

## Teacher Awareness: an Essential Element of ELT Education

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Most of the time when we say that a teacher is *dynamic* (which is the most frequent adjective students use to refer to good teachers), we seem to be talking about a teacher with well developed teaching skills. In fact, there is a wide variety of titles on description and instruction on teaching skills. However, more than concentrating on teaching skills, I prefer to pose questions about how these teachers arrive at knowing when, how and to whom to make use of the many teaching skills that they have developed. In my view, a possible answer may be found in the teacher education literature. In an article published more than a decade ago, Freeman (1989) stated that, apart from skills, there were three other components that should be part of teacher education. These are knowledge, attitudes and awareness.

With regard to knowledge, I contend that the theoretical principles of the subject to be taught are an essential part of the core of teacher education. Elsewhere (Clemente, 2001b), I have discussed this issue, arguing that "the reason for practitioners being (or becoming) knowledgeable in an academic area is...(to) make sense of theory as reflective practitioners in the teaching/learning process in which they take part" (p. 198-9).

I have also delved into the attitudinal factor. In a study carried out at the State University of Oaxaca with foreign language teachers, it became obvious that "teacher's attitudes are the consequence of a complex web of contextual elements and circumstances" (Clemente, 2001a). Moreover, I found that most of these elements were out of the teachers' control; they were contextual factors teachers have to deal with. They had no choice (ibid).

Having reflected on teachers' knowledge and having carried out research on teachers' attitudes, I decided to start a longitudinal study on the fourth constituent that Freeman (1989) mentions: *awareness*. Due to lack of space, in this paper I will introduce the theoretical framework and leave the empirical data and its interpretation for later publication.

In general terms, awareness has been defined as "a particular state of mind in which an individual has undergone a specific subjective experience of some cognitive content of external stimulus" (Tomlin & Villa, 1994, p.193). Emphasizing the importance of learning awareness, van Lier states that awareness is a perceptual component of consciousness, without which "it is simply not possible to realize the conditions....that make progress towards proficiency possible" (1996, p.74).

Focused on teacher education, Freeman defines awareness as "the capacity to recognize and monitor the attention one is giving or has given to something. Thus, one acts on or responds to the aspects of a situation of which one is aware" (1989, p.33). In addition, according to Thomas, teacher awareness is an explicit capacity that "facilitates reasoning and intellectual understanding of the phenomenon and contributes to the ability to impart it" (1987, p.34).

In sum, to be aware means: (a) to be explicitly conscious about all the different elements of the actual phenomenon of teaching/learning and (b) to be able to analyze such phenomenon and react according to it. In this sense, teachers' awareness allows them to make decisions about the amount, depth and quality of their knowledge, the practicality of their skills and the appropriateness of their attitudes. In other words, awareness "account(s) for the appropriate mobilization, interaction and integration of...[knowledge, skills and attitudes]... as a person teaches" (Freeman, 1989, p.33).

Moreover, awareness does not belong to the same category of the other constituents. It is a level above. It "functions as the unifying superordinate" (Freeman, 1989, p.33) that enables the teacher to make decisions about the other three components. Perhaps, for some people, to talk about awareness is to focus on the attention teachers pay to their teaching. It is true that these two concepts are closely related but they still refer to very different things. Awareness differs from attention in the sense that the former has a more "holistic function" (Freeman, 1989, p.33). It is not a matter of degrees: You are or you are not aware. There is no other possibility. There are no awareness clines. When you are not aware of something, you completely ignore it. On the contrary, attention implies degrees and this fact allows us to focus on specific situations. Awareness and attention belong to different levels and, in this sense, the former encompasses the latter.

Referring again to Freeman's (1989) scheme, knowledge, skills and attitudes could be a way to designate the areas teachers should be aware of. With regards to knowledge, the question would be: Are the teachers aware of their knowledge and the knowledge their students are acquiring? In regard to ELT programs like the ones implemented in Mexico, it is important to delve into the extent to which the Spanish-speaking pre-service teachers are aware of their strengths and weaknesses in terms of the content to teach and specifics of the phonological, lexical, semantic, discursive and pragmatic aspects of English.

Skillwise, this area of awareness is at the very core of teaching. In order to be able to teach, a teacher needs to become aware of his/her procedural knowledge, that is, his/her language skills, in order to make them explicit and declarative. In the case of language, these skills refer to the four main linguistic abilities (reading, listening, writing and speaking) plus all the other skills developed to gain different competences (linguistic, communicative, pragmatic, etc) to become a competent user of a language.

However, these are not the only skills the teacher has to become aware of. The teacher also has to pay attention to and reflect on his/her teaching skills in order to improve his/her teaching practice (see Lockhart & Richards, 1994; Richards, 1990).

