

“Working with Learners”: Shaping and Contextualizing a Teacher Education Methodology Course in the U.A.E.

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Abstract

Language teacher education programs have traditionally focused on transmission, product-orientated approaches that are applicable to any teaching context. However, there is a growing shift towards a constructivist, process-orientated perspective where student teachers are active participants in learning to teach. This article discusses the rationale behind shaping and contextualizing a teacher education reading methodology course in the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) B.Ed program in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Through the HCT’s Program Quality Assurance (PQA) process – using course evaluations and observational analysis – it was suggested that approaches such as microteaching, reciprocal teaching, modeling and problem-based learning might better maximize opportunities to practice the teaching of reading in a foreign language context. These findings could have important implications for teacher education programs in the UAE, by establishing the importance of building concrete links between theory and practice.

Traditional Models of Teacher Education

Traditionally, teacher education programs for English language educators have operated under the assumption that teachers needed discrete amounts of knowledge, in the form of theories and methods that were assumed to be applicable to any teaching context. “Learning to teach” was therefore viewed as learning *about* teaching in one context (the teacher education program), observing and practicing teaching in another (during teaching practice), and finally developing effective teaching behaviours as a graduate

teacher (Freeman and Johnson, 1998). Thus, the locus of teacher learning lay in on-the-job immersion into teaching and not on the processes of professional teacher education.

However, there is a growing sense that language teacher education programs have failed to prepare teachers for the realities of the classroom (Crandall, 2000). The focus has begun to shift in teacher education programs, however, from what teachers do, to how they do it and why they do it. It is now recognized that teaching language is more than the accumulation of research knowledge about language, because it is evident that giving more knowledge to teachers does not necessarily make them better practitioners (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Crandall (2000) notes that there is a tendency for teacher education programs to therefore shift their focus from a transmission, product-oriented perspective to a constructivist, process-orientated perspective, where student teachers are active participants in learning to teach, rather than passive recipients of transmitted knowledge. This is recasting conceptions of who language teachers are, what language teaching is, and how language teachers learn to teach (Freeman and Johnson, 1998).

Situated Teacher Practice

The growing respect for situated teacher practice has gained much attention and resulted in the development of concrete, relevant links between theory and practice throughout teacher education program (Bruner, 1986; Lave, 1988). Practical experience, including such activities as peer observations, micro-teaching, problem-solving and internships, has long been a part of most language teacher education programs. However, these experiences are often too few and not sufficiently focused on the realities of the classroom (Crandall, 1996). A number of language educators (Crandall, 1994; Johnson 1996b; Richards, 1990) recommend that more extensive and intensive practical experiences be integrated throughout teacher education programs, providing student teachers with greater opportunities to link theory to practice and to receive support from and learn from experienced teachers. Decontextualized theory fails to consider the multi-dimensionality and unpredictability of the classroom environment (Bailey and Nunan, 1996). Therefore, contextualizing preservice education, integrating methodology courses

with practicum experiences and encouraging collaboration between faculty and students enhances teacher education programs for language teachers of English.

Teacher education programs, however are not the only influence on becoming a teacher of English. Student teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical knowledge; they are individuals with prior knowledge, personal values and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in classrooms. As Kennedy (1991) in Freeman (2002, p.2) states “teachers, like other learners, interpret new content through existing understandings and modify and reinterpret new ideas on the basis of what they already know or believe”. Grossman (1990) argues that what teachers know about teaching is largely socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which they come. Based on memories as students, as language learners themselves, their beliefs about teaching are instrumental in shaping the type of teacher they become. Lortie’s (1975) concept of the apprenticeship of observation marks teachers’ socialization as students throughout their schooling, as a significant influence on their teaching practices. Also, how teachers actually use their expertise and knowledge in the classroom is subjective, socially negotiated and continually changing within the classroom.

However, teachers’ beliefs and past experiences as learners may conflict with the images of teaching that we promote in our teacher education programs. These preconceptions may be resistant to change unless an awareness of that prior learning is developed in the teacher education program and opportunities for practical experiences and reflection upon those experiences are provided throughout the program (Freeman and Richards, 1996). Self-observation, micro-teaching and reflection on practice can help teachers move from a philosophy of teaching and learning developed as a learner to a philosophy of teaching, consistent with their emergent understandings of the language learning and teaching processes. This is what Freeman (1994, p.5) refers to as “interteaching”. We must however, acknowledge the power of prior knowledge in teacher learning in its own right. Differences in learners, curricula, programs, policies and materials, and the socio-cultural context in which teachers are likely to find themselves calls into question any set of ‘best practices’ appropriate for all contexts or “any attempts to transfer the knowledge and

practice from teacher education programs directly to teaching” (Casanave and Schecter, 1997).

