Learning to talk like a language teacher: Crossing the boundary between university and school

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents the results of a small research study with a group of student teachers of foreign languages on a one-year postgraduate teaching course in an English university. Notably, two thirds of the training in this particular course takes place in school. The study focused on the student teachers’ experience of acquiring the professional discourse of foreign language teaching, and the extent to which there was a unified discourse across the training contexts of school and university. The main findings are that the student teachers were initially daunted by the range of terminology to be learned, and that they recognised both the social-referential and cognitive functions (Freeman 1991) of the new discourse, but that there was also evidence of differences between the two discourses of school and university. These differences, in turn, have implications for the acquisition of the professional discourse.

Introduction
The notion of learning to talk like a language teacher bears directly on how teachers develop their thinking about their classroom practice. While much has been written about the complexities of learning to teach in general (see, for example, Bennett and Carré 1989), less attention, perhaps, has been paid to the role of language in this learning process. In focusing on this aspect, we draw upon the idea of discourse as social practice, as argued by Carter (1995) who views discourse as:

… a particular set of beliefs, values and attitudes, which are embedded in social and cultural practices and which shape the identity of those associated with it. Discourse in this meaning is manifest in language, most saliently in the way conversations, arguments, written reports, narratives, etc are conducted.

(Carter 1995: 42)

In this paper, I take the view that language teaching is one form of social practice, and it has its own particular discourse. Freeman (1991: 445), investi-
gating the acquisition of a shared professional discourse by language teachers in the United States, highlights two important functions of this discourse. First, it serves a social-referential function in that through the use of the particular discourse, teachers come not only to refer to, but ultimately to belong to, a professional community; and second, it serves a cognitive function, permitting them to perceive and articulate their own feelings and thoughts about teaching. I would argue that this ability is crucial to teachers’ development as professionals who are able to analyse and critique their own views and the views of others, and to evaluate novel approaches and strategies.

The issue here, however, is not simply one of the role that a shared professional discourse might play, but crucially, how that discourse is acquired, or learned by newcomers to the profession. This is seen as apprenticeship by Gee (1989: 11), an experience he describes as a ‘master-apprentice relationship in a social practice (Discourse) wherein you scaffold their growing ability to say, do, believe, and so forth, within that Discourse, through demonstrating your mastery and supporting theirs’. Similarly, Arthur, Davison and Moss (1997: 77–8) discuss the student teacher’s development in terms of a synthesis of experiences, which they propose should be facilitated through engagement in a dialogue of educational discourses. Stones (1992: 29), in reporting upon investigations by teachers into teaching, also notes that ‘a crucial element in all the work was the possession of a common realm of discourse’. The issue of commonality is also raised by Freeman (1996: 236), who argues that a teacher-education program needs a unified discourse, one which is in constant use among members of its community. Not only does he advocate a unified discourse, but also one where there is some continuity across the different contexts of teaching.

Yet the question of a unified and continuous discourse is a particularly pertinent one in the current initial teacher education situation in England. The current situation in this country is well summarised by Williams and Soares (2000), who note the increased role for teachers as a key trend over recent years. Since the introduction by the government of school-based training in 1992 (DFE 1992), trainees in post-graduate initial teacher-training courses in England are required to spend two-thirds of their time in school. In this model of school-based training, the mentors are responsible for the training while the trainees are in school, with the university tutors taking a monitoring and moderating role. Student teachers are trained both by professional mentors, whose role is a more generic one, and by subject mentors, who deal specifically with the subject (in this case, foreign languages) issues, both by providing feedback after lesson observations, and by conducting tutorials with the student teacher.
about subject-specific issues. Thus, the training is located in different contexts, and provided by teachers as well as by university tutors. This raises the question of the extent to which student teachers experience and acquire the same discourse in school as they do in university.

**The study**

Our aims in carrying out this piece of research were first of all to explore the student teachers’ experience of the professional discourse of foreign language teaching, and thus to examine the role that such discourse might play in the construction of understandings and beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning. Second, we wanted to determine the extent to which there was a unified discourse across the training contexts of school and university.

**PARTICIPANTS**

The research was carried out with a group of foreign language trainees on the one-year Post Graduate Certificate in Education course at the Manchester Metropolitan University. This is a 36-week course (for graduates of French, German or Spanish) beginning in mid-September and finishing at the end of June. Of the 36 weeks, the equivalent of 24 are spent in school.

**DATA COLLECTION**

Data were collected in two ways. First of all, we collected data from 53 trainees in January, after they had completed their first major school placement. They were asked to discuss and complete in small groups their responses to two key questions. This was carried out as part of a teaching session, with the student teachers divided into three tutor groups. The purpose of this task was to provide a broader range of responses than that which could be afforded solely by a small number of interviews. We asked the student teachers to consider the extent to which they had had to learn a new language. They were asked to discuss and note (a) any new forms of language they had had to learn, and (b) ways of using the language with other members of the profession. They were requested to do this by making reference to their experiences in both the university and the school contexts. Second, in mid-June, 12 of the same trainees were interviewed after they had completed their second major placement and were very close to the end of the course. Each interviewee was reminded of the task carried out in January, and the subsequent interview was semi-structured, and focused on the same key questions, but sought to draw out the differences and similarities that there might be between the two contexts of school and university.
Results

The results of this research reveal the daunting nature of the task facing student teachers, and some interesting differences between the contexts of school and university.

