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THE ROLE OF TEACHER CONSULTATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION: A TEACHER DEVELOPMENT PROJECT FOCUSED ON DESIGNING AND EVALUATING PRAGMATICS-FOCUSED INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

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Introduction

Importance of pragmatics-focused instruction

Limited knowledge of pragmatics (the socio-cultural 'rules' of interaction in a community and how they are realised in language) can constitute a barrier to successful communication in a second language (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Yates, 2008), particularly for advanced learners whose pragmatic mistakes are regarded as more serious than grammatical errors by native speakers (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). Recent research indicates that L2 pragmatics can be taught and are in general best learned by explicit instruction (Jeon & Kaya, 2006).

Although 'dialogues' feature in many published ESL textbooks, they may not necessarily represent well the characteristics of natural language use in conversation (Gilmore, 2004). It has been suggested that teachers make use of authentic or semi-authentic recordings of natural language use in their teaching to supplement textbook materials (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Basturkmen, 2007; Yates, 2008). The use of such recordings in teaching pragmatics has been shown to be feasible and effective (Denny, 2009; Riddiford, 2007).

However the suggestion that teachers make use of recordings of authentic or semi-authentic samples of natural language use can pose challenges for many teachers who would need to find recordings or elicit and record samples of natural language use. They may not be familiar with devising materials in this area or have time to make such recordings, or may have limited in-depth knowledge of pragmatic theory to draw on. Some form of professional development programme in which they are given time and support may therefore be helpful (Denny & Basturkmen, 2009; Yates & Wigglesworth, 2005).

Approaches to teacher development

Because of the importance of pragmatics in language learning, a project to support teachers was developed in a tertiary setting in Auckland. At this institution there were various in-service professional development programmes in place including a requirement to engage in reflective practice, participation in professional development days and a generous allowance to enable teachers to attend

conferences and workshops. However none of these provided all the conditions needed for teacher-centred professional learning leading to effective innovation in day-to-day teaching including materials production. Such conditions, leading to real change for learners, have been shown to include provision and good use of time, ongoing collaborative and theoretical support, some expert input, a focus on everyday professional experience, reflection and critical enquiry-based evaluation of outcomes for students (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007; Webster-Wright, 2009). In particular time release from teaching and a more collaborative teacher-driven enquiry-based reflective project was needed. The design and progress to date of the resulting project will be described in this short report.

The Project

Approach

The project was therefore underscored by three considerations. Firstly, a long term, collaborative project was seen as likely to afford more opportunity for teacher ownership and reflection and also for more in-depth learning (Webster-Wright, 2009; Yates & Wigglesworth, 2005) than short-term workshops. Secondly, the context of the recordings and design of the materials needed for pragmatic instruction in the project could be determined through consultation with the teachers concerned. So the first stage was a consultation to identify the teachers' needs and also the needs of their learners in the teaching of the pragmatics of spoken English. Thirdly, the project would involve close collaboration between an experienced practitioner-researcher (the teacher educator) who was familiar with and had done some action research in the teaching of pragmatics, and key experienced teachers who it was expected would later share information and ideas from the project with their colleagues. As a result the project involved a consultation phase, a collaborative materials development phase and a collaborative enquiry-based evaluation phase. The first two phases have been completed and the third is still in progress.

Participants

Participants involved in the consultation stage taught spoken language on a variety of programmes (English for Academic Purposes, employment focussed and general English courses) with learners at different English language proficiency levels at the same tertiary institution. Four teachers became involved in the subsequent stages of the project. The experienced practitioner-researcher, who is collaborating with them on this project and is also a teacher educator, is a colleague of these teachers.

Stages

Stage One: Consultation

This stage was carried out by the teacher-researcher in collaboration with an experienced researcher for another tertiary institution and was funded with a grant from Ako Aotearoa Northern Hub. Thirty-two teachers were sent a questionnaire and 18 responded. The meaning of pragmatics was outlined and some examples given. The teachers were asked about existing materials used for teaching pragmatics, known gaps in availability of materials, the needs of their particular classes for pragmatic instruction, and about the pragmatic areas they believed needed to be targeted in their context. They were also asked about their current approach to teaching pragmatics. In addition the teachers were asked about the support they would need to undertake development of materials for pragmatic instruction. Eight of the respondents were invited to interviews, enabling us to explore the teachers' responses in more depth.

We found that most teachers included a focus on pragmatics and socio-cultural aspects of language use in their instruction and were aware of the importance of it. We also learnt that they wanted to work with New Zealand-based materials 'tailor-made' for their specific classes and students, that we would need to help the teachers familiarise themselves with pragmatics features and terminology and discuss alternative methods for teaching pragmatics, and our belief that there would need to be 'release time' to enable the teachers to take part in the project was confirmed (Denny & Basturkmen, 2009). From the consultation stage we identified four key experienced teachers to participate in both the second and third phases of the project.