The HCT B.Ed Program

In response to a demand by government authorities to improve educational practices in the UAE, and simultaneously “emiratize” and professionalize the teaching profession (see Mograby, 1999; Clarke and Otaky, 2006), the Higher Colleges of Technology’s first teacher education program commenced in 2000. The four year Bachelor of Education – Teaching English to Young Learners/English Teaching in Schools degree, developed in collaboration with and certified by the University of Melbourne, continues to be taught at all six Women’s Colleges across the UAE, and with some 360 trainee English teachers enrolled, is the HCT Education Division’s largest program. Teaching practice is considered the core of the HCT B.Ed., with students spending a total of 155 days in school placements throughout the 4 year program.

The HCT’s B.Ed program was designed with a social constructivist model in mind, emphasizing the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society, and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999; McMahan, 1997). A key understanding in the development of the program is that schools and schooling are the social and cultural contexts for teacher learning, and are crucial to establishing an effective teacher education program. As such, teaching is an activity that cannot be separated from the teacher as a learner or the contexts of schools and schooling in which it is done (Freeman and Johnson, 1998).

Continuous Quality Improvement

The UAE Ministry of Education and Youth’s (2000) *Vision 2020* plan calls for “embedding continuous quality improvement as a “strategic pillar” in the practices of UAE schools, reflected in increasingly effective teaching, appropriate methodologies and rigorous evaluation processes” (UAE Ministry of Education and Youth, 2000, quoted in Clarke and Otaky, 2006).

The HCT already models such aims with its own Program Quality Assurance (PQA) processes. These include professional and external bench marking (in the B.Ed program's case, accreditation by the University of Melbourne, Australia) and ensuring course aims, design, and learning outcomes are aligned with the HCT Graduate Outcomes (HCT Academic Services Program Quality Assurance Handbook, 2006, Internal Document). Also outlined are stakeholder consultation processes to define and evaluate quality leading to recommendations for curricula improvements. At the course level, the role of the curriculum leader and course team is critically important.

Role of the Curriculum Leader and Course Team

As part of the HCT's Program Quality Assurance process, curriculum leaders are appointed by Divisional Academic Teams (DATs) to design, develop and maintain curriculum for a program or cluster of courses taught within that Division in the HCT system. In the academic year 2005-2006, some 15-17 faculty in HCT's Education Division were curriculum leaders, each taking responsibility for one or more courses taught by the Division in 7 campuses across the HCT system.

The role of the curriculum leader involves communication and collaboration with the course team on sharing and promoting best practices in order to develop suitable resources, learning materials and assessments (HCT Role of the Curriculum Leader, 2005 Internal Document). An important aspect of the curriculum leader's role is to maintain and recommend updates for course outlines.

Supported by their course teams, academic supervisors and other experienced faculty, curriculum leaders make recommendations for updates after taking a number of factors into consideration. These include course evaluations and feedback by both faculty and students, observational analysis, and examining current trends in research and best practice. Revised course outlines are presented to the DAT for review and approval. Here we outline the rationale for and the processes involved in updating one of the courses that comprise the HCT's B.Ed – Teaching English to Young Learners / English Teaching in Schools degree.

“Working with Learners”: Outline of the EDUC 250 Course

The methodology course “Working with Learners” (EDUC 250) is a second year B.Ed course which focuses on the teaching and learning of Reading and Vocabulary. Developed in 2000, course designers were guided by the question: *What do student teachers need to know about reading to teach it effectively in the context of language learning in UAE schools?* EDUC 250 was first taught to the initial cohort of B.Ed – TEYL / ELTS students when they entered the second year of the program in 2001.

The EDUC 250 course aims to develop students’ own reading abilities as well as providing them with the skills and understanding necessary to teach reading to school-age ESL/EFL learners. The course goals and objectives focus on the theories and complex processes involved in reading. In its original iteration students examined bottom-up and top-down approaches from a theoretical perspective, ensuring they had a basic knowledge of the complexity of reading in a foreign language.

Revising the Course

In preparation for the 2005-2006 academic year, the EDUC 250 “Working with Learners” course was substantially revised. The impetus for undertaking this came out of HCT’s PQA process, based on feedback responses from students and faculty involved in the course, documented discussions by the EDUC 250 course team, and observations and discussions with students on teaching practice in schools. These processes revealed certain concerns about the course.

