

Professionalisation in English Language Teaching: The development of a discourse community

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A series of changes is currently taking place in English language teaching in Mexico, and one term that might describe the process is *professionalisation*. A particular conception of professionalism in teaching which was developed by Hoyle (1975) is relevant to the case. This conception of professionalism can be linked to the concept of discourse community (Swales 1990), and it can be shown that the construct of discourse community is able to illuminate the processes by which individuals who have the same work activity might come to see themselves, and come to be seen by others, as a united professional group. This discussion throws light on the importance of relationships between local and global discourse communities.

Introduction: A time of change

There has recently been much discussion of the rapid changes that are taking place in the field of English language teaching in Mexico. One term that is used to describe the changes is *professionalisation* and this term reflects a particular view of the direction of those changes; it is descriptive, and yet it is also representative of aspirations. In this introduction it is not my intention to enumerate or to examine in detail the specific changes that are taking place, but rather to discuss the process of change itself.

Investigations into change in other educational systems may be relevant to the situation in Mexico. In a paper on recent developments in British schools, Osborne (1990) alleges that in order for any educational change to be effectively managed, it is not enough to focus on particular goals; there is also a requirement to consider changes to structures and processes. This is because change is an ongoing process; it is to say the least unlikely that a grand solution will ever be found that will solve our problems once and for all. It is of limited value to achieve one specific change; what we need to develop is a generic capacity for changing well and appropriately.

Such a generic capacity could only come about by a focus on structures and processes; this is true for individual institutions, and also for wider fields of

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activity. In either context, the possession of a high-quality idea is not in itself a guarantee of successful change. Success depends not only on the quality of the idea, but also, vitally, on a continuing commitment to quality of implementation.

The demand for continuing quality in change brings with it a drive towards professionalisation. Professionalisation both leads to, and results from, a focus on structures and processes, and as such it can empower the community to take control of change.

A View of Professionalism

Having sketched out the background, it is now appropriate to consider a concrete view of what professionalism is. One way to do this is to look at the interactions between the individual practitioner and the wider community or organisation. This is the approach taken by Hoyle (1975) who develops a dual model of professionalism in the context of education. Hoyle focuses particularly on teachers' activities, and he uses the term *professionalism* to emphasise the dynamism of his interpretation. Hoyle's model is as follows:

<u>Restricted Professionalism</u>	<u>Extended Professionalism</u>
Skills derived from experience	Skills derived from a mediation between experience and theory
Perspective limited to the immediate in time and place	Perspective embracing the broader social context of education
Classroom events perceived in isolation	Classroom events perceived in relation to school's policies and goals
Introspective with regard to methods	Methods compared with those of colleagues and with reports of practice
Value placed on autonomy	Value placed on professional collaboration
Limited involvement in non-teaching professional activities	High involvement in non-teaching professional activities (especially teacher's centres, subject associations, research)
Infrequent reading of professional literature	Regular reading of professional literature
Involvement in in-service work limited and confined to practical courses	Involvement in in-service work extensive and including courses of a theoretical nature
Teaching seen as an intuitive activity	Teaching seen as a rational activity

(Hoyle 1975: 318; also quoted in Osbourne 1990: 13)

There are some important points to make about this model. Firstly, it would be simplistic to suppose that the left-hand column should be seen as wholly undesirable and the right-hand column as wholly desirable. Professionalism itself is not a unitary concept, and we should not *automatically* assume that it is *a good thing*.

Secondly, it should be remembered that the model represents ideal types only. It is not suggested that an individual practitioner would conform exactly to one column or to the other. As teachers we are likely to feel that aspects of both columns are applicable to us, in different working contexts and at different stages of our careers.

Having considered the above points, I would like to go on to suggest that there is one underlying theme of the model which is of particular relevance to the present discussion: and that is the left-hand column's emphasis on isolation, and the right-hand column's emphasis on collaboration. Osborne (1990) suggests that if we are to have autonomy and influence beyond the immediate context of the classroom, it is necessary to engage in a process of movement from the restricted to the extended approach to professionalism. Such a movement implies the forging of closer professional links and the ongoing development of the professional community.

The Concept of Discourse Community

In order to examine the notion of a professional community more closely, I intend in this section to introduce Swales' (1990) characterisation of a discourse community. I will relate Swales' characterisation to the ELT context in Mexico and to Hoyle's model discussed above.