Stage Two: Implementation

Before starting on the materials production, the teachers were given key readings to introduce pragmatic features and terms, update them on theory in the area of pragmatics and provide some examples of the teaching of pragmatics using authentic sample texts. After this, the practitioner-researcher worked with the teachers individually to identify suitable scenarios for texts based on learners' needs, and to plan and make recordings of native speakers role-playing these scenarios with no script. This is often a more practicable process for teachers than collecting fully authentic samples. Although not fully authentic, elicited unscripted texts can represent a distillation of native speaker implicit knowledge of what is appropriate in the context (Golato, 2003). Recordings made included, for the lower general English levels, conversations, invitations and appointments in different contexts, with participants varying in age and gender; at pre-degree level for the teaching of academic English, tutorial and student group discussions; and at first-year undergraduate level for interpreters, 'problematic exchanges' (that is, exchanges where some negotiation was needed).

To help develop the teachers' awareness of pragmatic features and terms, the practitioner-researcher worked with the teachers in making transcripts of the completed recordings, identifying features in them and developing materials centred on the use of the recordings. This was a collaborative activity. Generally once the conversation about pragmatic features was opened and examples from the transcripts identified by the practitioner-researcher, the teachers had significant input. Guidelines for recording, transcription and analysis were then written by the practitioner-researcher and made available for other teachers to create materials to suit their individual contexts.

Stage Three: Evaluation

Stage three (in progress) includes a trial of the materials and teaching methodology and an evaluation of this collaborative approach to teacher development. The method of evaluation of both is influenced by the 'self-study research' approach of Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy and Stackman (2003) in which teachers collaboratively examine their practice working with a 'critical friend'. The first of four evaluation projects is complete and is outlined below, and the second is in progress at the time of writing.

In this first project the teacher had developed three new audio-recorded role-plays of scenarios set in workplace contexts, with accompanying materials, for her class of first-year BA students of interpreting. The scenarios involved a number of pragmatic features such as asking for clarification and making complaints (speech acts), conversational repair and conflict avoidance. During the process of materials development and in teaching with the new materials, the teacher kept a reflective journal in which she recorded her awareness of developments in her professional abilities or knowledge, and her perception of the value of the materials and teaching approach. She also asked the learners as part of the course requirements to keep reflective blogs of their growing awareness of pragmatics as they engaged with the materials. At the end of the instruction period the teacher identified themes in her journal entries and wrote a summary of them. In collaboration with the practitioner-researcher she analysed the learner reflective blogs for evidence of any change in their pragmatic awareness and for their response to the teaching approach and materials she was trialling. The student response and the degree of evidence of successful learning would help her decide on future action – to abandon, continue or modify the materials or the approach. The practitioner-researcher also kept a journal recording her experience of the collaborative process.

There is not space to give detailed findings here, but in general, although the findings are not generalisable and are only indicative because this is insider research, the data suggested that the approach and the materials were effective in this class, the blogs showing evidence of an increasing student awareness of pragmatics as the teaching progressed (Sachtleben & Denny, forthcoming). The teacher is continuing to use this approach and the materials, and particularly

values the way in which use of an inductive approach based on an examination of the language in the recordings frees her to observe the students' engagement and progress in the classroom. She believes that further video recordings in a greater variety of contexts might be useful additions and plans to make these. Both the teacher and the practitioner-researcher also found the collaborative approach to materials development and evaluation helpful.

Conclusion

More data is needed and will be obtained from the other teachers in the project to draw more substantial conclusions about the value of this approach to materials development and evaluation. In addition more specific data might best be obtained from an anonymous survey of all the class teachers on completion of the project to avoid issues of conflict of interest which can arise when reflective journals in which the writer is identified are used. However enough possible benefits of this approach to teacher development and the teaching of pragmatics have emerged to encourage us to continue. Collaborating with teachers to create materials they need and wish to develop expertise in producing, for curriculum renewal and development in areas they see as valuable and important, has already anecdotally had a wider effect on the way pragmatics is taught in the institution, although this has not yet been formally tested. Collaborating with the interpreting teacher in the process of more formally trialling and evaluating one set of materials has also resulted in new insights for her and for the practitioner-researcher.

The collaborative nature of the project has ensured that both the teachers' classroom expertise, needs and priorities and the theoretical knowledge and experience of the practitioner-researcher has had an impact on the project at all three stages. It has also ensured that gaps in the availability of materials are being filled and that materials that might be the basis for more effective teaching in the important area of pragmatics have been created and are being evaluated, refined and made available to other teachers.

The evaluation will be continued as teachers are freed to take part. It will be interesting to see if similar benefits emerge with teachers working with lower level learners. It is important for the success of the project that these key teachers pass on their knowledge of others in their areas, enhancing the process of teacher development and curriculum renewal, and ways of ensuring this happens, maybe through seminars or workshops, may need to be devised, but informal day to day communication and the pooling of materials is also important and effective.

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