QUESTION TASK DATA

It was clear that there were numerous forms of language that the student teachers felt had to be learned. These were of three different kinds: first, there were general educational terms that were cited, such as ‘assessment’ and ‘differentiation’. Many trainees also noted the plethora of educational acronyms which they were required to learn, including SAT (Standard Assessment Task), IEP (Individual Education Plan) and SEN (Special Educational Needs). Finally, there were subject-specific terms (that is, terms with a specific relevance to the subject of foreign language teaching) such as cognitive, cognates, communicative, and target language, as well as linguistic terminology such as lexical, phonology, syntax and so on. When asked about the use of language, a number of respondents cited their increased awareness of the range of registers used in school. In terms of discourse, therefore, by January these student teachers had already begun to acquire a shared terminology of both general educational and subject-specific terms with which to refer to aspects of practice. In addition, some showed a sensitivity to the role that this new language played in their growing understanding of teaching. One response noted that the new language provided ‘a way of expressing ideas and concepts by using this jargon’, and another that it ‘helped me to express … what until now was in my mind but inexpressible’. Finally, there were differences noted between the language used in school and in the university, with some trainees using words like ‘formal’, ‘theoretical’ and ‘higher-level’ to describe the language used at the university, and others observing, for example, that ‘the university and staffroom worlds of language overlap but not completely’.

The main picture that emerged from these data was that trainees were identifying what was primarily new vocabulary, but beginning also to recognise the role this played in their own learning and the possible differences between the two contexts in which they found themselves.

INTERVIEW DATA

As noted above, the 12 student teachers (S1–S12) were interviewed towards the end of the course, after the second major placement had finished. A number of themes emerged from the interview data.

First, it was clear that learning to use this professional language was a daunting task, as the following comments illustrate:
... they (the teachers) talk to each other in language they all understand – some of it I haven’t understood but I’ve been desperately trying to understand … (S11)

... I felt really bombarded with terminology at the beginning … (S1)

... I think my brain’s so full of new vocabulary there’s no room for anything else … (S4)

... I think the first month, month and a half, I was really confused about using the terminology … (S5)

... some of the teachers were talking way above my head … (S10)

... with being foreign as well, you just come in and you think you speak the language but then it’s so specific I remember struggling at the beginning with words … (S12)

Despite the daunting nature of the task, there was evidence that the trainees made an effort to learn this new language. The following comments by S11 and S12, for example, appear to reflect an eagerness to be accepted as part of the profession:

... to impress my tutors and mentors I tried to adapt my language to them to show that I’ve understood what they’ve been saying … when I come to write my self-evaluations I can then turn that around into the proper terminology to show I’ve understood what they’ve been saying … but it’s good to see they’re using it with me now. They see me as a proper teacher who understands their terminology, they’re including me in it now, whereas before I was lower down, I felt a bit of an outsider who didn’t actually know what was going on, and now I feel I’m right at the top … I think they’ve realised that I’m understanding it and I’m moving up towards them, I’m actually using it with them so they’re seeing that I’ve understood it and including me in it … (S11)

... well I’m one of them now, I can do it as well, whereas I couldn’t in September or October … I’ve moved up, I can now use all these words … (S12)

Their sense of inclusion is very evident from these comments, and the status attached to this is suggested by the metaphors of movement, such as ‘right at the top’ and ‘I’ve moved up’. Their motivation to learn the new language, however, arises also from a sense of the importance of this. S7 can see that the new terms are needed in order to discuss the new concepts, as suggested by her comment that:

... there’s a lot of linguistics we discuss … because this is the first time I’ve really encountered phonemes because my university course was literature based. We didn’t talk about phonemes and things that help people learn to pronounce a word and things like that. When you need to discuss that, you do need specific language, you do need words like ‘phoneme’ and you need to be able to express that in a code form because otherwise you’d be forever tying yourself in knots trying to explain what you meant with things like that … (S7)
The student teachers interviewed in June, then, appeared to confirm and emphasise the data provided earlier in the year by the larger group. What the interviews afforded us, however, was a greater insight into the process of acquiring the new discourse. There was evidence that the student teachers were using and learning new terminology as part of this, and that teachers in school were also using this terminology with them. Yet, the interviews, even more than the earlier question task, suggested that this was by no means a uniform process. Not only was the terminology not always the same between the two contexts of school and university, but there were also differences in the opportunities for discussing certain topics, particularly in the subject-specific area of language teaching.

