Teaching With Attitude: A Pilot Study of Cultures and Learning in an ESP Class

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Introduction

Theories and Questions

In the last two decades, there has been increasing interest in the relationship between teaching, learning, language and culture. Two strands of theory and research stimulated this pilot study of the experiences and attitudes of teachers from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds.

First, from the field of western educational psychology, there is interest in the quality of learning at all levels of education. The model of *deep* and *surface* learning (Biggs, 1987) has inspired many studies aimed at identifying the most successful approaches which foster the development of higher order cognitive skills. Studies of adult students (Marton & Säljö, 1984; Dart, 1995) show that those who conceive of learning in terms of a quantitative increase in knowledge are unlikely to adopt a deep approach to learning, whereas those for whom learning means the abstraction of principles or conceptual development, are more likely to adopt such approaches. Moreover, a strong relationship has been found between conceptions of teaching and learning held by university lecturers, and those same lecturers' approaches to teaching (Trigwell & Prosser, 1995; Kember, 1998). These studies suggest that just as students' approaches to learning are limited by their ideas about learning, so too may teachers' approaches to teaching be limited by their conceptions of both teaching and learning.

The second strand of research relevant to this study is the examination by applied linguists of the relationships between educational value systems, culture and language education. A model of imperialism has been used to analyse the spread of English language teaching (ELT) in the world (e.g., Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994). Here, the power relationship between the *centre* and *periphery* of an empire is equated with that between the centres of expertise, research and training in ELT, particularly in Britain and the U.S.A., and the periphery of third world nations supplying the learners. Pennycook (1994) has pointed out that teaching methods are cultural practices, and are likely to fail when they are introduced to contexts where traditions and norms are very different. For example, there are many reports of English language teachers

encountering resistance when attempting to introduce communicative methods beyond the *centre* context (e.g., Harvey, 1985; Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Watkins, 1998; Cipolloni, 2003).

There have been many attempts to categorise educational philosophies, curricula and methodologies (e.g., Tickoo, 1990), but only the two which inform this pilot study are outlined below.

Models of Language Teaching Cultures

* The integrationist/collectionist model, first proposed by Bernstein (1971), was developed by A. Holliday (1994, 1997, 1999) in his theory of international cultures of language teaching. Holliday, like Pennycook above, found that culture is the point on which the success of teaching and learning turns. His theory proposes two distinct contexts in ELT: Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA) and state education in the rest of the world (TESEP). These are characterized by fundamental differences between the typical interaction patterns of people in classrooms, summarized in the top half of Table 1. However, Holliday also emphasized that two other groups of factors operate in both these international contexts: local and individual cultures of educational institutions, and aspects of national, religious and class cultures.

* Skilbeck's framework (1982) of three different educational value systems: classical humanism, reconstructionism and progressivism, was applied by Clark (1987) to foreign language teaching. While these systems have succeeded each other historically in the west, they are not discrete, but exist contemporaneously, each one having a greater or lesser importance in different educational contexts. Clark's analysis included the implications of each system for language teaching in the areas of syllabus, methodology, assessment, classroom activities, the role of teachers and style of curriculum renewal. These are summarized in the lower half of Table 1 below.

Table 1

Models of International Cultures of Language Teaching

	Categories	Characteristics
Bernstein (1971) Holliday (1992)	1. Collectionist (TESEP)	* strong subject boundaries * didactic, teacher-centered approaches
	2. Integrationist BANA)	* cross-disciplinary * skills-based, collaborative approaches

(Table 1 Cont'd)

	Categories	**Characteristics**
Skilbeck (1982) Clark (1987)	1. Classical humanist	* subject-centred * transmission of knowledge/cultural values * grammar translation methods
	2. Reconstructionist	* oriented to society's practical needs * skills-based * structural syllabus, audio-lingual methods
	3. Progressive	* development of individual * process oriented-communicative methods

It can be seen that in ELT, classical humanism roughly corresponds to TESEP/collectionist/grammar translation methods, while progressivism corresponds to BANA/integrationist/communicative methods. Aspects of reconstructionism, typified in ELT by structural syllabus and audio-lingual methods, can be found on both sides of the binary models of Holliday and Bernstein.

