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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 66 (2012) 2 – 7

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

The 8th International Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) Seminar - Aligning Theoretical Knowledge with Professional Practice

Professional Discourse Community of Teachers through Critical Classroom Analysis within Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores teacher discourses and the intricacies of discourse communities of teachers. A modest attempt is made to link the discussion to professional discourse community, teacher education, and language for specific purposes (LSP). Through this grounded approach to critical classroom discourse analysis, I intend to share insights gathered from classrooms of teacher learners interacting among themselves and with their teacher educator in a teacher education course. Findings suggest that teacher education courses serve as a fertile ground to examine teacher discourse and understand discourse community of teachers. Such insights, I hope, are useful to LSP practitioners and educators in general.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the LSP 2012 Committee, Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Keywords: ELT (English Language Teaching); Professional discourse community of teachers; teacher education; language for specific purposes (LSP); critical classroom discourse analysis

1. Introduction

At some points in our lives we have to assume the role of a leader, teacher, learner, and interestingly teacher learner (for instance, when many of us decided to join teacher education program while still teaching). Throughout the professional lives of teachers, we are required to be critical thinkers, researchers, and leaders. We assume multiple roles in order to confront social and educational problems.

Teachers who are professionally active will eventually develop a strong discourse community. But to what extent could the community be regarded as a professional discourse community? Is there a need to redefine professional discourse community of teachers itself? The existence of such community is important as it will not

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only contribute to teacher professional development (TDP) but also ensure appropriate formulation of policy and effective policy implementation. Only through a well-established professional discourse community of teachers, will educational change take place.

2. The context of the study, findings and discussions

This section describes the context of the study, findings and discussions. This organization was made to capture the interrelated nature of the topic and the themes it has generated.

2.1 Critical classroom analysis, teacher learners, teacher educators

This paper makes a modest attempt at understanding professional discourse community of teachers by examining a discourse community comprising English teachers who are also teacher learners in a teacher education program at a local university. Singh and Richards [1:149] view teacher learners as an important community of practice that offers valuable insights into teaching:

“The course room [serves] as a community of practice where teachers learn through engaging in activities and discourses, mediated through cultural artifacts. A community of practice is also shaped by larger systems of power, which are reproduced in the micro-context of the course room.... Their ability to successfully participate in diverse social settings and roles relies on the ability to deploy multiple identities, and knowledge of attendant discourses for different purpose and times. This perspective, then, complicates teacher learning, and problematizes what we are ‘teaching’ participants in the course room.”

Teacher learners in my classroom interacted among themselves as well as with me, their teacher educator within the context of a postgraduate classroom. Hawkins [2] emphasizes the needs for teacher educators to play an active role in the learning communities they created. Their personal and professional experience, personalities, and beliefs when discussed in a postgraduate classroom of a teacher education program, I hope, will help provide answers to some of ELT (English language teaching) phenomena.

I decided to employ critical classroom discourse analysis [3;4;5] when describing my experience with students in my postgraduate class. As their lecturer who assumes the role of a teacher educator, I should have relatively sufficient knowledge and skills to observe and analyze my own classroom discourse. Working with different cohorts, in different semester, with these full-time teachers for about 15 years has enabled me to see them as belonging to a unique discourse community. This grounded approach allows me to share their critical views and assumptions.

2.2 Classroom ELT discussion and discourse community of teachers

What shapes classroom discourse when teachers are asked to discuss a topic that is close to their hearts and relevant to their practice? Teachers in my postgraduate class managed to display active and engaged discussion when they were asked to dwell on practice-ideology dichotomy (i.e. their teaching practice when juxtaposed with their teaching ideologies or beliefs). Teaching ideology has been given different labels such as theory, belief, principle, or framework, and it is a well-researched area [6]. Ramani [7] regards theory that emanates from classroom teaching as useful for teachers and researchers, complementing well the current trend in grounded approach to research in education. Teaching beliefs and practices among academics in higher institutions has received similar attention among researcher [8]. Practice-ideology discussion, due to its relevance to the teacher learners, naturally leads to active discussion that displays their personal and collective ideologies as well as their school teaching contexts.

