Teaching Idea Sources and Work Conditions in an ESL Program

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W here do ESL teachers get their ideas for teaching? Many in the academic world of ESL might like to think that ideas come from research or research-based sources,[1] but in the field of second and foreign language education, there is little evidence indicating whether such research is available, being used, or even appreciated as a source of teaching ideas by its intended audience of classroom teachers and program administrators.

This study concerns the idea sources of a group of ESL teachers in an intensive English program in the western United States. As such, its conceptual context is teacher beliefs and cognition, a research area that was more active in mainstream education in previous decades (Clark & Peterson, 1986) and, only recently, is beginning to have an impact on TESOL (cf., Woods, 1996). What ESL teachers think in general—their values, the concepts with which they approach teaching, where they get these concepts from, and how they develop them—are obviously important areas we, as TESOL professionals, need to understand. However, the literature provides few accounts of the paths running, in whatever direction, between ideas in published research and classroom practice, on the one hand, and among teachers, on the other. In addition, the study addresses a major concern that emerged from participants, namely, their working condi-

tions as teachers. Although we did not begin our study focusing on this issue, our research ultimately forced us to look at how difficult working conditions affect the professional behavior of teachers.

Background

Our inquiry began with a concern about whether the academic journal is successful in communicating research findings to teachers in a form they can use. We started by asking friends and colleagues who teach ESL a question that would avoid too much presupposition: Where do you get your teaching ideas? Our respondents mentioned several sources, including personal experiences of what works, spontaneous self-generation, materials given to them by their schools that they modified for classroom use, and informal talks with colleagues. None mentioned more formal sources. Based on this preliminary inquiry, we decided to pursue the question further among 20 teachers at an ESL program we knew of.

At the time of this study (1992), the majority of these participants had MAs in ESL or were in the final stages of completing them. Several others were working on graduate degrees in fields related to ESL, and a few had little or no formal training in ESL. As in many such schools and programs, several teachers at this site had more than one ESL teaching job. Their pay was typical of, or perhaps slightly better than, other programs in the area, but they were receiving no

health or pension benefits and their 10-week contracts held no provision for tenure or guarantee of renewal.[2]

The majority of the nearly 150 ESL students enrolled in the program at the time were from East or Southeast Asia, though some were from Europe. Many had entered

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the program after hearing about it locally, rather than having applied directly from their home countries. Most were young adults. Few were absolute beginners, and many intended to pursue further studies at U.S. universities after improving their English.

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Method

We conducted open-ended, semistructured interviews among 19 of the 20 faculty during a 3-month period. We based our interview protocol on the response to our preliminary survey of ESL teacher-colleagues not associated with this study. The interview questions explored the basic issue of where the teachers in this program got their teaching ideas and why and how they selected and used these idea sources. Our initial interviews tended to

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last about 1 hour. Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), we used debriefing after each interview to reflect upon and develop our hypotheses. We also made field notes focusing on the context of the teachers' work situation and work culture. Using analytic induction, we then coded the transcripts of the interviews and our field notes to determine emergent themes and used organizational data matrices and counts to help conceptualize data patterns.

Findings

The idea sources discussed by the teachers fell into six major categories, listed in order of popularity:

1. accumulated teaching experience
2. informal consultations with colleagues
3. pedagogically oriented printed resources (e.g., book series)
4. spontaneous self-generation
5. preservice training
6. in-house workshops

These sources were all mentioned by half to three-fourths of the teachers. A seventh

source—institutionally provided, teacher-modified materials, such as textbooks and preexisting teacher-made materials—was mentioned by six of our respondents, and other less common idea sources, mentioned by four or fewer individuals each, were second or foreign language research journals, local teaching workshops (not in-house), advice from students, and the teachers' own second language learning experience. Not mentioned, or actually explicitly rejected as teaching idea sources, were major second language teaching or research conferences, classroom observations of other teachers, performance evaluations, and personally conducted classroom research.

In addition to this basic information, another important theme of our research that emerged concerned how teachers at this site reacted to the stresses of their work and how their responses to this stress affected their selection and use of teaching idea sources.

