

Reflexivity and TESOL Practice Teaching and Learning: A Pacific Island Case Study

Annabelle M Leve
Monash University,
Clayton, Victoria, Australia
Annabelle.Leve@education.monash.edu.au

Introduction

This paper is a work in progress, a moment in time of my bumpy but exciting PhD journey, inspired and informed through my ongoing reflexive practices and experiences. Informed by feminist postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy and critical applied linguistics, and drawing from a recent unique and challenging teaching experience in the Solomon Islands, this paper will address the following questions:

- What is meant by ‘assessing and meeting the diverse needs’ of English language learners;
- Whose needs, expectations, demands, interests, indeed, whose values determine what eventuates in my classroom; and
- What does it mean to be ‘literate’ in a number of languages with no written form?

It was working in a remote Aboriginal community school that initially inspired me to pursue a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) specialisation. As a trained but inexperienced secondary school teacher, with an Art/media specialisation, I found myself unable to respond appropriately to the needs of the children, or the community, in which I was temporarily employed.

Twelve years ago I was given temporary responsibility for a small remote school in the Western Australian central desert. I was thrilled at the challenge, I was always willing to be ‘thrown in at the deep end’, but I had no idea of the difficulties that lay ahead. The biggest shock to me was that these kids’ lives were so far removed from life as I understood it, let alone school and education and the English language. Nothing in my initial teacher training had prepared me for the challenges of working with and responding to difference. I recognised the significance of language and culture and I believed that a TESOL qualification would provide me with all the tools and understandings I needed.

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A Graduate Certificate of TESOL (Edith Cowan University), Master of Education (Monash University), various local and overseas teaching positions, one child, and 11 years later, I sent an email to everybody I knew with any links to the educational profession:

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Dear friends & learned colleagues

Yes, here we are on a tropical island, living in our school house made of sago palm leaves, enjoying breezes and temperatures between about 26-29 degrees celsius. So in between enjoying the fact I’m doing something I’ve wanted to do for a long long time, I’m TRYING to run a ‘school’ and actually cater to amazingly varied needs, abilities and personalities. Sure, just like every other teacher in any other classroom. But I feel as if I’m failing miserably – having put myself in at the deep end is a great test of all of our theories and teachings. But I’m hoping to receive some useful advice/ideas/commiserations and/or encouragement from any of you wise experienced people.

I went on, describing my 8 students and their educational backgrounds as I understood them at that time. Their memorization of texts rather than reading ability, apparent lack of learning initiative, and the difficulties I had in getting them to contribute in class, or work together co-operatively. So yes, if anyone has any suggestions – I do have lots of books, drawing/art materials, text books etc at my disposal, it’s the magic that I’m out of at the moment. Any you could offer would be gratefully received. ...

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It was the lack of responses that spurred me to write this paper. With all the strategies, methodologies, philosophies and pedagogies, why is it that some teaching contexts are just too hard? How long do you try to ‘push’ your own pedagogical beliefs with no apparent gains? How hard do you cling onto your values and beliefs when they seem so at odds with the whole of the community in which you teach? How flexible can a person be without losing a sense of commitment or motivation to do their very best? Am I right to suggest to my pre-service teachers that the most important thing they take with them into their teaching careers is ‘flexibility’? Or is there in fact a need for more consistency and maintenance of personal (theoretically informed) pedagogic beliefs, whatever the context?

Assessing and Meeting ‘Needs’

A quick perusal of synopses and objectives of a number of current university TESOL courses reveals repeated references to ‘assessing and meeting the diverse needs’ of English language learners.

Whilst I maintain the elements of ‘flexibility and adaptability’ as being important to TESOL practice, the imperative to ‘assess and meet’ the needs of our learners strikes me as a far too rigid a sample of a liberal pedagogy that focuses on the individual and loses sight of the wider context. More importantly though, it assumes the possibility of the TESOL practitioner:

1. knowing what those needs are, as if they are somehow rigid, ‘written on the body’, waiting to be deduced by the efficient TESOL practitioner; and
2. of being capable of, and willing to address those needs.

Whose determination of what the students ‘need’ takes precedence?

A feminist notion of reflexivity requires one to be able to turn a critical eye upon oneself and one’s practices. I felt it was necessary to continually reflect both on the dilemmas I faced when attempting to balance my own beliefs with those of the institution (or my employer, or my students, or their parents, or their communities) and my responses to these.