These models and theories are difficult to test, but need to be evaluated if a series of trial-and-error approaches to ELT curriculum innovation is to be avoided. Do aspects of learners' and teachers' cultural and educational backgrounds predict the effectiveness of particular methodologies? If so, it could be better for English teachers in TESEP contexts to adapt to their institutional culture rather than try to get their students to adopt the foreign learning methods of communicative approaches. Yet some of the practices preferred in the TESEP context (e.g., mass chanting, rote-memory testing), could be seen as limiting students' learning. The linguistic imperialism model seems to implicitly deny any intrinsic differences in the quality or effectiveness of teaching practices, yet a concern for improving the quality of education cannot simply be dismissed as ethnocentric.

An opportunity to investigate these questions in a small way was presented by a diverse group of 12 teachers in an ESP course, English for Teachers (EFT), held in Sydney. The teachers, all advanced learners of English, had studied, qualified and taught in non-English speaking countries before migrating to Australia. They included

both primary and secondary teachers from Burma, Egypt, India, Iraq, Pakistan, Peru, and Uruguay. Their aim was to pass a test of professional English proficiency and gain teacher registration from the state education authority.

Aim

To investigate several factors in the participants' learning and teaching experiences and the relationships between them.

1. their own school education, including English

2. their teaching practice in their countries of origin

3. their conceptions of teaching

4. their conceptions of learning

5. the qualities they most value in teachers

6. their preferred learning activities, as students in EFT

Method

An observation-based questionnaire in six parts was designed to elicit information about the respondents' experiences both as students and teachers in their countries of origin. This questionnaire type was selected as it has been shown to be superior to types based on judgement or attitude in student evaluations of teaching (Eley & Stecher, 1995). It was also considered important to avoid asking the participants to make value judgements about their own schooling or teaching. Statements were constructed about systems, curricula and classroom activities in line with Clark's model (after Skilbeck, 1982). Examples from each of the six sections are given below.

Section 1   Your Experiences as a School Student

B   *Foreign Language Curriculum* (8 items)

Think about your classes in English or other foreign languages when you were a school student. Read each statement and decide how often you observed or experienced this happening in your foreign language classes. Tick (✔) usually; sometimes; rarely or never, to best describe the situation in your classes.

4.   *Students practiced English by translating sentences, using the grammar rules and vocabulary the teacher presented.*

..... *usually*   ..... *sometimes*   .....*rarely*   .....*never*

Section 2   Your Experiences as a Teacher

A multiple-choice format allowed selection among three alternatives in line with Clark's model. Information about curriculum aims, teaching program and teaching resources was elicited in this way.

C   Class Activities

Read each statement and decide, in your experience of teaching, which activity you spend most of your lesson time doing. Rank them from 1 (most frequent) to 5 (least frequent).

.... *explaining subject content to the whole class*

.... *monitoring and helping individual students as they worked on set tasks*

Sections 3 and 4   Your Ideas about Teaching and Learning

Section 3 and 4 required respondents to rank definitions of teaching and learning. These definitions, which constitute a hierarchy, derive from studies of adult students (Marton & Säljö, 1984) and of university teachers (Trigwell & Prosser, 1995). Those lower in the hierarchy tend to be equated with surface learning, and those higher with deep learning. As these definitions can also be calibrated with Clark's classification of language education, it seemed important to discover if this link existed for the respondents.

Below are some definitions of teaching. Think about your own experiences as a teacher and decide which definition has been most true or most important to you. Rank them from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important).

..... *A teacher transmits the content or ideas of the syllabus to students.*

Section 5   Qualities of an Excellent Teacher

Section 5 attempted to elicit the teaching qualities and practices which the respondents valued most highly. The practices were described in behavioral terms, in an attempt to keep the evaluations linked to classroom reality rather than to an ideal.