First Language Reading Approaches

The original EDUC 250 course's primary focus on first language reading approaches – giving student teachers a broad overview of what reading is, discussing the theories of bottom-up, top-down and interactive approaches to reading – was identified as a key issue. Similarly, exposing students to a range of reading theories or methodologies and expecting them to apply their theoretical knowledge in actual classroom settings, with limited opportunities for practice prior to in-school experiences, resulted in students compartmentalizing subject areas and to some degree, separating college from the authentic activity of teaching in schools and classrooms.

Faculty and students noted that approaches such as emergent literacy and whole language approaches appeared to have little place in current UAE government school English language classrooms, where reading instruction consists of only fifty minutes per day. Student teachers made the point that while they appreciated the value of these approaches and would relish the opportunity to implement them if given the chance, the reading methods they used as teachers of English would have to be suitable to the current context.

General Teaching Practice Observations

Students on teaching practicum are regularly visited and observed by college faculty while on their placements. In a typical three week block in a school, students will be visited three times by one or more of the college faculty, who observe lessons, provide feedback and offer support and advice.

It was an observation of supervising college faculty that Year 2 B.Ed students had some difficulties in differentiating between reading methods, in choosing appropriate activities before, during and after reading, and in organizing specific approaches in the classroom. An analysis of student lesson planning provided additional evidence of a limited understanding of what a reading lesson entailed. Students often presented a series of unrelated activities that weren't connected to the overall approach being used. It was felt that these fundamental skills needed to be strengthened in the methodology course to

ensure that students had relevant skills for the EFL classroom. Additionally, course evaluation data revealed students' frustrations concerning an overload of assignment tasks to be completed, rather than a core focus on learning how to teach reading.

Student Course Evaluation

Student feedback revealed that the students found the EDUC 250 course informative and interesting, though challenging. Comments on the feedback forms such as "I appreciate all the interesting things the teacher did to make the heavy input... interesting" and "I found the course heavy but we learnt a lot from it" were common, as were "there are many assignments, which were heavy for us" and "need more time to do the assignments" (Student course feedback, 2004-2005).

Students also felt that the course could have better prepared them with the skills and strategies necessary to teach reading in UAE English language classrooms. For example, one student wrote in her feedback form:

"The learning center (assessment task) is incompatible with the course content on reading." (Student course feedback, 2004-2005).

The students reported a gap between theory and practice and felt that they gained a fuller understanding of how to teach reading through 'trial and error' while on teaching practice. As another student commented:

"Very heavy and too much assessment. More practice needed on teaching reading itself." (Student course feedback, 2004-2005).

Students requested that more time be given to the analysis of reading approaches and evaluating their application to the EFL classroom in a UAE context. Comments included "We need to learn more about approaches that work in an EFL environment" and "We need more useful books that describe different reading approaches in a simple way" (Student course feedback, 2004-2005).

Course Team Feedback

Similarly, feedback from the course team (faculty who taught the course in 6 HCT Colleges in 2004-2005) highlighted the theoretical foundation for this course and the lack of practical knowledge about how to teach reading. One finding of the course team in their feedback for EDUC 250 was that:

“Some of the readings required scaffolding and quite a lot of teacher input. Practical examples and hands on activities to explain theories and concepts were necessary in this course for students to make sense of and how to use theories in practice.” (Faculty course feedback, 2004-2005).

It was felt that students’ competence in how to teach reading was secondary to being able to write a theoretical essay as an assessed task:

“Students need to be more aware of the differences between reading approaches. The time allotted only enables us to skim over the various approaches which results in the students having a limited understanding of each approach.”

(Faculty course feedback, 2004-2005)

The course team felt constrained by time pressures and course delivery requirements which meant there was a discrepancy between what faculty wanted to emphasize to their students and what they actually emphasized:

“The students have limited knowledge or practical experience on how to teach reading. Therefore they require extra time for what we would perceive as known strategies or processes through one’s own personal experiences as a child being taught reading. Students need to be competent in the teaching of reading before they graduate and unless more time is given this will not happen.”

