MONASH University

Education

Challenging the monolingual mindset
RUMAC Colloquium – University of Melbourne
Tribute to Professor Michael Clyne

Becoming a Community Languages' Teacher: the perceived role of professional learning programs

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Introduction

"Community languages schools are community-based, not for profit bodies established by community groups and individuals to provide language classes to school age students out of school hours. In Victoria, such after hours providers conduct classes for more than 30,000 students in over 50 languages, many of which are not available in any of the mainstream day schools In some of these community languages, qualified teachers are not available to conduct the classes." (DEECD 07/07-27, p. 3)

"Community languages schools … provide a wide range of languages programmes with a view to preserving and celebrating the languages, cultures and traditions of Australia's multicultural communities. [They] contribute to the development of the linguistic capabilities necessary for Australia to be successful in the international community of the 21st century." (Community Languages in Schools; Contributing to Quality Languages Education in Australia, 2007, p.1)

Why this study

We felt it imperative to investigate the participants' reactions and attitudes towards professional learning courses in which they had engaged in order to discover whether their classroom practices and their beliefs about language teaching were informed by a theoretical framework and pedagogical knowledge.

- "Complementary schools remain unexamined for the interaction, learning and identity formation processes which are probably at the heart of sustaining community languages and developing their identities through socialisation practices" (Creese & Martin 2006: 2).

Monash University has been conducting professional learning courses for Community Language Teachers for over 15 years. During this period 50 different courses have been offered, with enrolments between 15 and 30 teachers and principals. More than 1000 teachers have participated in these courses.

Objective and Research Questions

To develop a knowledge base for the development of Community Language teachers' knowledge and skills by modifying an existing proposed knowledge base (Freeman & Johnson 1998, Velez-Rendon 2002, 2006).
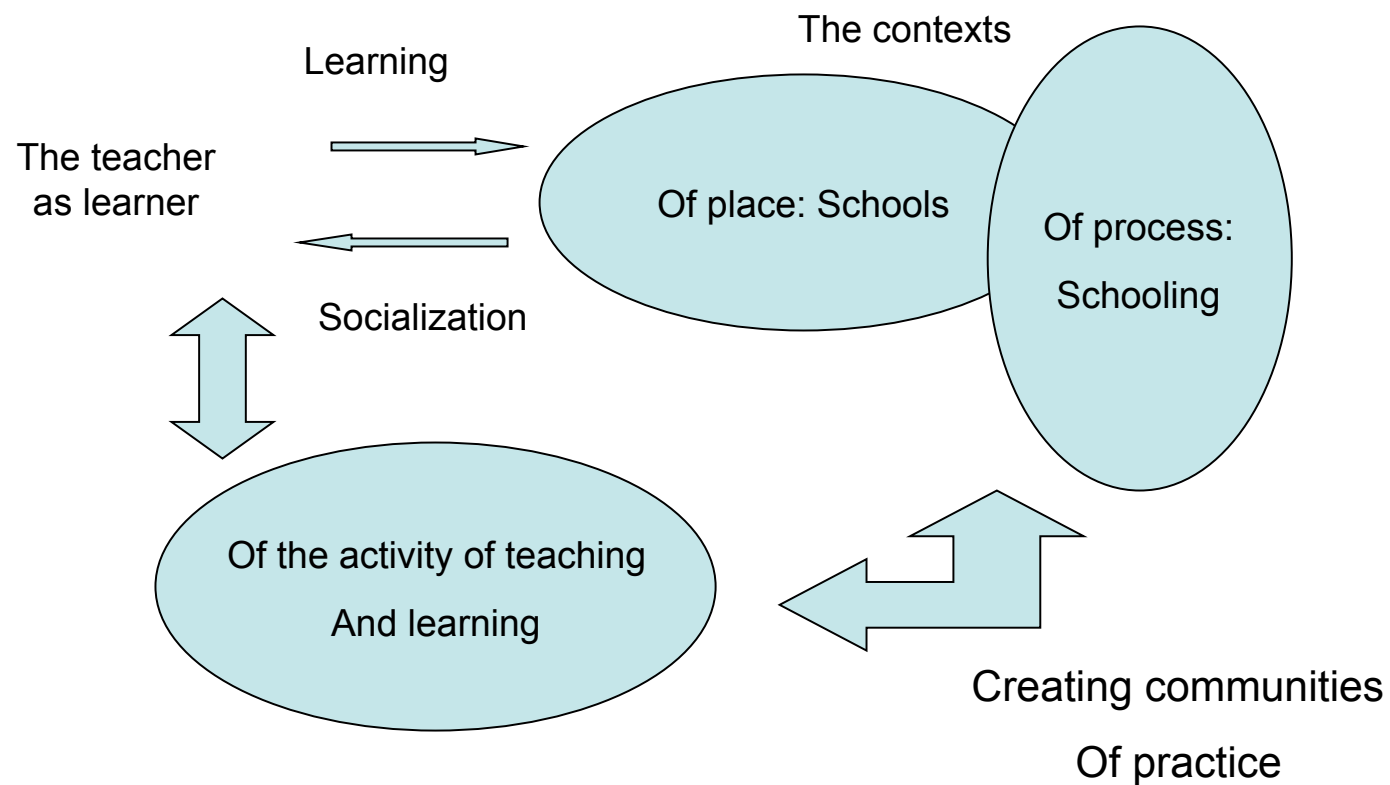
1) To what extent do Community Languages teachers believe their prior language learning experiences influence their classroom practices?