Below are some characteristics of good teachers. Think about an excellent teacher you admired as a high school student. Decide which qualities or behaviour were most important in forming your high opinion of this teacher. Rank them from 1 (most important) to 10 (least important). If any important qualities are not included in this list, write them in the space provided below.

..... *The teacher had an excellent knowledge of the subject*

..... *The teacher pointed out the practical applications of everything we learned.*

Section 6   Your Preferred Learning Activities in this Course

Finally, in section 6, the respondents were asked to rank ten learning activities used in EFT. This was in order to discover any relationship between their experiences of teaching and learning in their countries of origin, their attitudes to those processes and their own preferences as adult students of English in Australia.

> *What are the learning activities you prefer in this course? Rank the activities below from 1 (most preferred) to 10 (least preferred).*
>
> ….. *doing practice tests in class under exam conditions with a time limit*
>
> ….. *doing practice tests in class in a group, discussing and comparing answers*

Results

Nine valid questionnaires were completed. The results for each questionnaire are presented below, then the consistency of the individual responses is considered.

Sections 1 and 2

Table 2

Summary of Sections 1 and 2 — Student and Teaching Experiences

	Classical humanist	Reconstruct-ionist	Progressive	Mixed
1. Student experiences				
A. school system	7	-	1	1
B. language curriculum	6	3	-	-
2. Teaching experiences				
A. teaching program	4	3	1	1
B. curriculum aims	2	6	1	-
C. class activities	3	4	1	1
D. assessment	4	3	1	1
E. teaching resources	3	1	1	3

It is clear that most respondents had attended schools in the classical humanist tradition. Most had also experienced this tradition in their English classes, which usually consisted of translation exercises.

About half the respondents chose characteristics of their teaching identified as classical humanist, and half chose those identified as reconstructionist. It is interesting

that two-thirds chose reconstructionist curriculum aims, and this may indicate that it is easier to change official policies than class activities. One response was consistently in the progressive tradition. The result for *E. teaching resources* were inconsistent, probably because the available funds were as much a determiner of the school's situation as educational philosophy.

Sections 3 and 4

Table 3 below displays the correlation between the respondents' ideas about teaching and learning. Only the definitions ranked 1. (*most important or most true for you*) have been correlated.

The definitions of both teaching and learning are arranged in a hierarchy from A, the most limiting (reproductive model) to the most sophisticated (constructive model). Definitions E and F for teaching and D and E for learning are those which enable teaching approaches which encourage deep learning by students (Trigwell & Prosser, 1995, pp. 391-2).

Table 3

Summary of Sections 3 and 4—
Ideas About Teaching and Learning Ranked (most important)

Ideas about teaching	Ideas about learning				
	A	B	C	D	E
A. A teacher transmits the contents or ideas of the syllabus to students	-	-	1	-	-
B. A teacher transmits his or her own knowledge to students	-	-	-	-	-
C. A teacher helps students to learn the content or ideas of the syllabus	-	-	4	-	-
D. A teacher helps students to learn the knowledge the teacher possesses	-	-	1	-	-
E. A teacher helps students to develop ideas.	-	-	2	-	1
F. A teacher helps students to change their ideas.	-	-	-	-	-

Ideas About Learning

A. Learning is gaining more knowledge

B. Learning is memorizing.

C. Learning is gaining facts, methods and skills which can be stored and used when necessary.

D. Learning is gaining a general understanding of principles.

E. Learning is a process of interpreting reality.

It can be seen that for half the sample, there is a clear correlation between their ideas about teaching and learning, five choosing C or D for teaching and C for learning. This configuration fits with Clark's profile of reconstructionist values (1987, pp. 14-15). Therefore, the reconstructionist conception of learning and teaching was very dominant. These conceptions could limit teachers to approaches which encouraged surface rather than deep learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 1995; Kimber, 1998; Biggs, 1999). However, it is also important to note that all the respondents chose at least one of the higher order conceptions as their second or third ranking.