(Faculty course feedback, 2004-2005)

The course team made a number of suggestions to address these concerns. This included a suggestion to include microteaching as an integral part of the course, in order to give students the confidence to “try out different reading approaches in a non threatening environment that gave feedback and encouraged reflection, before going into school situations” (Faculty course team feedback to EDUC 250 course, 2004-2005). Other suggestions included connecting the course more closely with the concurrent teaching practice course which has a reading focus, thereby giving the student teachers “the experience in how to organize different reading approaches and adapt these to integrate with UAE English coursebooks, such as *New Parade* (2005)” (Faculty course team feedback, 2004-2005). A recommendation was made to take out the classroom management component of the course – not because the team did not think this was not important, but because sufficient time could not be devoted to this area in the current course.

Based on this feedback, the EDUC 250 course was substantially revised for the following academic year.

The Revised EDUC 250 Course

While the B.Ed program was designed with a social constructivist model in mind, it was felt that in its original iteration, the EDUC 250 reading course had more of a focus on how reading is a multi-faceted complex phenomenon, rather than on how to teach reading itself. This resulted in students not necessarily understanding how to put the ideas into practice in EFL classrooms in UAE schools.

The revised course therefore aimed to address two key concerns:

- *What is reading in a foreign language?*
- *How can our B.Ed graduates successfully teach reading to EFL learners in a UAE context?*

To achieve these aims new teaching approaches were incorporated into the course work plan. These include microteaching, reciprocal teaching, modeling and problem-based learning.

Microteaching

Microteaching is organized practice teaching (Bok, 2002). The goal is to give student teachers confidence, support, and feedback by letting them try out among peers approaches and related strategies when teaching reading in schools. Crandall (1998) notes that traditionally, limited opportunities were given to observe and practice particular theories and specific skills in simulated contexts, such as microteaching. However, in the revised EDUC 250 course, microteaching and observation of microteaching sessions are scheduled weekly, and students are required to come prepared with their lesson plan and resources. Lessons are peer and teacher reviewed, with student teachers discussing and reflecting on such things as the suitability of different reading methods for a chosen lesson and suggestions to enhance their teaching techniques in future lessons. Suggestions made are recorded in the student teacher's teaching journal.

Initially, students were self-conscious about performing mini-lessons in front on their peers, as observations are characteristically used in teacher supervision and evaluation. However, once they were reassured that it was an opportunity to try out reading methods and techniques, in preparation for their teaching practice placement, they fully immersed themselves in planning for, teaching and discussing specific aspects of reading instruction. At the same time they were constructing or reconstructing understandings of language teaching and learning.

Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching is a cooperative learning instructional method in which natural dialogue models and reveals learners' thinking processes about a shared learning experience (Foster and Rotoloni, 2005). It relies on the belief that a collaborative construction of meaning between teachers and students leads to a higher quality of

learning (Allen, 2003). Reciprocal teaching is based on Vygotsky's (1962) theory of the fundamental role of social interaction (dialogue) in the development of cognition. Lessons include scaffolding, thinking aloud, using cooperative learning, and facilitating metacognition with each step. In the revised EDUC 250 course, student teachers took ownership of their roles in reciprocal teaching when they felt comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions in open dialogue about issues faced while on teaching practice. Procedures were first modeled by the teacher educator, practiced and coached with peer and teacher feedback and finally student teachers took control of planning and implementing sample reading lessons during microteaching and related peer observation. Continual teacher and student modeling of cognitive processes for each of the four strategies - predicting, questioning, clarifying, summarizing - was an integral part of the process.

Modeling

A cognitive modeling strategy, with teachers serving as cognitive role models, is a key characteristic of cognitive apprenticeships. The models should put students' thoughts and reasons about a particular situation/experience into words while explaining and demonstrating relevant approaches and methods (Meichenbaum, 1986; Shunk, 2000). This is critical as students cannot otherwise monitor the thinking process involved in choosing appropriate reading approaches and strategies for a particular age-group and context. Modelling allows students to build a conceptual model and acquire an integrated set of cognitive and metacognitive skills required to be reflective practitioners through processes of observation and practice (Collins, Brow and Newman, 1989; Collins, 1991). In the revised reading course (EDUC 250), the teacher educator modeled various reading approaches such as shared reading, reading aloud and choral reading. Through modelling, a message was communicated to student teachers about what is important in EFL reading teaching. It involved the use of examples and created 'images of the possible' for Emirati student teachers of English.