The Solomon Islands

My first encounter with the Solomon Islands was ten years ago, as an AVA (Australian Volunteer Abroad). I went there to find ‘a better place’ to be, to discover my own personal paradise (Leve, 1999). The experience was confronting and life-altering, highlighting the ‘histories that separate us’ (Mostern, 1994) and I spent much of the subsequent 10 years trying to make sense from my encounter with difference.

The Solomon Islands context is a fascinating one that so often falls outside the realms of the dominant theory that has framed so much of my teaching/learning practice. The government decreed official language of the Solomon Islands is English and there are around 60-120 languages and dialects (‘home languages’) spoken around the country.ⁱ However, in practice, Solomon Islands Pijin (SIP) is the commonly understood lingua franca, and English is used only by a distinct and powerful minority. English is officially the language used in the Public service, in schools and all school materials (but not necessarily in practice). In my experience, SIP is the preferred method of communication with anyone who does not share a local or home language and is becoming more frequently the first language learned for those growing up in urban areas. This relatively new phenomenon brings with it many additional challenges relating to the value of the different languages, education, literacy and language in use.

Since the British ‘granted’ independence in 1978, the people of the Solomon Islands have struggled with the challenges relating to the value of the different languages and the people who speak them. These notional values impact directly on the provision of contextually appropriate education, notions of literacy and language in use.

Local, or home languages, are still most often the first language/s learnt by Solomon Island children, and are commonly aligned with a sense of identity and belonging. The SIP term ‘wantok’ derives from ‘one talk’, ie, those who share a language. ‘Wantoks’ may be family,

community, village, island. In another country the notion may go beyond language so that a 'wantok' is one who has South Pacific Island roots or similar coloured skin.

Significantly too, largely unsuccessful efforts to encourage the use of a written form of SIP, and thereby raise its perceived value, or of local languages (the majority of which have not, nor ever did have a written form) are clearly factors that complicate the whole concept of 'literacy' in a Solomon Islands context.

What does it mean to be 'literate' in a range of languages with no written form? Pennycook suggests a way of understanding literacy is as "a set of contextualised social practices" (Pennycook 2001:77) and argues that it is not literacy in and of itself that provides advancement, but the practices within the social and political context.ⁱⁱ The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary defines 'literate' as "able to read and write" (Sykes, 1987:628), yet 'illiteracy' as "uneducated" (ibid:531). Glenda Hull uses the term 'conventionally literate' and describes research that "shows how people get along without literacy – through the use of networks of kin and friends" (Hull 1993:302). In the 1970 Solomon Islands census, officials equated the completion of the highest grade of primary school with literacy (Tryton, 1988:289). Various understandings of 'literacy' became an issue of importance to my daily decision making and pedagogic practices in my small island school.

Introducing Margaret

"...individuals in a newly literate society, far from being passively transformed by literacy, instead actively and creatively apply literate skills to suit their own purposes and needs." (Kulick & Stroud 1993:31)

I would like to introduce you to one of my students, Margaret, who was able to show me how one could be contextually literate in a supposedly 'non-literate' society, and who highlighted the inadequacies of my own pedagogic knowledge.

I was invited to open up a school on a small remote island in the far east of the Solomon Islands. I would be the sole teacher, working with eight students of various ages and abilities. I was to be paid by the father of one of the students and was expected to teach 'whatever it is that they do at school.' As I was a trained and experienced teacher, and from a wealthy educated country, he was sure I would know what this was.

Margaret presented me with a stack of her form one (first year high school) exercise books before we began our classes. Inside were pages and pages of neatly written text; English grammar and comprehension, horticulture, history, geography, politics. Margaret appeared confident and interested, always listening intently, nodding and smiling at appropriate moments.

At times she reprimanded the younger kids, making sure they paid attention and did their work. She taught us all how to make balls out of coconut fronds, and strings of frangipani and hibiscus to wear.

A visiting Norwegian professor of linguistics chose Margaret as his local informant because she was able to translate concepts and ideas from the local language into SIP and speak clearly and confidently enough for him to make recordings of her speech. One day my son asked her about a 'motu' and she promptly made a miniature construction of a stone oven and leaf wrap to demonstrate how the locals would cook a bat to eat.