At the general level of assessment, S12 articulates very nicely the tension between what she calls normal words and college words, and what happens when she arrives in school:

… then you go to school and you start using the words and they don’t know all of them so then you kind of step back a bit and okay they don’t know this one so I’ll just use a normal word … formal assessment is a college word, whereas a test is a normal word … so you think when you come to college and you’ve got all these nice words and you think well that’s the way it works. It is a bit but not all of it, there’s some normal words … I did some tasks talking to a teacher and then writing some nice words in them, like college words in them, again about assessment … I think it’s because of thinking oh somebody’s going to read them so I’d better put some nice words in … I’m addressing somebody from college now with some knowledge of theory … (S12)

Here, her awareness of audience, and what appears to be expected in the two different contexts, is evident. Similarly, but on a more subject-specific note, S10 articulated her unease with discussing the issue of communicative language teaching in the quote that follows:

… my current subject mentor would never say communicative language teaching … that’s something you’d use more at uni. than at school … I’d never say it to a teacher … you don’t want to come in with all these wonderful words from here and they haven’t got to grips with them … (S10)

This suggests that certain ways of talking do not ‘belong’ in the school context; her use of the phrase ‘wonderful words from here’ suggests that these were words that belonged elsewhere and might be perceived as sophisticated in some way.

This is, however, an issue that goes beyond the choice of words. It is interesting to note that one trainee who had told us that ‘there did not seem to be a language barrier between school and university’ then went on to express regret that certain topics were not discussed in school, suggesting that, at least with
regard to the school context in which she was training, there was in fact a difference of substance:

… they don't seem to have philosophical discussions like we do at university which is a shame … they didn’t seem to have philosophical discussions about how grammar should be taught or anything, and even the presence of trainees didn’t seem to inspire that unless it was time to do my school-based task … (S7)

Yet we could argue that there resides in this difference a barrier that is greater than that imposed at a lexical level. It suggests a possible tension between the topics privileged by the discourse of the university-based training context and those deemed to be of importance on the school one. Admittedly, this particular trainee did find that carrying out her school-based tasks provoked some discussion, and her comments relate to the department as a whole rather than her mentor in particular. However, referring to both grammar and communicative language teaching, another trainee, S10, revealed real frustration that such opportunities had not been forthcoming in her placement:

… she did not want to talk about it at all, she didn't want to discuss anything. So how I am supposed to learn? How are people supposed to learn if other people don't want to discuss current issues? (S10)

To summarise, then, what emerged from both the question task data and the interviews was as follows. The student teachers’ experience of the discourse of foreign language teaching was one where they were initially daunted by the general and subject-specific terms to be learned, but ultimately frustrated by the limited opportunities to articulate their conceptions of language teaching when in the school context, the discourse of which they found to be different from that in the university.

Discussion

Our aims in carrying out this study were to investigate the experience and acquisition of the new professional discourse, as well as to examine the extent to which a unified discourse exists across the training contexts of school and university. A number of issues have emerged as worthy of consideration. First of all, we were struck by the range of terms that the student teachers identified as new and problematic, and by the non-foreign language-specific nature of much of this. What was also evident was their awareness of the need to learn these terms, for both of the reasons identified by Freeman (1996: 236), that is, for cognitive as well as social-referential ones. Yet the interviews in particular revealed that there were differences between the school and the university training contexts in terms of what was talked about as well as how, leading us to question whether the unified discourse advocated by Freeman (1996) was
available to these student teachers. Certainly, the student teachers showed a measure of frustration with the limited opportunities for discussion the school context appeared to offer them, and with the difficulty of using some of the terms they had learned at the university, particularly with respect to subject-specific issues.

Arguably, there is for these student teachers a tension between the two functions of the discourse as described by Freeman (1991):

… the discourse serves a social-referential and a cognitive function … (and) permits these teachers to refer to, and ultimately think of, themselves as members of that community. At the same time, it organizes their thinking about teaching by providing them with a means to articulate explanations and thus to construct understandings of their practice. (Freeman 1991: 452)

On the one hand, these student teachers were clearly eager to be accepted into the professional community they wished to join; on the other hand, they experienced limited opportunity to express their thinking in the way they had been encouraged to do at the university. This suggests also that the kind of scaffolding suggested by Gee (1989) can falter when student teachers have their apprenticeship across two contexts. It is perhaps unsurprising that student teachers should encounter different discourses in the two environments, as a school-based mentor living the daily pressures of school life may be less attuned to the importance of articulating that experience than either the novice teacher or the university tutor. But given that the professional community student teachers wish to join is that of school, it may be that it is this discourse, rather than the one learned at the university, that is, in the end, the prevailing influence, although it may exclude or minimise issues prioritised and articulated by the university course.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we have some distance to travel before we succeed in creating the unified discourse that could enable beginning and experienced teachers to critique classroom practice in relation to prevailing orthodoxies. We might ask to what extent our student teachers are learning to talk like teachers, and to what extent they are learning to talk like language teachers. While recognising that the school and university contexts may well have differing discourses, the challenge of shared training may nevertheless be the identification or even the creation of a greater degree of overlap than currently appears to be the case. Within this space, student teachers may experience a more fruitful apprenticeship into a professional discourse that will allow us all, tutors, mentors and student teachers alike, to talk together as language teachers.
REFERENCES

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