Exploring values in English language teaching: teacher beliefs, reflection and practice

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Introduction

English language classrooms and schools are local environments in which values, value-judgements and value-based decisions are part and parcel of the daily working lives of teachers and teacher educators. Moreover, we are also involved in a profession which is global in scale and effect, and where difference is a way of life (Richards, 2003). Yet it may be true to say that values are rarely reflected upon openly in staffrooms and on professional development programmes.

We are generally so busy preparing, teaching and ensuring that we cover our syllabus that we have little time to focus on and talk about values and the value dilemmas we face (Woodward, 1999). Talking about values may also cause us anxiety and therefore be avoided as we ask ourselves what might happen if our colleagues see things differently from ourselves and whether they might they judge us negatively.

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However, perhaps the very act of thinking about values in our teaching might be helpful to us as teachers and teacher educators. If values form a key part of our teaching, reflection will help us clarify what we do and why, both within and beyond the classroom; what our choices are and what the possible outcomes of these choices may be. Reflection may thus help us develop as teachers and as teacher trainers and educators.

The purpose of this article, then, is both to prompt readers to consider their own values and how these might be realised in practice in your teaching and training, and to provide awareness-raising activities for teacher development. The article will first outline some of the issues which underpin any reflection on values in English language teaching, considering both the complexity of our professional environment and offering a 'working definition' of values. It will then examine the values teachers and teacher educators often report that they hold, before examining how values may be realised in practice, and the complexities, conflicts and richness that may result.

A final note before we continue: the aim of this article is not to tell readers what to think or what values to have, but to raise some issues for consideration and provide opportunities for reflection.

Setting the Scene: What do teachers do?

Firstly, it is worth considering the complexity of teaching:

- Teachers generally meet people in large groups – the more people we deal with, the more complicated, interesting and varied things often become.

- Teachers carry out many different functions in our schools and institutions – we teach, but in some way we also represent the school to our students (and to their parents). Thus teachers are not free to do exactly what we want.

- Teachers are involved with socializing students – we teach and help our students to join and fit in to the culture of our schools and also to the culture and way the world works outside our schools.

- We are responsible for students (in some way at least), both now and in the future.

- Teachers think – about what we are teaching, how we are teaching it, how to deal with the class, how to deal with a particular student or colleague or manager…

- Teachers have values, and teachers also have power and responsibility.

Additionally, English language teachers work where cultures and languages come together. Hence, we (both students and teachers) learn new ways of communicating with people from different backgrounds to our own, often learning about things which lie beyond our everyday experience and knowledge. The centrality of language in the development and expression of identity, again for students and teachers alike, adds to this complexity.

What do we mean by 'values'?

There are several ways in which values might be defined, but here I will adapt an explanation by Johnston. Values are:

> The beliefs which help a person decide what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Beliefs are both individual and social. They are individual in that all values are expressed by and through particular people… but strong social forces affect individual beliefs. As a result, values only become interesting when they are put into practice in social settings – when our inner beliefs are converted into actions that affect others.

> *(adapted from Johnston, 2003:6)*

Rather than worry about whether values are mainly individual or mainly social, it is in fact the interplay between the personal and social which is most interesting. To put it another way, we negotiate our personal values through our social setting – the two are inseparable. Of course, as well as interest and stimulus, this may cause enormous potential for problems and difficulties as it is unlikely that two or more people, or all the students in our classes, or all teachers in a school have exactly the same set of values. Somehow, however, we all have to get on with the business of teaching and learning English and working in our institutions in a reasonably harmonious way!

Exploring teachers' values: some examples

A simple starting point for teachers and teacher educators to investigate values are the following three questions:

- What values do you think **teachers** should have?
- What values do you think **English language teachers** should have? Are there any which are different to those for teachers in general?
- What values do you think **English language teacher trainers** should have? Are there any which are different to those for English teachers?