Teaching Ideas

Accumulated teaching experience was the most often cited source of teaching ideas. Many of these teachers spoke about their teaching experience as being a personally unique and self-contained entity, not a potpourri of teaching ideas from a variety of sources. It was a personal history of knowledge and information gained through trial and error, concerning which teaching ideas (and their sources) were effective in which circumstances. As one veteran teacher stated simply, "As you have more practice, then you know in the classroom what will work and what will not work." One teacher indicated that, with experience, a teacher accumulates the ability to identify and react to archetypal teaching situations and student types: "I've been teaching ESL for 6 or 7 years. I [can] take a look at the students, talk to them [for] two or three days ... [then] know, 'Uh-huh. He's that kind of student.' "

Perhaps the self-contained nature of this experience was responsible for caution or skepticism when respondents were asked about the possibility of using sources and teaching ideas outside their personally tested repertoire. This was often politely but firmly rejected without much further consideration. One typical remark was, "Personally, I am willing to try different methods, but what I feel has worked for me through the years is what I sort of stick to." It seemed that for even introductory consideration by these teachers, untried ideas needed to be socially initiated through favorable endorsement from colleagues:

Generally, other teachers will only volunteer to you something that they've

tried and has worked. I trust someone saying, "Hey, I did this the other day. And my students really liked it, and they seemed to really get a grasp of the structure." I trust that more than something based on research.

That is to say, such peer review and screening, emphasizing an idea's effectiveness, lends necessary credibility and weight to probationary techniques.

This high regard for peer review also seemed related to the generally low opinions that experienced teachers in this school held for "expert" advice from nonteaching researchers and people outside their faculty. Many participants articulated a strong, stereotypical image of researchers as living in an ivory tower, and tended to feel that only working teachers could have credible opinions about good teaching. One teacher remarked, challengingly, "If you get the professors from [an ESL teacher education program] and bring them ... here and give them a week to teach, they will probably miserably fail." The familiar idea of there being a social rift between the research and teaching communities did seem to exist at this program at this time:

I think a lot of ESL teachers have good ideas. Many good teaching techniques. But what they say may not be as powerful as [what] some researchers [say], who never have been in the classroom. But when they say something, people believe them because of their social position, their academic status.

These teachers also perceived other differences. Several complained about difficulties in communication between the two groups. One, for example, preferred seeking help from colleagues first because their shared experience supported problem-solving discussions: "Colleagues are in the same situation as you are. They have the same sort of schema when they respond to your question. They know what you are talking about and they know what to offer you."

Although some untrained teachers mentioned finding research journals intimidating because the writing was over their heads, this was not the reason given for not using such material as an idea source. Instead, work pressure and attitudes were key:

I don't respond to literature. The way it's presented .... It's hackneyed stuff. It was boring ... pages and pages of this stuff, and charts and statistics and things .... I don't have the time, or I don't choose to have the time, to sit down and go through all this stuff.

One graduate student employed at this site remarked:

I'm a graduate student and [teaching] ESL is my part-time job. Once I'm finished with my graduate study, I'll feel like I'll have more time to look at that sources. And would be more motivated to go to the library. Right now, I rely on past methods, and other teachers, and quick-help kinds of things because of the fact that I'm putting in so many hours into my own writing and dissertation.

Regardless of where they obtained their qualifications, teachers at this site complained readily that their graduate teacher education programs were heavy on theory and light on techniques. Responses about benefits they received from their training were noticeably hedged. However, teachers who had had graduate training in ESL (or related fields) commented more often about getting new ideas from a wider variety of sources than did teachers without such coursework. These sources included materials they themselves had modified (e.g., a textbook) or designed and real-world sources (e.g., newspapers, television). By contrast, the handful of teachers without such background more often referred to using conventional sources, such as dictionaries, textbooks (without modifying them), workbooks, and teachers' handbooks. One of the more experienced, qualified teachers commented:

Yeah, some of the newer people, or some of the people who don't have that much ESL training, they really lean on those, you know, those books like the Oxford or Cambridge series. And it's like they're constantly using those games and those things straight out of there .... I kinda go more with my own ideas, or things that I've learned from other people. Rather than just taking something straight out of a book.

