
Activities for Raising Teacher Awareness

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Recently there has been renewed interest in teacher training activities which aim at providing ESL/EFL teachers with awareness about their teaching so that they can make informed decisions about what and how to teach. The objective of this article is to point out the kinds of activities which are used in this pursuit and to emphasize the need for research into how effective these activities actually are.

Teacher Training Activities

As Ellis (1986) points out, teacher training activities are similar to the kinds of activities classroom teachers use with ESL/EFL students; however, the emphasis is on awareness and acquisition of teaching, rather than on the acquisition of language skills. As with designing an ESL/EFL activity, the teacher needs to consider materials, kinds of tasks, and the procedures that will be used to conduct the class (Ellis, 1986), and there are a wide range of materials, tasks, and procedures.

A survey of articles on what teacher trainers do (Alatis, Stern, and Stevens, 1983; Ellis, 1986; Fanselow, 1987, 1988; Fanselow and Light, 1977; Gebhard, Gaitan, and Oprandy, 1987; Gebhard, 1986; Richards and Crookes, 1988) provides insight. Materials used for teacher training purposes include video and audio recordings of lessons, transcripts of lessons, readings, textbook and other teaching materials, realia, lesson plans, and samples of students' work. The kinds

of tasks which teacher trainers do with these materials vary greatly, but some include having teachers compare, prepare, evaluate, describe, adapt, listen to, select, rank, characterize, relate, complete, rearrange, and test. Trainers structure activities through lectures, group work, pair work, workshops, individual work, demonstrations, whole class discussions, and teacher trainer elicitation.

This list represents only a partial understanding of teacher training activities, and in order to present a fuller understanding of how teacher trainers combine materials, tasks, and procedures in creative ways, four different kinds of teacher training activities are presented below, including: (1) microteaching, (2) observation, (3) investigative projects, and (4) humanistic exercises.

Microteaching

As reported in Richards and Crookes (1988), microteaching was originally based on the idea that teaching is a complex set of behaviors that can be broken down into isolated skills which can be practiced. A microteaching experience is very short, usually about two to five minutes in length in which the teacher practices predefined teaching behaviors (for example, wait time, giving clear instructions, putting students in groups or pairs). The other teachers act as students, and teaching materials are often used, such as a textbook exercise, realia, information

gap activities, and so on. The interaction is video taped, the whole class views the tape after the microteaching, suggestions are made by the teacher trainer and classmates, and the teacher then practices the same set of behaviors, again following the suggestions.

Observation

Observation of teaching provides indirect experience for teachers. According to Fanselow (1988), observation affords teachers chances to see their own teaching in the teaching of others and provides a multitude of ideas about what and how to teach. Observation is done either in a classroom (or observation room) or through audio and video tapes of classes. Teachers observe each other or "master" teachers.

In order to make observation more systematic, observation systems are sometimes used, such as Allen, Frohlich and Spada's (1983) COLT (The Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) or Fanselow's (1977, 1987) FOCUS (Foci on Communication Used in Settings). Such observation systems have categories through which to selectively observe different aspects of teaching, such as who or what the source of communication is (teacher, student, text, other), what kinds of pedagogical moves are being made (structuring, soliciting, responding, reacting), what mediums are being used to communicate content (linguistic visual-print, linguistic aural-speech, paralinguistic, nonlinguistic, silence, and so on). Observation is also done through the use of categories originally for research purposes. For example, some teacher trainers have used Rowe's (1986) concept of "wait time,"

originally used in her research on the consequences of having teachers wait several seconds after asking a question and repeating the question or asking another student the same question. For teacher training observation purposes, teachers duplicate her research to see for themselves what the consequences are of waiting longer than usual periods of time.

Observations done through audio and video recording are sometimes shared by teachers. Teachers code the communication in small groups, describe patterns of teaching, and offer alternative ways to teach. Small group and whole class discussions based on observations of each other's or "master teacher's" teaching provide teachers with content through which to process their own teaching ideas.