In a recent project undertaken with 30 teachers, I asked similar questions. All the teachers were English mother tongue speakers who had taught in countries other than the UK but were now working in Britain. So, the sample is not representative of English language teachers as a whole. The values they suggested for English language teachers could be organised under three headings:

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a. Student achievement matters

- *'Individuals have the right to achieve to the best of their abilities, and their abilities are not fixed things. Labels such as 'intelligent' create and reinforce boundaries'*

- *'Fulfilling potential for all, the avoidance of labels, the first introduction of the notion of power in the classroom (between students as well as between teacher and students); and the idea that hard work is good…'*

b. Ways of working in the classroom

- *'The aim [for teachers] of working themselves out of a job – i.e. promoting autonomous learning wherever possible'*

- *'Help students find their own way'*

- *'Encouraging students to set the agenda, wherever possible'*

- *'A belief that the teacher is an organiser and is simply further down the path of life than his or her younger students'*

- *'A professional and personal interest in their subject – so that this 'infection' may get passed on'*

c. Recognizing the individual

- *'Modesty or humility – the feeling that one doesn't have all the answers…a curiosity and openness'*

- *'There must be dignity in the classroom'*

- *'A desire to know about the students & their cultures; as much real communication as possible'*

- *'A professional and personal interest in those we teach'*

- *'To be a good language learner and a good language teacher, tolerance and 'openness' to the differences in others is a pre-requisite'*

- *'An awareness of how your own personal views are colouring your relationship with your students. Both teacher and student must learn this by exposure to each other; is this what we call 'experience'?'*

Although these are not the 'right answers', it does seem likely that most English mother tongue language teachers in most environments recognise some of the values above as essential in their lives, both within the classroom and beyond. Indeed, the trends identified above are similar to those suggested by Edge (1996) as key values within English language teaching: diversity, inquiry, cooperation, respect.

However, as Hafernik et al (2002) observe, the way humans make value-decisions is informed by history, religion, philosophy, culture, the law, institutions and personal experience, and it is possible to argue that the perspectives summarised here are based on a liberal, western tradition which other cultures, societies and political perspectives may not share. Thus, it is also worth noting at this point that understanding the values of others cannot be taken for granted. It is something we have to work out and work at, and this might not be easy (Richards, 2003: 298).

Moving on: values in practice

Pajares (1992) suggests that the values individuals hold are often contradictory, only partially clear, and even incoherent. For example, I may value honesty; but I may also value tact, diplomacy, and protecting the feelings of others i.e. not telling the full truth. These values would seem to conflict. Similarly, I may value loyalty, but when does loyalty become inflexibility and an inability to see the world as it really is? Again, I hold conflicting values. Thus, we need to move from what we think as individuals to what we actually do in our classrooms, schools and society more generally, as it is perhaps a little too easy to come up with broad statements about values without examining how they are realized in practice.

For teachers and teacher educators, congruence between apparently contradictory beliefs can be worked on through discussion of case-studies. Here are a couple of examples:

Case study 1:
In a class a few years ago, I encountered a student who wouldn't speak during pair work activities or in group or whole class discussions. Awkward pauses developed whenever she was asked to contribute. She was an able student who certainly could speak, but she chose not to (even after one-to-one discussion, I never quite managed to clarify the reasons for her silence).

My teaching dilemma was that she had the right to be silent, but this silence affected other learners and the dynamic of the class who had the right to expect participation and cooperation. Was I to value her individuality and wish to express (or not express) herself as she wished? Or was I to continue trying to develop her (obviously unwilling) contributions in what I saw as a contribution to the benefit of the rest of the class? In this situation, what would you do and why? What values would inform and underpin your actions?

Case-study 2:
Two of your students submit essays which are very similar in both content and language for your English language course. You suspect that one student, who has been given lower marks throughout the year, has copied the work from the other. Your school's regulations state that both students should now fail the course. However, if they fail your course, they fail the year-long programme which they have paid a lot of (their family's) money for. If they fail, they will have to return home to face their family and friends without a certificate. What would you do and why? What values would inform and underpin your actions?