2) To what extent does participation in 30 hour language teaching method courses change Community Language teachers' classroom practices according to them?

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Language teacher preparation

"Learning to teach (is) viewed as learning about teaching in one context (the teacher education program), observing and practising teaching in another (the practicum), and eventually developing effective teaching behaviours in yet a third context (usually in the first years of teaching)" (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 399) is simply not the case for teachers in Community Languages schools. Those working, voluntarily or for a stipend, learn to teach "on the job" and develop their own method, usually one based on the best means of surviving in an after-hours language classroom with students who may or may not desire to be part of the class.

Freeman & Johnson (1998, p. 405): "the knowledge-base of language teacher education responds to a deceptively simple question: Who teaches what, to whom, where?" – a very good starting point for the development of a course specifically for Community Languages teachers.

Freeman & Johnson Framework (1998, P406)

The contexts

Learning

The teacher as learner

Of place: Schools

Of process:

Schooling

Socialization

Of the activity of teaching

And learning

Creating communities

Of practice

Second Language Teacher Education

"…very little attention has been paid to how second language teachers learn to teach, how they develop teaching skills, how they link theory and practice, and how their previous experiences inform their belief systems." (Vélez-Rendón 2002, p.457)

Kramsch (1996) also sees the need to expand the base of teacher education for languages teachers.

"Beyond the traditional knowledge of cultural facts, an intercultural approach aims at gaining an understanding of the way these facts are related, i.e. how as a pattern they form the cultural fabric of society". (Kramsch 1996, p.6)

[see also Scarino & Liddicoat 2009, p.21 on the role of intercultural language teaching and learning]

Context of the study

This study was conducted between 2007 and 2010 with volunteer teachers from Community Languages Schools who were participating in second languages methodology courses in the Faculty of Education at Monash University.

Participants in these courses are often novice teachers, who have no pedagogical background, but who are committed to the maintenance of their first language and culture for children living in Australia.

They also frequently have a low level of academic proficiency in English particularly in writing.

Data collection – instrument/s, participants

A questionnaire asking participants to respond to questions about

their own prior language learning experiences,

their beliefs about what constituted good teaching in a Community Language School,

the contribution the languages methodology course made to their classroom practices,

and their perceptions of positive and negative factors associated with their Community Language School.

Participants in five courses were surveyed between semester 2, 2007 and semester 1, 2010.

Q 1. Does the way you were taught your language influence how you teach? Give two or three examples

Of the 82 participants surveyed, 44 acknowledged the influence of their prior language learning experiences.

One Thai participant wrote:

"I use the way of learning reading & writing form I was taught in primary school in Thailand. I also use dictation/spelling vocab in the prep class."

Teacher Y from semester 1, 2008 wrote: "My primary school teacher will stay always a role model for me in her manners as well as her way of teaching. I still prefer the old way of spelling and connecting letters to make a word and making sence (sic) of what we are reading."

Q 1. Does the way you were taught your language influence how you teach? Give two or three examples

A German teacher (2010) commented: "I learned through strict structure. So it is hard for me to accept New Methods of teaching theses days. e.g. Vocals need to be learned by heart.Grammar was done over and over again.There weren't any modern tools (interactive whiteboards etc) in my days."