Problem-based Learning

Widdowson (1997, p. 121) states that teacher educators tend to be solution-oriented, with the “implication that teachers are to be given specific instruction in practical techniques to cope with predictable events...”. However teacher-education is problem-orientated, with the implication of “...a broader intellectual awareness of theoretical principles underlying particular practices”.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an instructional strategy in which students actively resolve complex problems in realistic situations and is used to help students understand the utility of a particular concept or study (Glazer, 2001). In the revised EDUC 250 course, simulations of "what if" scenarios were used to give student teachers experience in classroom management issues involved in reading on a daily basis in an EFL setting. The simulations provided an opportunity to not only address realistic problems but to encourage student teachers to experiment with different reading approaches while engaged in teaching practice experiences. It was hoped that student teachers would be less likely to fall back on the sorts of behaviorist reading approaches that they experienced as students themselves.

Table 1 outlines the major changes made to the EDUC 250 course as part of the PQA process.

Table 1: Summary of changes made to the EDUC 250

Original EDUC 250 Course	Revised EDUC 250 Course	Pedagogical rationale for changes made (if applicable)
Examine bottom-up, top-down and interactive models of reading.	Examine bottom-up, top-down and interactive models of reading.	Theoretical overview maintained
	Introduce and analyze approaches to the teaching of reading, (as observed during teaching practice placement in	Previous to this, it was observed that students had some difficulty understanding the differences between reading methods and

	English medium schools), and evaluate their applicability to the teaching of reading in a foreign or second e.g. reading aloud, shared reading, choral reading, look-say, phonics instruction, reader's theatre, sustained silent reading.	often found it a challenge to implement them effectively during teaching practice.
Evaluate the reading readiness perspective, emergent literacy and whole language approaches to teaching reading. (NB based on first language literacy approaches.)	Examine the language experience approach, which draws on learners' own experiences, and evaluate its effectiveness in teaching reading in a foreign or second language	More appropriate for EFL learners; makes print meaningful and culturally appropriate; gives confidence to EFL learners – oral recounts of personal experiences written down by the teacher.
Develop activities during Teaching Practice-	Develop and implement activities for pre-, while-, and post- reading in the foreign or second language classroom through ongoing reflective micro-teaching sessions throughout the entire course.	Incorporate microteaching as a central component, to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Activities tried and developed before teaching practice.
Assessment: Design and create a display that promotes literacy development.	New assessment, involving a mini-lesson, where students demonstrate appropriate strategies and activities for a chosen reading approach to EFL learners.	In preparation for teaching practicum, students get a chance to practice teaching reading. Creating a display takes place during Teaching Practice.
	Development of a new lesson plan proforma designed for reading.	More explicit integration with the B.Ed program's Teaching Practice courses.
	Examine the need to develop students' awareness of the conventions of English print and	To develop an awareness of differences between English and Arabic conventions.

	text and compare these conventions with Arabic	
Demonstrate intensive reading skills by using text attack skills in class reading of the course's academic texts throughout the semester. Understand through using them, the skills of setting a purpose for reading, accessing new vocabulary, skimming and scanning, prediction and summarizing.	In addition to intensive reading skills noted, also examine and apply, in the context of in-class reading of academic and other texts, the KWL teaching strategy (Ogle, 1986) to aid comprehension: What do I already Know about the topic before reading? What do I Want to find out? What have I Learnt?	Setting a purpose for academic reading.
Classroom management	Incorporated into other courses within the B.Ed program	Recognized to be of critical importance for effective teaching.

To support the introduction of the revised course in each college, lecturers were supplied with activities for the pre, while and post-reading stages suitable for use during micro-teaching sessions, and core and supplementary readings. A WebCT site was also set up as a course management tool to archive relevant resources to support each goal, including PowerPoint and Word documents, recommended websites and other course materials.

Conclusion

The new course was taught for the first time in 2005-2006. Lecturers have responded positively to the new course design. The organization, relevance and applicability of resources chosen appear to be better contextualized for students gaining experience teaching reading in UAE schools. It will be interesting to see if this is borne out in the student and course team responses about EDUC 250 for the 2006-2007 academic year. We as teacher educators need to begin with the activity of language teaching and learning; the school and classroom contexts in which it is practiced; and the experience, knowledge, and beliefs of the teacher as a participant. We need to acknowledge that

becoming a teacher is a life-long process; it is built out of and through experiences in social contexts. The better we as teacher educators understand, define and modify what English language teachers need to know beyond the subject matter itself; the sooner we can maximise opportunities to practice innovations (through such approaches as micro-teaching, reciprocal teaching, modeling and problem-based learning) to shape and contextualize teacher education experiences for UAE teachers in UAE schools.

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