Discussion of these case-studies with groups of teachers has, in my experience, revealed value-based conflicts. In the first example there is potentially a conflict between ideas surrounding diversity and those on cooperation in the classroom. How can both ideals be accommodated? The second case-study, meanwhile, may reveal attitudes to what constitutes cheating; what information an institution should share with students, what is an appropriate penalty or punishment when rules are broken; institutional versus individual value conflicts; and how events and circumstances from beyond the classroom or school affect our daily working lives and decision-making. There is clearly no 'right' solution in either case; nor is it reasonable to suggest that what might work in one classroom context will necessarily be appropriate on another occasion. As no two situations are exactly the same, case-studies such as these reveal that teachers need to decide what is in the best interests of a particular student at a particular time, whilst also considering what is in the best interests of the rest of the class, our colleagues, institutions and, when relevant, parents. Here, then, it is possible to see the complexity of the relationship between my values as an individual, and how these interplay with the values of other interested parties.

Values: what we say and what we do

What seems clear in any discussion of values in teaching and learning is that teachers teach values by what they do as much as by what they say. Teachers pass on values all the time, often unconsciously. Indeed:

> Once we begin looking at classrooms closely, values can be seen in every aspect of classroom life, from physical setting to needs assessment, in how people participate, in curriculum development, lesson content, materials, instructional processes, language use, and evaluation. We are forced to ask questions about the most natural-seeming processes: Where is the class located? Where does the teacher stand or sit? Who asks questions? What kind of questions are asked? Who chooses the learning materials? How is progress evaluated? Who evaluates it?

> *(adapted from Auerbach, 1995: 12)*

Thus everything teachers do reflects values and, as Dufeu says, "we teach who we are" (Dufeu, 1994) as students pick up on the value-laden messages teachers send out.

We can, as busy teachers, see this very positively. If we accept that teaching does involve the display or exemplification of values, then this is not something we need to do extra preparation for. Values are part of our daily lives already. They are not something we need to add on. They are a central part of what we already do.

For teachers and teacher educators, the following kinds of questions are a starting point for further exploration of values in the English language teaching classroom:

- How do we teach? How far are our methodologies 'student-centred'? How far are they 'teacher-led'? What does this say about our values and world view? How far does this accord with the values of our students?

- How are the following aspects of our teaching organised? Why are they organised like this? What, if any, values underpin these forms of organisation? Can we imagine things being done differently? For example in the areas of:
  -Physical setting – arrangement of tables and chairs
  -Interaction and turn-taking
  -Lesson content
  -Evaluation

- Do we have rules for attendance and participation in our classrooms? What values underpin these rules? How else might these rules be set up?

- What images of society and the world are shown in our materials? Are they images we are happy to teach (with)? How is their content related to the real lives of the students? What are the students asked to do with them? Do the values they represent fit in with our own values, the values of our students, and those of our schools and institutions (and, if appropriate, parents)?

As with the previous two discussion activities, these questions are meant primarily as initial prompts for individual and group reflection, so that teachers understand more explicitly their own value beliefs and practices. For such understandings to really emerge, this needs to take place in a 'safe' environment, where diversity is respected, before teachers return to their busy teaching lives.

To summarise

Teachers and students have values. Teachers also have power and responsibility. There is therefore a need for teachers to reflect, monitor ourselves and exert self-control. However, our values are not something independent from our context; nor are they something that we can act upon without considering those around us, our institutions etc. We are individuals but also representatives of our schools (whether we like it or not!) and members of society, both local and global.

So, can we find time in our working lives to explore values and beliefs within English language teaching, and reflect upon the way these values are realised in practice? Is there a place for addressing values in teacher training and education programmes? Although it may not necessarily be an easy process, nor are there necessarily any right answers, English language teaching is so deeply value-laden already that exploring these issues would seem to be a key process as we seek to develop as teachers and teacher educators.

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