Promoting Teacher Professional Development through Online Task-Based Instruction

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ABSTRACT

The importance of teachers in the success of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is unquestionable. However, designing a teacher course on TBLT raises many questions concerning ‘what’ and ‘how’ it can be implemented. Can teachers’ professional development be promoted through Task-Based Instruction (TBI)? This paper explores this question by examining the design and implementation of an online course for teacher development on TBLT at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. This paper proposes a task definition for teacher education and develops a framework for TBI in online teacher education. The tasks, suggested framework for professional development, and potential of online education resulting from the interaction tools used in this course also provide insights into the development of online TBI for teacher education.

Keywords: Task-Based Instruction (TBI), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Teacher Development, Teacher Education, Teacher Professional Development

ISSUES AND MODELS IN TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Research in applied linguistics has mainly focused on the learner and the learning process. However, as Waters (2005) points out, the importance of teaching and the teacher began to receive increasing attention in the 1990s. This can be understood “since quality of learning is affected by quality of teaching, which … is influenced in turn by the quality of the education the teacher receives” (p. 210). Concerning TBLT, one of the main agreements among researchers is that teachers’ understanding of tasks and of the way TBLT is to be implemented, both play a crucial role in the success of this approach. Teachers should then become the focus of attention as the main agents of change in any classroom context.

Since the distinction between teacher training, teacher education and teacher development has been made by several writers (Allwright, 1997 in Waters, 2005; Wallace, 1991; Wright, 2000), it is important to make clear that, in this paper, we will use the term ‘teacher professional development’ as an equivalent of Waters’ (2005) concept of teacher education. That is, as a term used to refer to the “practical skills (teacher
training or doing), knowledge of theories and research (teacher education or knowing), and self-awareness (teacher development or being)” (p. 211). According to Waters, the role of the teacher educator is to facilitate the learning of teaching itself. Thus, in the case of teacher development and course design in TBLT, we are engaged in attempting to facilitate learning about and teaching of TBLT on the part of teachers. In order to help teachers learn about TBLT or any other subject, expertise is required in “a) knowledge of how teachers learn linked to b) practical skill in translating such understanding into teacher learning opportunities” (p. 212).

In this paper, “knowledge of how teachers learn” will be addressed by looking at different models of teacher development and describing the way in which such models were adapted into the framework for teacher professional development which supports our course. Concerning the “practical skill in translating understanding into teacher learning opportunities”, this will be primarily exemplified in “Course Structure and Thematic Content”, “Online Course Components”, and “Exploring Tasks in Teacher Education”.

MODELS OF TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Wallace (1991) suggests three major models of professional education: 1) the craft model, in which the knowledge of the profession lies in a skilled practitioner, the apprentice learns by imitating that practitioner’s performance; 2) the applied science model, a one-way model in which discoveries in the scientific area are transmitted to the apprentice by specialists in the subject. Adjustments in the practice component are restricted to specialists, who usually disregard the value of teachers’ classroom experience; 3) the reflective model, a model that distinguishes between received and experiential knowledge. Received Knowledge is the academic content of the profession – facts, data, theories – that teachers need to be familiar with. Trainee-teachers accept rather than experience this knowledge. Experiential Knowledge is the tacit knowledge gained by a teacher from his day-to-day practice. This knowledge allows him to identify signs, problems, etc., though he is unable to give precise descriptions. The reflective model suggests a reciprocal relationship between the received and experiential knowledge, “so that the trainee can reflect on the received knowledge in the light of classroom experience, and so that the classroom experience can feed back into the received knowledge sessions” (p. 55).

When analyzing teachers’ learning contexts, Waters (2005) advances another model of teacher development. Similar to other professionals, he explains, teachers acquire knowledge via two main routes, off-the-job courses about teaching (acquisition of explicit theoretical principles or propositional, declarative knowledge), and on-the-job learning (accumulation of tacit ‘know-how’ knowledge which is experiential or procedural). Waters (2005) claims that both learning contexts, ‘in mutually-reinforcing ways, are capable of making important contributions to the development of teacher learning’ (p. 215).

Both Wallace and Waters’ models recognize the difference between received/propositional and experiential/procedural knowledge. Both recognize also the interplay between them, and the importance of on-the-job-reflection as a primary constituent of professional development. Their models also account for the importance of teachers’ previous knowledge, experience and feelings about teaching as an important factor that influences what is transformed from potential into actual intake during teachers’ learning opportunities.

How can the above models be adapted into a course on TBLT for teacher professional development? What can Task-Based Instruction in teacher education be like? Or, as Van den Branden (2006) puts it, can teachers be trained to teach the ‘task-based’ way? In this paper, we aim to describe a course on TBLT for language teachers which explores what the methodology of TBLT in teacher education would be like. In
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