Teacher Workload, Tenure, and Morale

A central issue fostering and sustaining the above attitudes appeared to be simple overwork and an associated lack of preparation time. Many of the participants routinely worked at two or three schools. Their average reported workload was approximately 50 hours per week, so it is perhaps not surprising that a proven repertoire of teaching ideas and a cautiously pragmatic attitude was common. One teacher reacted irritably to suggestions that anything else was possible in the situation:

I don't have time to look at that stuff, you know? It's a waste of time.

Because if you have to prioritize what you're going to do, to sit and read a lot of research doesn't help you .... Because they don't relate to what you're doing.

Even when forms of professional development were institutionally encouraged and new teaching ideas made readily available to teachers, overwork and its effects were still cited as being obstacles to increasing idea sources, as one experienced teacher noted:

I think a lot of people feel burned out .... So there's a major guilt around here of things like *TESOL Quarterly* and all that. There [are] all kinds [of] true reactions to seeing one appear in your mailbox. 'Cause we circulate [the journal] in the mailbox. One [reaction] is serious guilt, and the other is, "Don't put anything in my mailbox! Put it in somebody else's mailbox!" 'Cause people feel overwhelmed .... I think that's one reason *TESOL Newsletter* has appeal. It's kind of short stuff and isn't heavy duty academic stuff.

Several experienced teachers also described how overwork affected their quality of life and, possibly, their teaching:

It's a mighty tough walk .... I mean, people have held down two jobs .... So I'm trying to avoid the hospital. Trying to stay in good health ... and specifically look for ways that eliminate stress in the classroom.

Another teacher admitted that teaching quality can suffer, despite will and effort to the contrary:

I'm very frustrated. I was feeling bad when I was running around three schools. I knew I wasn't as good as I could be .... So it doesn't give you much time ... when you're talking about reading journals and going to conventions. For some people that's a joke. Who has the time?

Under these conditions, most of these teachers had decided to draw personal limits for their jobs, due to resentment or a feeling of exploitation: "When I'm spending [many hours] a week which I'm not being paid for, am I dedicated or am I an idiot?"

This decision to set limits also appeared to affect teacher access and use of new idea sources:

I really try to keep my work down to 40 hours a week. I want a quality personal life. And I don't want my work life to take over, which I know can happen very easily. I mean, it can be very interesting to get into all that stuff [e.g., idea sources mentioned earlier]

and really put your time into it, but ... to me, my family life is a priority.

At the time of this investigation, the program only hired teachers on a casual basis, and they were regularly laid off. As a result, morale was low.

Although many of the experienced teachers had been with the program for some years, they were of the opinion that they were not valued, that they could easily be replaced, for example, by graduate students from a nearby ESL teacher education program. Referring to these individuals, and to hiring

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practices in general, one experienced teacher commented:

If they run out of Master's people, they dip down on people who are *working* on their Masters. Then, if they run out of those, they dip down into people that, you know, have a degree in veterinary science. You know, this is no put-down on our director, it's just the way the field is. Which is why we don't have a lot of benefits and we are not respected. A plumber can teach English if they can't find somebody.

As a result of such hiring practices, this teacher ended up receiving calls for help and advice from inexperienced or untrained teachers in the program. Consequently, several other teachers at this site similarly feared that ESL teaching was being seen as a mere job. This disaffection appeared to overwhelm positive motivation to keep up with trends, research, or new teaching ideas: "There's no incentive! That's the key. Keeping up with new ideas, reading literature, or discussing one of the new things [with colleagues] ... well, will you give us money [for this]? Somebody support us? The answer is no."

Another teacher commented: "ESL teachers are highly educated. A lot of PhDs. And we lived in foreign countries. Some of us speak five or six languages, and we're just treated like casual workers." Teachers at this program who expressed such dissatisfaction were at pains to exclude their immediate administration and program director, reserving their criticisms for more impersonal entities.