Yet Margaret was not able to read the simplest text, nor could she construct her own. She could not make out the difference between tip, tap, top, bit, bat or but and had never learnt phonetic sounds and symbols. She could not add numbers together and was unable to tell the time. In the classroom Margaret was unable to follow the most direct and clearly scaffolded tasks. Yet Margaret had developed what I would term literate skills that never ceased to amaze me. The binaries between literate and non-literate, civilised and primitive are glaringly unhelpful in this context.

“Many students never learned to read or write beyond a basic grade one or two primary school level ... but all of them are operating in a world which has required of them multiliteracies beyond which the teachers had imagined.”
(McGinty, Sue 1995:41) writing about a literacy program for adults in a remote Aboriginal community

Government policy, community and parental attitudes and ambitions and my (private) employer decreed that my students were to leave their own language at the school door (or in this case, the water’s edge). I could not ignore the message this was potentially giving my students, yet nor could I expect to make much of a difference in the short time I was there. Whose needs, expectations, demands, interests, indeed, whose values would determine what was to eventuate in my classroom?

Creoles

SIP is comparable to the creoles that are increasingly becoming a focus of study. Clachar (2004) refers to the linguistic repertoire of English-based Creole speakers as a continuum of speech varieties ranging from Creole to standard English, created by the continuous interaction between the two. Clachar argues that Creole-English speakers, who are neither native nor nonnative speakers of English, (she refers to them as English as a second dialect (ESD) speakers), represent a separate category of learners whose literacy needs cannot be addressed by an ESL curriculum. She refers to the North American public school curriculum “which holds rigidly to the native speaker of English or ESL learner dichotomy” (Clachar 2004). TESOL methodology, or even TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) is clearly problematic in such circumstances.

Resistances

In the quest to find ways of effectively responding to the needs and desires of the stakeholders in my small island school, Brito et al (2004) suggest a process of negotiation, with teacher, students, and families participating in the co-construction of the class. This was of course an option that I considered, but assumes an intelligible response that in my case, wasn’t forthcoming. But they also point to the recognition of ‘resistances’, certainly present on the island, and demonstrated in various ways by my students. The recognition of, and possible responses to these resistances now seems a more significant and useful notion than attention to the perceived ‘needs’ of students.

Resistances can be perceived as an assertion of the students’ power to control their learning environment, or simply as a case of undesirable behaviour or student learning deficiency requiring modification. In my small island classroom, a focus on the dominance of silences rather than verbosity, of passivity as a form of resistance and significant absences that speak volumes about my students’ preferences, have the potential to inform me of alternative needs, expectations, demands, interests, and values of my students and their community, that could help to determine what eventuates in my classroom. Being attentive and responding to resistances as an articulation of needs and desires rather than as behaviours that need to be changed, we can then respond to, and make informed decisions about, our teaching/learning practices in context. Pennycook points out that the many elements of our modern language classroom, such as group/pair work, an informal student centred atmosphere and of playing games as a way to learn, are cultural preferences, not some kind of universal truth.

“Students resist teachers’ pedagogies and teachers resist students’ practices. What may appear to be lack of ability or lack of preparation may in fact be resistance.” (Pennycook 2001:129).

Conclusion

The students at my small island school made many choices in their active ‘co-construction’ of their school, they just did not do this in a way I was able to recognise as constructive at that time. It is

therefore only through a “continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action” (Pennycook 2001:3) that we can recognise our students’ resistances and agency in changing the discourses that construct their lives. I may not be able to offer advice in response to my rather pathetic email from my small island one year ago, but I would certainly not hesitate to encourage, to get out there, learn more, experience more, and thereby, imagine better futures. And yes, to maintain flexibility, reflexivity and adaptability within whatever context we may find ourselves.

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Endnotes:

ⁱNumbers of ‘official’ languages and purported speakers vary but is most commonly reported as around 60 distinct languages currently in use.. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2799.htm>; <http://www.paclii.org/sb/government.html> ; <http://www.atlapedia.com/online/countries/solomon.htm> Accessed 23/09/04

ⁱⁱ I acknowledge the various debates around the distinctions between literacy and language teaching but maintain that many TESOL practitioners find themselves in particular situations, as have I, where the distinction is purely academic and unhelpful in practice.