One participant from semester 2, 2007 stated: " I was taught in a monotone-constant repetition approach. In my class I have gone the opposite and try to give my students the hands-on experience to learning."

Another wrote: " When I was at school, my first teacher at grade1 was very strict and hardly never gave us compliment. So I always try to make children happy and confortable with lots of compliments."

Q.2: What do you believe is the best way to teach the language to the students in the Community Language school?

Many of the answers reflected the lecturers' emphasis on concrete and experiential learning activities and the importance of lesson planning:

The following quotes reflect many of the participants opinions:

"through a lot of fun and interesting activities that are well planned and according to well-known practices' (Teacher 5, semester 1, 2009);

"I believe activity like as games, singing is the best way to teach my language" (Thai teacher semester 2, 2009); "give students as much activity as you can" (Teacher 11, semester 2, 2007)

One Greek teacher -semester 2, 2007: "I believe the best way of teaching is a combination of teaching and playing together. For a Saturday school teaching must be fun (not too fun)."

Q. 2: What do you believe is the best way to teach the language to the students in the Community Language school?

In 2010 some of the comments were different from previous years.

Chinese teacher:

"Let students love Chinese class, enjoy learning.Not too academic".

One Vietnamese teacher:

"The best way to teach language to the students in the Ethnic school are:

Motivate students

Listen to students in need

Help students learn in their own way."

One Tamil teacher:

"We have to make kids to be fun. When we teach, only way is teach through games; Encourage students.

Get help from Parents".

Theoretical perspective

Johnson (1996, p. 766-7) notes that "… what teachers know about teaching is not simply an extended body of facts and theories, but is instead largely experiential and socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which teachers have come. […] teachers' knowledge is inherently their own, constructed by teachers themselves and largely experiential."

For example:

Teachers 9 and 11 from Semester 2, 2007 referred to the importance of experience by stating the need "to experience more learners and to know what kind of ways and activities are more valuable to learners"; – the more I teach the more I know."

Q4. Give three examples of how the LOTE Methodology course has prepared you to teach in your Community Lanage School.

The lecturers' focus on the need for planning and writing lesson plans for each lesson appeared as a key feature of the courses, with 27 of the 82 respondents mentioning these.

One Thai teacher wrote: "I think my lesson plan help me to become a better teacher each year because my lesson plan can show me that I success (sic) in teaching by follow the plan or not. If not I can improve my lesson plan for the next semester and next year."

Q4. Give three examples of how the LOTE Methodology course has prepared you to teach in your Community Language School.

The way in which the course provided them with new and practical ideas for teaching young children, especially the use of games, songs and an activity centred approach based on Gardner's Multiple Intelligences.

One teacher mentioned "lesson plan with focus on MI theory", another that the course "make me aware that MI is very important"

Others mentioned "lots of examples, lots of practical things", "lots of fun but educational activities"

One Thai teacher commented "I knew a lot of games from this course and I bring to teach to my class; I teach my students by songs."

One 2010 teacher wrote: "I am more aware of student needs.
I know and understand more about the mainstream culture".

Findings and Discussion

The majority of the Community Languages teachers surveyed had positive responses to the 30 hour course which they had enrolled in. Most recorded a strong belief that the course had introduced them to new classroom teaching strategies and to the importance of being prepared PRIOR to walking into a class. For example, writing lesson plans, preparing materials and resources, linking their teaching to current government language curriculum documents and approaches to teaching primary school aged students.

In 2010, additional comments such as the importance of planning a curriculum, of being creative and of addressing students needs were mentioned.

Conclusion

In a very small way, this project has aimed at documenting the influence of teachers beliefs about language teaching and of the professional learning courses on their perceptions of how and why they teach.

In 2005, Hornberger noted that one of the recommendations from a joint US and Australian seminar on heritage /community languages was the establishment of research projects which would see "combined ethnographic and quantitative investigation of US and Australian practices of teacher education in community and heritage language programs" (Hornberger 2005, p.105).

Factors to be analysed would include

the educational backgrounds of teachers and documentation of teacher professional development for both formal and non-formal certification (Hornberger 2005, p.105).

teachers perceptions of their professional identity

the relationship between their beliefs and their actual classroom practices.

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