It is interesting to explore such classroom discourse within the larger communities of teachers in the society. The questions are: Is professional discourse community of teachers identifiable, well-established, well-received and sustainable? Would its existence contribute to better understanding of ELT, classroom practice, and teacher education? To put it more bluntly, aren't teachers a group of people who are "too ordinary" to form their own professional discourse community? Surprisingly, the old sayings, "those who can't do, teach" still reverberates in Malaysian society. Teaching has been viewed sometimes as an art, and at other times as a science. Many decided to take a safer position: teaching is both of each. Thus, while other professions have gone through demystification process, "teaching" has been "overly demystified" that we fail to see teaching as a sophisticated and scientific (to some extent) endeavor. I am experimenting with this notion of "mystification" suggesting the need for researchers to further problematize "teaching" profession. Such problematization will pave the way for critical classroom analysis.

It is common to see some teachers who merely express their simplistic practice-minded views, dismissing theories as not applicable to their teaching. Such practice-informed orientation seems to dominate my postgraduate classroom ELT discourse, at least during the first few weeks of the semester. However, the practice-ideology dichotomy seems to diminish as the semester progresses as the teachers were continually exposed with readings, discussion with classmates, and "guidance" from me who they perceive as their teacher educator. Or was such shift of thinking among my students necessary? Was I too ideologically entrenched in my teaching ideology by expecting to see the shift?

The classroom, in addition to serving as an avenue for educational discourse, is potentially a fertile (sometimes risky) ground for political and social discourse. Due to the teachers' shared professional background, similar surrounding institutional and organizational factors, and common classroom goals, classroom discourse among my students has been critical, open, and sincere. Happy and sad stories among teachers were discussed and well "analyzed". Controversial topics were discussed openly. The following seemingly neutral topics or behaviors, for examples, can lead to controversies if discussed outside Malaysian classrooms:

- Teachers' dissatisfaction with the national syllabus
- Disagreement with the principles
- Conflicting personal beliefs with the school policies on crucial teaching matters
- Practice on meritocracy or the lack of it
- Being critical with government policies

Teachers in my class, however, managed to deliberate on such topics objectively, assess the problems and come up with constructive suggestions, albeit, in the form of a restrictive academic exercise. I could see the emergence of a cohesive and well-represented discourse community, perhaps a truly professional discourse community which I would never imagine of finding outside. Their practice-mindedness was transformed into a theoretically sound and acute discussion. Singh and Richards [1] found similar vibrant and resourceful teacher learners' community of practice in their classroom. Thus, such a strong and stable displayed feature of community of practice can no longer be undermined by us, teachers, educators, and researchers.

2.3 Teacher education program and its courses

Teacher education program is influenced by the university's organizational cultures and practices. Teachers joining the education program bring with them rich but different school cultures and practices. The university-school gap, if not reduced will thwart classroom discourse. It is possible to bridge the gap or provide smooth transition if we can capitalize on the school-university common goal: the need to approach ELT in an honest academic manner by focusing on real educational issues, and genuine willingness to put aside personal and political biases.

The nature of the course in teacher education programs (mine is Syllabus and Materials Design) plays an important role in shaping classroom discourse. My teaching orientation is based on my beliefs that teacher education courses should focus on the following:

- Classroom discussion on ELT must be discussed within critical perspectives. The first few weeks must be devoted to discussion critical issues which include current scenario, misconceptions, and their critical stance.
- Theories should not overwhelm the adult learners. There is a need for demystifying educational theories in order for them to be applied to ELT (but not the demystification of teaching mentioned earlier in this paper). ELT does need the refinement of major educational theories.
- Teacher reflexivity should be embedded to allow for in-depth teacher reflection that leads to personal and professional development.
- Teacher learners must be allowed and given time to articulate their beliefs (about language, teaching, learning, and designing materials) through written and speaking classroom assignments.
- Different expectations must be addressed taking into considerations the university-school gap, the demand of a postgraduate course, and multiple roles as full-time teachers and part-time postgraduate students.

Another factor that shapes classroom discourse, and the way we see teacher learners' discourse community, is the role of the teacher educator. In this case, I play the main role of a teacher educator. The following are my other acknowledged roles which may have contributed to classroom discourse:

- I am an informed parent who is involved with the school and I understand the institution and organization of the school. My children's schooling experience helps greatly in understanding schools.
- I was once a school teacher and could relate to their practitioner's view. I could sympathize and disagree with my students based on my personal experience.
- I may have projected myself as approachable, my personal characteristic that may have defined my relationship with my students. I normally established a good rapport with my students.
- Due to my multicultural inclination and backgrounds (I had raised my children in the U.S and sent 3 of them to American schools), I brought to my class critical, comparative, and multicultural perspectives (some students may have viewed me as liberalist, I could only take the credit if only the term is defined "correctly").
- My academic orientations resulting from teaching subjects in sociolinguistics (with its micro-macro tendency and curriculum studies (with its sociopolitical nature) has shaped the way I approach the subject matter and my classroom practice.