Section 5

Table 4

Summary of Section 5—The Qualities of an Excellent Teacher

Qualities		1	2	3	Total
1.	excellent knowledge of the subject(s) - CH	3	1	-	4
2.	pointed out the practical applications -R	1	1	1	3
3.	strong personality which attracted students -CH	3	1	1	5
4.	explained work and answered questions clearly -CH	-	1	1	2
5.	set interesting and challenging tasks -R/P	1	2	-	3
6.	kept firm but fair discipline in class	-	1	-	1
7.	made the students think for themselves -P	-	-	1	1
8.	kind, helpful and encouraging to every student	1	2	4	7
9.	gave regular tests on work covered in class -R	-	-	-	-
10.	encouraged them to do individual projects -P	-	-	1	1

Codes
CH - classical humanist
R - reconstructionist
P - Progressive

Overall, the two top ranking qualities of a highly esteemed teacher in these students' experiences were *1 - excellent knowledge* and *3 - strong personality*. While it could be argued that personality factors are independent of educational value systems, a strong personality is seen here as a valued trait for the teacher-focused, transmission strategy classroom, where "strength" is needed to dominate and direct whole-class activity. Therefore, the selection of 3 supports the selection of 1 and together they reflect the respondents' classical humanist schooling. It is interesting that *8 kind and encouraging* was the most frequently selected of all the qualities, but was seen by most respondents as ranking third—a valued support for more important characteristics.

Section 6

Table 5

Summary of Section 6—Preferred Learning Activities

Learning Activities		1	2	3	Total
1.	doing assignments at home by myself	-	-	-	-
2.	computer room or language lab	1	-	3	4
3.	practice tests in class - time limits	3	5	-	8
4.	practice tests in class - group discussions	2	-	2	4
5.	teacher explains correct answers	-	1	1	2
6.	listening to teacher or guest presentation	-	-	1	1
7.	working on set task in small group	-	1	1	2
8.	discussion - whole class and teacher	1	-	-	1
9.	role plays and microteaching	1	1	1	3
10.	individual help from teacher	-	1	1	2

The favorite class activities were 3 and 4 *(practice tests)*, all but one subject choosing 3 - practice tests in class with a time limit—as their first or second preferred learning activity. Fewer subjects chose the social-oriented *4- practice tests in a group, discussing and comparing answers*. This does not correlate with the results in Table 4 (the qualities of an excellent teacher), where *9 (gave regular tests)* was the only one of ten characteristics not ranked in the top three by any subject! This result could well be explained by the respondents' total focus at the time of their English proficiency test, which they were to sit only two weeks after the questionnaire was administered. It is

possible that their responses would have been different for courses not leading to an external gateway examination.

Correlations For Individual Respondents

Table 6 shows the profile, according to Clark's classification, of the individual responses to the first five sections of the questionnaire. The responses to Section 6 have been categorized in terms of a preference for individual, group, or whole class activities, and task or teacher orientation. The table enables the consistency of each individual's responses to be seen.

Table 6

Individual Questionnaire Response Profiles

Subject	Questionnaire sections					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	CH	CH	R	R	CH	indiv/teacher
2	CH	R	R	R	R	indiv/teacher
3	CH	R	R	R	R	group/task
4	CH	CH	R	R	R	indiv/whole/task
5	CH	CH	CH	R	CH	indiv/whole/teacher
6	CH	R	P	R	R	indiv/
7	CH	CH/R	R	R	CH	group/teacher
8	CH	R	R	R	CH	indiv/group/task
9	R/P	P	P	P	P	group/whole/task

It can be seen that each respondent's profile is consistent, showing a classical humanist school experience followed by teaching experiences modified to a greater or lesser degree by reconstructionism. Ideas about teaching and learning are nearly all reconstructionist. Those with a classical humanist teaching experience were more likely to choose classical humanist teaching characteristics as most important in Section 5.

From Table 5, the respondents' preferred learning activities would not appear to be predictable from the pattern of their responses to other sections of the questionnaire. However, it may be significant that the respondent with the strongest classical

humanist profile has a preference for individual and whole class teacher controlled activities, and the only subject with a progressive profile has a preference for group and whole class task oriented activities.