For the few teachers in the program who had notably less teaching experience, their accumulated experience was also cited as a primary idea source, but, by comparison, was

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characterized partially in terms of their recent teacher education course work. These teachers planned to amass tools such as games and worksheets for repeated use: "Honestly, just between you and me, I will be recycling all my own class notes. I put everything on the computer and take photocopies."

Perhaps it might be expected that these newer teachers would be more adventurous than their older colleagues. Nevertheless, because they shared the same working conditions, their comments reflected the same concern over lack of time: "I will often choose or create an exercise [even though] I know there could be a better one, but I just can't do it within the time that I have." In a similar vein, another teacher commented:

Well, as a [graduate] student, you were in the position of thinking about certain recommendations, certain methods ... in a position to think about it again and again, refining the most ideal way. But once when you come to teach, you don't really have time to think. You walk out of one classroom, then in 5 minutes you gotta start another one. All those good ideas flew out of the window right away.

Despite similar working conditions, however, inexperienced teachers were more reluctant to complain than their experienced colleagues. One possible reason, mentioned by a number of the newer teachers, was that they still derived satisfaction from the social and adventurous aspects of ESL teaching, such as traveling and interacting with their international students. These aspects, however, were not mentioned by more experienced teachers, who appeared to allow their jobs, to some extent, to substitute for a social life:

Being new here ... the people I know at work are pretty much the only people I know. So that's also my social life. So you come early. You can talk about this and that. Ask a question about grammar, talk about a movie. It's [teaching ideas] all mixed into the other socializing stuff. So it never really feels like work. It feels like fun.

Interteacher Communication

A number of respondents described an atmosphere of popularly enjoyed and open collaboration in the program, which partly derived from the physical arrangement of the staff room:

It doesn't take very long to know which teachers are really good at grammar, or which [are] really good at conversation. So if I ever feel that I'm stuck on something, I'll just ask people. Throw it up in the office: "Gosh, does anybody know what I could do to teach conditional sentences, because I've been doing it for a week and they still don't get it." And people will just volunteer ideas.

Several teachers commented that these informal talks were preferable to more formal forums, such as teaching workshops and research conferences. Even local workshops were dismissed by some as more suitable for networking than true opportunities to learn about teaching, "with everybody being really polite and nobody ... saying anything." In comparison, informal chats with a colleague were felt to be a more convenient means of sharing ideas. Such talks apparently were supported by an unofficial understanding in this program that older teachers help their newer colleagues. Despite statements to this effect by younger teachers, observations at the site did not reveal much evidence of this collegial interaction. Rather, teachers appeared to spend their free time engaged primarily in lesson planning, office activities (including photocopying handouts), and personal matters (e.g., eating lunch), leaving quickly for other jobs or for home after their

classes. One teacher, in fact, remarked:

We don't see each other that often. And we hardly ever talk to each other .... People just come, pick up their books, go out to their class. When they're finished, they leave. Or they have to go some place else and teach. .... You're too busy .... You have to actually make an effort, you know, to establish any kind of relationship with any other people who are there, you know? 'Cause it's just not a conducive environment .... It's always on the fly.

Some teachers' comments suggest a possible explanation for this difference in attitude: "Well, I mean, a lot of it is personality. There are teachers I will ask and teachers I will not ask, right? And that's just who I get along with." Another added, "Even without soliciting the information, you hear who are the better teachers. From the students. You hear [from] other teachers, you know, the rumor mills."

Although most teachers in this study said that they consulted first with selected colleagues when stumped by a recurring problematic teaching situation, they also answered uncertainly or expressed ignorance when asked whether they were aware of similarities in the choice and use of idea sources by other faculty. It appears that discussion among teachers on this topic may have been happening mainly in friendship networks. Several teachers expressed a desire for more pedagogical exchange, complaining of the wasted effort of "a lot of repetition and duplication among teachers ... you know, reinvent the wheel kind of [thing] here."