For Swales, "discourse communities are socio-rhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals" (p. 9). So it is already clear that the notion of discourse community, unlike that of speech community, for example, contains an idea of *intentional* formation, joining and belonging.

Let us now look in detail at the characteristics of a discourse community as defined by Swales (1990). He lists six characteristics, which will be discussed briefly in turn.

1. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.

There may be dissension, within the community, regarding the best way to go about these goals. The goals themselves, however, are likely to be reasonably specific and they are likely to represent agreement at paradigm level. The perception of shared goals and a shared paradigm may provide individual professionals

with the "perspective embracing the broader social context..." which Hoyle (above) associates with extended professionalism.

2. A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.

The importance of this characteristic cannot be overemphasised. In Mexico, a certain number of mechanisms of intercommunication in the field of ELT are well established; many more have developed comparatively recently, and still others are planned. The mechanisms are varied in nature but they all have the same effect: they allow the members of this emerging discourse community to advocate and to reinforce the notion of its existence. In this sense, recognition is strength.

3. A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback to its members.

Membership is therefore explicitly linked to the uptake of informational opportunities. Uptake provides opportunities for exchange, and exchange in turn provides the substance for intellectual growth and debate within the community. Uptake is the individual's link to the local community and via that to sister communities in other parts of the world.

4. A discourse community utilises and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.

Genres are the ways in which a discourse community uses language to get its business done. Genres may be written or spoken: academic articles, conferences, teachers' meetings and newsletters are all examples. It is important to realise that genres are subject to constraints, both in terms of form and in terms of content. A discourse community by its nature has discursual expectations, perhaps about the appropriacy of topics, or about the precise roles of texts. The important interplay between genre and discourse community expectations will be discussed in more detail below.

5. In addition to owning genres a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis.

All EFL teachers regularly use lexical items which would be puzzling to those who do not belong to our profession. Such lexis has both a group solidarity function, and a professional communication function. First, the fact that we understand and use it helps us to feel like a group when we meet and interact. Secondly, it gives us intellectual access to the thoughts of members of the global EFL discourse community, and a common baseline for sharing our thoughts with them, even when opportunities for meeting are limited.

6. *A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise.*

Anyone who is involved in teacher education in Mexico has a direct responsibility for socialising new members into the emerging discourse community of the Mexican EFL profession. The strength and vitality of the emerging community depends directly on the success of this process; discourse in a community is a means of maintaining and extending the group's knowledge (Herzberg 1986, cited in Swales 1990).

This sixth and final characteristic makes it clear that the concept of discourse community includes a rather strong notion of gate-keeping; and this idea in turn is commonly associated with increasing professionalism. The consequences, positive and negative, of such a gate-keeping function will be discussed in more detail below.

Having considered the characteristics of a discourse community in some detail, it will also be illuminating to think about what a discourse community *not*. We have seen that discourse communities grow out of fields of activity which individuals share; but a number of people all doing the same thing do not necessarily constitute a discourse community. Swales (1990; 25) examines this issue in the guise of "The Cafe Owner Problem." he asks: Suppose there are three cafe owners, all doing substantially similar work in the same town, even with some of the same clientele, but who have no contact among themselves. Can they be said to constitute a discourse community? The answer, for all that these three people have in common, is no: their lack of established methods of intercommunication makes it impossible for them to have shared communicative goals.

The cafe owners' situation relates directly to Hoyle's model. Hoyle's extended professionalism depends on the kind of professional network that a discourse community can provide; without such a network, practitioners are forced to work in isolation.

Genres

What does a professional network consist of, in concrete terms? To examine this question it is useful to relate Swales' concept of genre to Hoyle's extended professionalism. Hoyle (above) makes reference to "reading of professional literature", to "in-service work" and to "non-teaching professional activities" such as "subject associations" and "research". As will be seen below, these communicative events can be thought of as genre-based activities.

Swales (1990) emphasizes that "the main feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is a shared set of communicative purposes" (p. 46). Goals, not content or form, are the essential criterion. The ELT community

in Mexico is giving rise to an increasing number of communicative events, such as conferences or newsletters / journals, which are representative of local discourse community goals and which can therefore be thought of as genre-based.

In any context, the relationship between genres and discourse community activities is symbiotic: they feed from each other and shape each other. It can thus be seen that the development of genres in Swales' sense is at once a goal of professionalisation, and a tool to help achieve it.

Cultural and Professional Values

It was stated above that genres tend to be constrained, in terms of form and in terms of content. These constraints are significant because they provide information about the cultural and professional values of the community which owns the genres.