Discussion

It was found that Clark's model fit the sample teacher's education experiences well. While engaged on the task, all respondents appeared to quickly recognize items as relevant or not to their experience and thus completed the questionnaire without difficulty. The results show that all but one of the respondents, from very diverse national, linguistic and religious backgrounds, shared similar student experiences which were clearly in the classical humanist tradition. This supports both Clark's model of educational value systems and also Holliday's theory of international collectionist features of English teaching in the TESEP context.

In line with worldwide education developments since World War II, half the sample showed change towards reconstructionist values and practices in their teaching experiences. Those whose teaching experiences remained largely in the classical humanist tradition were more likely to continue to value most highly those teaching qualities associated with that tradition.

However, turning to conscious conceptions of teaching and learning, all but one of the teachers espoused reconstructionist ideas. Will these attitudes limit both their own learning and their ability to adopt teaching approaches which develop deep learning in their students? Many concerned with improving the quality of education believe so, and Trigwell and Prosser (1995) recommend that explicit attention to attitudinal change to teaching and learning be included in professional development for university science teachers. Similar recommendations have been made in other areas (e.g., Biggs, 1996; Dart, 1998; Kember, 1998; W. Holliday, 2001), and may need to be applied in TESOL education programs, to enable innovative teaching strategies to be successfully adopted in TESEP contexts (Lamb, 1995).

Except for the two respondents who represented the opposite poles of Clark's spectrum of educational values, this study did not show any direct link between earlier experiences as students and teachers and their own preferences for learning activities in their current course. This might show a flexibility towards different learning tasks which does not support Holliday's view (1994) that negative reaction to innovation is predictable in the collectionist context. Such a hypothesis needs to be tested with a larger sample.

The profiles of individual's responses to all questionnaire sections showed considerable consistency in line with Clark's model. Variations for individuals can be explained in terms of the model in the same way as the frequencies of total responses for each section of the questionnaire.

Conclusion

Although the small number of respondents limits conclusions that can be drawn, the study lends further support for Clark's model (after Skilbeck, 1982) as a useful tool in categorizing the educational experiences of both teachers and students. Moreover, support was found for Holliday's claim that the collectionist (classical humanist/reconstructionist) educational culture of TESEP has international similarities despite very different aspects of the respondents' national and institutional cultures.

The issue of the implications of the TESEP educational background for teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching requires further study on a larger scale. If these attitudes are indeed of importance to the quality of learning, such a study could have considerable practical implications for teachers education programs. For example, many BANA TESOL teachers have qualified by completing quite short intensive training courses, which by their nature neglect an exploration of language acquisition processes and the development of attitudes to and conceptions of teaching and learning. When these teachers first encounter TESEP education contexts (as thousands do every year), conflicts and failures often happen (Holliday, 1994). Solutions to such clashes of educational cultures proposed for the TESOL sector include a shift in the focus of TESOL training courses from culture-bound teaching techniques to wider skills in solving classroom problems in a culturally sensitive way (Holliday, 1994). Further, innovative methods can be introduced in ways that provide cultural continuity with accepted institutional practices (Holliday, 1997).

Of course, teachers imbued with communicative methodology encounter similar culture clashes when teaching students with a TESEP background in BANA, in all education sectors, an example being the EFT class who participated in this study. The challenges to Australian educators of rapidly increasing numbers of Chinese students since the late 1980s, for example, have motivated many studies, some included in *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological, and Contextual Influences* (Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Some of these studies begin to bring together in a fruitful way the two strands of research discussed earlier.

Teachers can help those studying in English speaking countries in both their learning and cultural adjustment by being themselves culturally aware. Improving students' intercultural competence by explicitly teaching students about educational and institutional cultural roles and expectations and facilitating critical reflection of these seem to be very helpful strategies. For example, this can be done in relation to key sociolinguistic norms such as politeness, or plagiarism (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000; Cipollone, 2003). Such critical reflection is indeed just the sort of process that is believed to grow from teachers' own attitudes to teaching. These highly developed concepts and attitudes encourage deep learning in both teachers and students, with the potential to breaking down cognitive and cultural barriers to improve the quality of education for all.

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