Investigative Projects

Based on Fanselow's (1977, 1987) ideas, Gebhard, Gaitan, and Oprandy (1987) provide a means through which teachers can research their own teaching. The aim of the project is to provide teachers with opportunities to gain new awareness of the interaction going on in their classrooms as well as to consider how they might approach teaching a lesson differently. Teachers select a topic they are interested in investigating, such as how to make language comprehensible to students, how to keep students on task, the consequences of using classroom space in different ways, how to treat students' errors, or the effects of setting different kinds of tasks for students to work on. Teachers are asked to (1) video or audio tape classroom interaction which centers on the aspect of teaching they are investigating, (2) make transcripts of parts of the interaction and code/study them (through an observation

system such as FOCUS) for specific behaviors, consequences, and patterns, (3) decide on small changes in their teaching which might give them insight into the topic they are investigating, (4) implement the changes in the next lesson they teach while video/audio taping this lesson, (5) make transcripts, code/study again, and (6) compare the behaviors, patterns, and consequences in each teaching experience.

Humanistic Activities

Humanistic activities aim at providing teachers with "self knowledge". The idea behind the activities is that the more teachers understand themselves as human beings and teachers, the easier it is to make informed decisions about teaching.

Teacher trainers who work with a humanistic concept do activities such as "Real and Ideal Teacher" (Curwin and Fuhrmann, 1975). The objectives of this activity are to express a metaphorical model of ideal teaching, express a metaphorical model of current teaching, and to identify ways to move toward the ideal. The teachers are asked first to draw a picture of an ideal teacher (art work not important). After completing the picture, they are asked to list the characteristics that apply to the creation. Next teachers show each other their pictures and have a question-answer period, emphasis being on sharing ideas. The teachers then sit down with crayons in hand to draw a picture of themselves as they currently see themselves as teachers, and once completed they show their pictures and again have a question-answer period. After the two pictures have been completed and examined, teachers lay them down and take a sheet of paper and place it between the

two completed drawings. They then consider what steps they might take to move from the drawing of the current teaching self to that of the ideal.

Other humanistic activities include role plays in which the teachers become students in settings where the students have problems with the teacher's behavior and values, problem solving activities in which the teachers have to make decisions about who they would hire for a job from a list of candidates, sensitivity exercises in which teachers are asked to get in touch with their feelings about certain behaviors and attitudes, observation exercises of body language and its consequences, and much more.

Do These Activities Work?: A Need for Research

As interesting and informative as teacher training activities appear to be, there is little proof that the activities which teacher trainers use result in awareness of teaching and provide the skills for teachers to make informed decisions about what and how to teach (Fanselow, 1983; Stern, 1983). There is, in fact, a paucity of research in ESL/EFL teacher education in general, and it cannot be overemphasized that teacher trainers need to research the effects of teacher training activities on the teachers who participate in them, both from a short term and long term perspective.

The little research that has been done does not look promising. Some researchers suggest that teachers do not easily change their teaching behaviors, that decisions about teaching are not based on training, and that teachers are not necessarily aware of their teaching after

their training has ended (Long et al., 1976; Shapiro-Scrobe, 1982). On a more positive note, in my own research (Gebhard, 1985) I discovered that teachers change their teaching behavior, at least when they have opportunities to process self-selected aspects of their teaching through multiple activities, investigative projects, and readings (and when they are given a break from one teaching setting and afforded the chance to teach in a different one).

In conclusion, there are many possible uses of materials, tasks, and procedures to conduct teacher training activities. But, it is not enough simply to provide these activities. The question teacher trainers need to ask (and research) is "What are the short term and long term consequences of using teacher training activities on the teachers who participate in these activities?" As with any teaching-learning setting, the more informed we become through research efforts, the more educated we can be in making decisions about which teacher training activities to use in a particular training context.

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