As a discourse community develops and its networks strengthen, there may be an increasing tendency for its genres to become fixed. We might argue that the more established a community is, the more pressure there is for an individual to show that they can conform before they are allowed membership--and certainly before they are allowed to make changes. So the affinity that an individual feels for the values of a discourse community becomes an important issue.

The concept of discourse community is a unifying concept. It emphasises shared expectations and participation, and as such it has strong implications of conformity and convention. But Rafoth (1990) poses an important question: Does the concept obscure all the variety and all the conflict that exist in actual, real communities?

Real discourse communities are full of dynamic forces, power struggles and pressures for change. These struggles arise precisely because discourse communities are not *only* networks for information exchange and for the disinterested furtherance of science; rather, they are "organised around the production and legitimisation of particular forms of knowledge and social practice at the expense of others, and they are not ideologically innocent" (Chase, quoted in Rafoth 1990; 146)

Rafoth's points have a clear application in the context of this paper. We can see that the "forms of knowledge" and the "social practices" supported by the emerging and the established discourse community in this case will include specific views about the nature of teaching as an activity; about the purposes of education; and about the descriptive and explanatory adequacy of different ways of looking at language.

The question, then, is clear: Does increasing professionalisation necessarily mean increased standardisation? To what extent will it be possible, for an individual or for a small group, or have their voices heard in the community if their way of speaking does not fit with that of the orthodoxy? In short, how can a discourse community ensure that it continues to be dynamic and so to benefit from all the variety that exists within it? Such questions have no simple answer but they do point towards a particular intellectual attitude. Rafoth (1990) suggests that discourse community members should seek to *understand*, not merely to imitate, conventions; in doing so, he suggests, we will be able to unmask and hence have the possibility to weaken the control which they exert. We are all capable of critically examining our own roles in the system of social reproduction, and this examination may in fact empower us to change the structures of that system.

It is doubtless inevitable that an academic discourse community will have power structures, that it will develop an intellectual orthodoxy, that there will be a socialisation process for novices, and that outsiders will be kept outside. From the point of view of professionalisation, all this might even be seen as desirable. But recognition of a general trend should not prevent us from examining in detail the processes of that trend and the structures which it is engendering, and from taking positive action where this seems to be appropriate.

An academic community which is prepared to engage in critical self-examination will be more dynamic intellectually and better grounded socially; it will be more effective at serving both the needs of its members and the needs of the wider society of which those members are also a part.

Conclusion: Relationships between local and global discourse communities

This paper has talked about the discourse community of Mexican EFL teachers / researchers. But of course, there is also a wider discourse community of EFL teachers and researchers all over the world, and individuals, whether in Mexico or elsewhere, may have direct membership in that group. This last statement should make it immediately obvious that there are many different ways of belonging.

Probably the most widespread form of belonging is that which relates to the reading of professional books and journals or attendance at educational events; by interacting with the wider discourse community an individual becomes aware of its ideas and has the possibility to assimilate them, whether passively or creatively. A second form of belonging involves the individual in a more equal mode of interaction with the ideas of the established discourse community. He or she uses ideas as the starting point for local research, so that any resulting practice will be fully informed by the local context. A third form of belonging is

achieved when the individual gains a forum for his or her research within the wider discourse community; for example, by publishing in one of the established journals of the community.

I would suggest that it is only via the third form of belonging that one has any possibility of shaping and influencing the wider discourse community. It therefore stands to reason that if the people in a given local group want the wider discourse community to take account of them, then they need to have a significant number of their members contributing to the wider discourse community in the third way described above.

That is why the *development* and *growth* of the local discourse community is so important. Not only does such development provide for the continuing intellectual development of established members and for the education of new ones, but it also allows the local group to develop a unique approach to its subject of study: an approach which is grounded in an individual context and yet which is sufficiently well-researched and well-documented so that those who do not belong to its native context can still assess its relevance to themselves.

Any local community which develops such an approach will be very well placed to increase the profile of those of its members who are already active contributors to the wider discourse community, and to allow some members who are not yet contributing, to begin to do so. The wider discourse community will thus be able to benefit from the increasing professionalisation of a particular local group.

These last points suggest an active and an optimistic interpretation of the term "professionalism", on which I would like to end. Readers of this paper are invited to consider whether increased participation in the wider professional community could, paradoxically, be one of the keys to increased prestige at home.

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