiova suggests, facilitating the learning process may not be what language teachers really have as primary focus (Kubanyiova, 2009:329), and the push to be involved in such facilitation may destabilise teachers established cognitions. The second group are those who integrate aspects of dealing with diversity. This could either be because of professional development, or because of their ability to empathise or understand from their own experiences. The third group are those who appear to have an intrinsic capacity to view diversity in all its nuances as described earlier, perhaps because professionally they have engaged with reflection, discussion, teacher development and research in this area, as is the case with Mary and Nicola.

A second discussion point revolves around understanding student need. Some teachers (and teacher developers) suggest that tasks involving maximum talk- time, cultural authenticity and real-life modelling are student-centred approaches, yet, if not discussed with students and if not underpinned by particularity, they may remain methodologically- and teacher-driven, rather than by a deeper understanding of students’ psycho-linguistic and emotional needs. Without student involvement, without flexibility in task content, design, management and participation, such choices may not be student-focussed. All of this may be particularly key in open, distance and blended independent study where, for the bulk of the time, students are used to directing their own choices about what they do and how they do it in self-study.

Third arise the implications of engaging with research. Engagement may mean different things: teachers doing research themselves, reading other people’s research or being part of a staff programme which relies on a research base for its agenda and principles. Better merging of research and practice may also prevent tensions between practice meta-narrative and practice nitty-gritty, which we observed during the day but also encounter regularly as teacher developers working with teaching teams. A meta-level narrative around practice was not discernible in the group sessions. There may be a link here to Ellis’ point that teachers who don’t research may find it difficult to engage in more abstract thinking about practice

(Adams and Nicolson, 2010). In the plenaries, however, more abstract thinking tended to occur, which in turn helped new approaches to emerge. A tension between rhetoric and planning was also noticeable at times, as though translating ideas into action was not a natural step. What participants *said* they were concerned with and what they actually then planned for the session were two different entities. For example, one group seemed student-focused in theory ‘..we don’t just look at language achievement...but how [students feel] about the teaching session, whether their emotional needs are met. Are they likely to come back as well. ...what often happens if you really don’t take care for the weaker students, they just drop out...’. However, the subsequent planning of tasks only considered language issues, not how to do the task comfortably. This may also reinforce Yero’s suggestion that in fact, ‘teachers’ behaviours frequently spring not from higher level thinking processes but from habit’ (Yero, 2010:7).

The fourth point is around the benefits of constructed reflection opportunities. During the sessions, participants did make an attempt to co-construct solutions in a Vygotskian way, using a ZPD where colleagues’ views influenced thinking and possibly future action. In one group, for example, joint agreement was reached that they should explain the rationale behind changing partners in groupwork. In another, they came to a joint conclusion that: ‘Whether students talk about themselves or give their own opinions, we thought it was best to give them a choice.’ Such constructed opportunities may also lead to *individual* reflection and decision-making both on the day and after the event itself. For example, Heidi had wondered on the day whether she fully explained to students that they can opt out if uncomfortable with the task: ‘I have always meant students to understand there is nothing in the teaching session they have to do, but have I explained to them? Quite possibly no, I haven’t.’ She also thought she should ‘work on ground rules... where you establish [...]...for instance ...are you prepared to go with me in the TL first of all and then ...if you are really not coping... I’ll stop’. After the event, she indicated on her feedback form that she had reflected further on providing more student options, concluding she would consider this in future planning ‘...if it helps to create a more positive experience for the student, which in turn can only enhance their learning’. Jacques, who had appeared resistant to change throughout the day, sent feedback after the event, that he needs ‘to think more about non-linguistic difficulties that our students can encounter. I can deal with linguistic problems but I might need more training in the other kind of difficulties that students can have to make sure I react in the right way or that I do the right thing.’

Conclusion

We recognise that, in trying to enable teachers to reach the level of awareness and sensitivity that creates comfortable engagement with learning, we confront challenges. Teaching approaches can be deeply engrained and may require prolonged and regular staff development to effect change, for, as Usher and Bryant assert (1987:206): ‘Individuals have a great deal invested in their intellectual and emotional systems and sometimes it is easier to be stuck than to be productive.’ A particular methodology can also be an oppressive force within a profession, widely applied without necessary reflection and inhibiting access to a true understanding of particularity. A focus only on the end performance of students rather than how the journey happens is to be avoided, otherwise we fall into the trap of simply ‘endgaining’, in F.M. Alexander’s sense of the word (Brown, 1992:41), which prevents true engagement in the present.

The question remains, to what extent can we modify teacher approaches? We are aware that we need to tread carefully because teacher identity and professionalism are at stake, and, as Yero reminds us, teachers, like all students, have ‘a tangled web of beliefs, values, metaphors and thought processes’ (Yero, www.teachersmind.com) which will impinge on everything they do. Not to accept the challenge of change, however, would fail to meet our humanistic aim to make learning comfortable for all. Ultimately, as learners we may well forget what we were taught but we will never forget how the teacher made us feel.

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