Hawkins [2] provides an accurate portrayal of teacher educators:

For teacher educators, it becomes crucial to engage in critical, reflective practices as well, and to envision their work as creating learning communities within which they also participate as teachers and collaboratively negotiate new understandings of their profession and practices. Teacher educators, too, must establish new practices and take on new roles (p. 6).

The recent concept of the scholarship of teaching [8;9], has defined teaching in higher education. Academics at the university are expected to be critical in their teaching through teaching itself as well as through their research on teaching. Similarly, in schools teacher professional development has long started in the form of reflective teaching and action research. Teacher educators (the academics) and teacher learners (the school

teachers) may appear as two distinct discourse communities while in fact they share many commonalities and a specific strong sense of purpose, i.e. the sole purpose of educating others and learning from others . They are not strangers to each other.

3. Insights into Language for Specific Purposes

LSP should serve as an appropriate ESL syllabus design framework that can address institutional, organizational and sociopolitical contexts of ELT. In order to deal with such constraints, ESP/LSP practitioners are compelled to collaborate effectively with the content-specialists as well as other stakeholders with varied academic and social backgrounds. Even within an assumed English discourse community, there are members with different beliefs and practice. Knowing such diversity in English teachers' discourse community, LSP/ESP syllabus designers have to find an effective approach to collaborative syllabus design.

LSP must capitalize on the multidisciplinary aspects of teacher education program and its diverse student population. In a typical faculty of education in Malaysian universities, for instance, teachers of various disciplines (e.g. mathematics, science, physical education, Islamic studies) interact freely on campus and sometime share similar elective courses). By tapping on the richness of social and subject matter diversity, LSP can contribute to curricular and pedagogical aspects of English language teacher education, for example ESP-based English language teacher education.

It is quite common to see how LSP practitioners keep losing out to other stakeholders during curriculum planning stages. ESP professionals are not normally in the front line or visible at all. Swales [10] acknowledges the lack of institutional recognition to LSP profession. It is time for LSP to be visible, useful at all levels of planning and with all types of stakeholders. The diverse discourse communities of teachers and their critical teacher discourses have yielded mixed reactions or even resistance towards some well-established ELT premises, including ESP. We must convince our people before we could convince the stakeholders outside the community circle. We must work towards making LSP as a sociopolitically empowered discipline.

LSP can contribute to research on language teachers' discourse communities, specifically, in investigating discourse communities through teachers' professional practices in order to gain the "understanding of professional discourse not only as text and genre but, more importantly, also as professional practice within the broader context of institutional, professional, organizational and disciplinary cultures" [11: 171]. LSP research, thus, must engage in multilevel analysis with multiple disciplines.

Teacher education courses normally needs to strike a proper balance between educating (focusing on broader goals) and training (emphasizing on specific competencies). Teacher learners have different learning styles and needs. Teaching requires proper identification of specific needs. Language for specific purposes (LSP) could provide both theoretical and methodological framework with regards to specific needs.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored teacher discourses and the intricacies of discourse communities of teachers with an attempt to link the discussion to professional discourse community, teacher education, and language for specific purposes (LSP). The observations made are summarized below:

- Due to their expected roles in society, teachers naturally have to assume multiple identities when functioning as members of the community. This has shaped their socialization patterns, redefining their discourse communities
- Thus, it is expected that there are multiple discourse communities of teachers which are functioning and fulfilling their respective purposes. However, they can also be factious and, in turn, weaken those other better represented communities.

- Courses in teacher education can be a good avenue to understand discourse communities of teachers and explore the potential of teacher discourse to be a fully functional professional discourse community of teachers.
- Classroom discussion of practice-ideology dichotomy, a seemingly old issue, has generated a revealing discourse that delves beneath the surface manifestation of ELT problems. Such discussion is characterized by serious teacher reflections and critical perspectives.
- Classroom discourse among teachers in a teacher education program is shaped by their multiple identities as (teachers and teacher learners), interaction with their teacher educators, and the school-university gap.

In conclusion, since teacher education and its courses can be the source of conflict, critical classroom discourse analysis a) can be an enlightening methodological tool to understand the ideological nature of ELT and teacher discourse, and b) informs discourse communities that teaching is a continuous teacher professional development which serves as the basis for educational and social change. The multidisciplinary nature of LSP and its multilevel analysis would allow LSP to contribute to teacher education, classroom teaching, and ELT through the areas of syllabus design, curriculum or program planning, and research design.

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