In terms of attitudes, the teacher needs to reflect on the attitudes (his/hers and his/her students') around the different aspects involved in his/her teaching. According to Freeman (1989), this is one of the least studied elements of teacher education in spite of the fact that we all know how important they are for the success (and for the failure) in education.

## Discussion

I contend that it is necessary that we in Mexico start reflecting on the approach to our teaching education programs. The experience of programs in other parts of the world has been that a technology-oriented approach (focused on knowledge and skills) has been only partially successful. The problem is that it completely overlooks the human aspect of teacher education (Hargreaves, 1994). It is essential, from my point of view, to reverse the approach and, having in mind a holistic view, focus on the four components mentioned above.

Different authors have defined the terms training and education in different ways (Freeman, 1989, p. 40; Wallace, 1991, p. 3; Winer, 1992, p. 57; Woodward, 1991, p.141). Although I have used them as synonyms so far, it is time to make explicit the difference between them.

According to Widdowson (1990), *training* can be defined as

a process of preparation towards the achievement of a range of outcomes which are specified in advance...(It) is directed at providing solutions to a set of predictable problems and sets a premium on reflecting expertise (p.62).

On the other hand, *education*, as he sees it,

provides for situations which cannot be accommodated into preconceived patterns of response but which require a reformulation of ideas and the modification of established formulae. It focuses...on...the critical appraisal of the relationship between problem and solution as a matter of continuing enquiry and of adaptable practice (ibid).

Widdowson's (1990) dichotomy could be the explanation for the problems of most technology-oriented EFL teacher education programs. They are not complete because they are training but not educating. The pre-service teachers develop what Wallace calls "initial competence" (1991, p.58). In other words, they can deal with that "set of predictable problems" but they are not prepared to face problems "which require a reformulation of ideas" (ibid). They cannot make decisions about when, how and with

whom to use the set of skills they have been trained in, first of all because they are not aware of those skills nor of their efficacy. They have not gotten that "expertise" (ibid) yet. One way to acquire this expertise is to articulate our own tacit knowledge to make it explicit. There are several schemes and concepts that have been proposed for making knowledge explicit: action research, reflective practitioner, teacher's thinking, etc. Among those, I have found that the tools explored by sociocultural theories (reflection, self-assessment, and narratives) are especially useful (Verity, 2000). Within the sociocultural framework, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) stands out as a relevant construct for this discussion.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has been very widely used in educational settings where teachers try to define it in terms of their own students and the way they help them to achieve their potential (Clemente & Higgins, 2003). However, the ZPD can also be applied to pre-service teachers and their educators. As I see it, the ZPD develops the potential of the novice teacher to make the best decisions (in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes) when teaching. In a teacher education program, the main role of the educator, with the help of his/her own expertise as a teacher, is to help the novice teacher become aware of his/her teaching. One of the most important roles of educators, to paraphrase Verity (2000), is not to make the student-teacher know *more* but to know *differently* (p. 192), and re-conceptualize the ZPD as an:

arena of transformation [which] functions not only as a mediational space for the completion of particular tasks, but also as a place for the learner to confront, practice, and internalize strategies for the completion of other similar tasks (p. 184).

Through various curriculum decisions, ELT educational programs could help novice teachers become aware, always taking into account the very local sociocultural circumstances of each program in the Mexican educational context. Above all, there has to be a general consensus that the philosophy of the program, and the educators taking part in it, should encourage the formation of teachers with critical reflective minds and flexible criteria for using different approaches and materials according to their specific teaching situations. Thus, every syllabus within the program should contain a reflective aspect which provides the students with the opportunity and space to develop her/his awareness skills as a student with her/his own teachers. Furthermore, there has to be a change in the way we organize the different contents and courses in the ELT programs. We are very used to starting an educational program with theoretical aspects and finishing it with the practical side of education. For developing reflective minds, the proposal is to take a more balanced approach where theory and practice could work together. As a part of the *Programa Flexibilizado para la Enseñanza de Idiomas*, (*Flexible BA Program in Language Teaching*, Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca) that was implemented in 2002, we are working with this kind of approach, dealing with courses such as *Observation* and *ELT Methods and Approaches* from the very beginning.

In both courses, I have observed that the students, in spite of their basic knowledge and experience, are responding very well to analyzing their own and other's teaching. These and other later courses (such as *Microteaching* and *Teaching Practicum*) increase the amount of teaching practice and, hence, the opportunities for reflection.

To use Freeman's (1989) and Widdowson's (1983) terms discussed above, these changes in our education programs would mean setting the appropriate conditions for novice teachers to *become aware* of their own teaching and what it involves (knowledge, teaching skills and underlying values that generate their attitudes). Furthermore, these changes will also provide the best conditions for our teacher education programs to gain a position within the realms of education.

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