It was not possible to perceive the entire process—from the occurrence or exchange of an idea to teacher collaboration—following from such talks. Undoubtedly, chatting about work with colleagues is a natural behavior. Yet, during the period of this study, teachers often appeared rushed, which might partly explain why, as one teacher said, "We don't really go deep into techniques." Nevertheless, talk between teachers appeared to have other positive aspects:

[Talk] provides sometimes different options than ones I've thought about. And often ... support in a form you know .... Especially if it's [a problem with] a student. I went first to other teachers and said "Does this happen in your class?" and found out that it wasn't just me, and it wasn't just my class. And that makes a difference to me, too. You know, [it] isn't, in a sense, my problem and it's not my imagination.

Another teacher remarked:

I think it depends on how much confidence you have. Like X has far less confidence than I do. He'll ask me, "What can I do with my students tomorrow?," when I know he can figure it out himself. But he just wants to kind of double check. I think it's more a confidence thing than he can't get ideas .... I think the lower the confidence is, the more likely they are to ask for help.

Conclusion

Our survey of this group of ESL teachers, at this particular time, suggests that where and how they acquired and used their teaching ideas reflected their workloads and was linked to their personal networks of communication. Reflection or use of new ideas—though desired—may sometimes have taken second place to a need for finding less sophisticated but readily applicable ideas already honed through much experience in a specific site. This response would be consistent with the description of teacher *routines*,

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presented by Floden and Clark (1988) as "adaptive responses to classroom complexities" (p. 515). According to their description, these "habitualized patterns of thought and action remove doubts about what to do next, reduce perceived complexity, and may increase the predictability of classroom events." By this definition, routines are not meant to solve problems in the long term, but, rather, to offer quick fixes or prevent the emergence of problems entirely. A successful routine, of course, eliminates the need to adapt or change, and presumably militates against seeking new ideas in a particular area of teaching.

The patterns of communication attested to emphasize the importance of locally generated knowledge. That is, these teachers seemed to prefer and accept more readily ideas that were already tested and proven rather than those that were presented as general applications in less pretested forms. In this respect, these patterns connect particularly to the concept of *teacher lore* (cf., Schubert & Ayers, 1992). They also connect with classic research on the working conditions of teachers (cf., Lortie, 1975), which Fullan, with Steigelbauer (1991), summarize by saying, "Individual teachers are less likely to come into contact with new ideas, for they are restricted to the classroom and have a limited network of ongoing professionally based interactions within their schools or with their professional peers outside" (p. 53). Lortie's view is that teacher communication on professional matters is unlikely to concern the "broader conceptions that underlie classroom practice," but involves discussion of "the tricks of the trade" (p. 77). His work, and that which has followed it, has tended to stress the isolation of the teacher culture as a primary problem. At the same time, many other studies of elementary and secondary teaching have emphasized the increasing intensification (Hargreaves, 1992) of teachers' work—in this sense, broadly interpreted as longer hours under more difficult conditions. The position of the ESL teacher, however, both in the postsecondary sector and elsewhere, reflects both these characteristics, plus the additional fact that these individuals serve a population that, whether well-off or poor, is regularly seen as being marginal to the mission of the educational institution (Auerbach, 1991). Thus, ESL programs may have structural characteristics far from central to or optimal for the teaching profession. That was the case for the program considered here, during the period of the research. It is in the interest of highlighting this phenomenon further that we have presented this partial description and interpretation of a period in the history of this particular ESL program. Those privileged to be in positions investigating the conditions for successful ESL teaching and learning should consider the extent to which they optimistically can assume that their work will be taken up among the population it is presumably intended to benefit. Arguably, some of the investigative energies of the research sectors of applied linguistics would be well directed to exploring and aiding the restructuring of teachers' work conditions, if the increasing quantities of knowledge of ESL learning and teaching are to be effectively utilized.

Notes

1 "The proper function of educational research is widely regarded as being to inform policy-makers and practitioners"

(Hammersley & Scarth, 1993, p. 216).

2 The program has altered considerably since the time of this study. Employment conditions have changed substantially and there has been a staff turn-over of greater than 75% as well as a total change in administration.

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