INNOVATIONS IN ELT PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT: BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS WITH LEARNER AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I share some experiences about how we, at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore, addressed a challenge with regard to our student teachers' English language standards. This problem, identified by our Ministry of Education, was a continuing one that seemed difficult to resolve. We reanalyzed the issues and saw that a different perspective was needed. Thus, we moved away from the traditionally-oriented language proficiency courses that had been running at NIE and instead developed a language programme that placed learnerautonomy as a central pedagogical tenet. We sought to create motivated, autonomous learners who were able to appreciate and understand the complexity of the issues, develop their own understandings, and achieve the the learning goals.

Introduction

From around 2005 - 2007, attention to the 'state' of English in Singapore saw a sharp escalation. While debates in the local media about the standard of English in Singapore were commonplace, these few years saw the "pro-blems" of English in Singapore being systemati-cally deliberated about by a committee set up by the Ministry of Education (MOE), known as the English Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee (ELCPRC) that was to examine the issues relating to the English language curriculum, teaching as well as teachers, and to make necessary recommendations for improvement. There were many factors fueling this increased attention economic anxiety about the exponential growth of the China and India's manufacturing sectors saw many politicians worried that Singapore's key advantage of being an English speaking country might become eroded with the continued growth of the local vernacular, Singlish. The centrality of English to Singapore's economy, seen as key to Singapore's success, appeared to be in a position of peril (Alsagoff, 2012).

Following on the heels of the mid-term review of the 2001 English language sylla-bus, ELCPRC focused its attention on how to raise the standard of English used in Singapore classrooms. Key to this was the Ministry's concern about the standard of the teachers' English, which meant that it became the problem of the National Institute of Education (NIE). As the sole teacher education institute in Singapore, NIE is responsible for preparing all teachers for a career in teaching, for primary schools, secondary schools as well as junior colleges. Strictly speaking, although NIE does not run teacher- certification programs, an NIE diploma is nonetheless required credentials for employment by the Ministry of Education as a 'main-stream' teacher.

Thus, the challenge was thus in figuring out how to meet these newly articulated obligations as the national teacher education institute of Singapore while still remaining true to the constructivist educational perspectives and frameworks that guided work at the depart-ment. This meant that while the teacher educa-tors at the English language and Literature (ELL) department of NIE needed to ensure the teaching of the exonormative norms of English particularlyof Standard British English - that aligned with the MOE's politically and econo-mically-driven position on English language teacher competence, they also needed to ensure that this did not entail changing their courses to embrace a deficit model of language teaching which saw this exonormative set of standards

as superior to local standards. The deficit model refers in this case to a term coined by BrajKachru in 1991 to refer to Randolph Quirk's advocacy of exonormative standards for 'non-native' English speaking countries in what became known as the English Today debate (Jenkins, 2006). The majority of NIE's teacher educators had professional beliefs that were grounded on theoretical and research-based views of language as heterogeneous and multiply-centered; as such they advocated an endonormative stance that saw language as local practice (Pennycook, 2007).

In the following section, we examine how ELL, NIE addressed the issueof addressing the MOE's concerns yet keeping to the principles of the pedagogical model that served as the foundation of the teaching and learning at NIE through the implement of learner autonomy.

The Innovation

The ELL department of NIE proposed an adjunct program that student teachers under-taking the undergraduate programs of study as well as the non-graduate student teachers studying in the Diploma in Education program would take in addition to their teacher prepa-ration programs. The adjunct program, known as CELS (Certificate in English Language Stu-dies), would be for the Diploma in Education students and those undergraduate student teachers who did not read English Language as one of their Academic subjects. CELS included three language enhancement courses - Effective Oral Communication, Effective Written Communication, and Grammar in Use - in addition to three content knowledge courses. The language enhancement courses in the CELS program focused on developing the language skills of the student teachers - these were included to address the concerns of MOE's ELCPR Committee that non-graduate student teachers should receive training to improve their standards of English.

However, even though the MOE's concern was clearly the standard of the teachers' English, it is important to note that the ELL department chose not to position the language enhancement courses in CELS as proficiency courses. Rather, these were conceptualized, and more importantly, presented to the student teachers as courses that would help improve the student teachers' effectiveness as teachers through developing greater competencies and skills in the English language. The design of the language enhancement courses thus differed from the type of proficiency courses that would have seen student teachers put through the paces of drill and practice. Instead, these courses approached the challenge quite differently. The primary guiding principle that underpinned the successful delivery of this group of language effectiveness courses was learner autonomy. To develop greater learner autonomy, we focused on two key aspects in our EL teacher program deve-lopment.

i. <u>Agency</u>

The CELS courses featured a significant percentage of self-directed learning which explicitly acknowledged the role of agency in language learning which sees learning as more dependent on the activity and the initiative of the learner than on any inputs to the learner by the teacher (van Lier, 2008) whether through direct teaching or through the teacher's use of a textbook. Thus, the courses employed a project based learning approach for the language experience camp that enabled student teachers to explore and reflect on their English language communication skills through the development of a multimedia pro-duct - either in the form of a digital story, e-newsletter, or a digital journalistic report. Such activities were designed to increase the active participatory roles of the student teachers in examining and reflecting on the ways that the enhancement of their language skills would contribute towards their overall professional development as teachers. In a similar way, the independent study modules at the Self-Access Center encouraged the student teachers to improve on their linguistic knowledge by deve-loping greater self-awareness of their linguistic capacities and repertoires.

This approach saw student teachers embracing the courses positively. Issues such as lower than average attendance were surprisingly absent; and the quality of the student projects demonstrated a high level of commitment. More interestingly, some of these projects were in-tensely personal, and reflected the way the stu-dent teachers began to reflect on their choices (or not) of language and how such choices related to their identities as individuals and as future teachers. The

technologically-advanced Self-Access Center, specifically designed and built for these adjunct students, whose décor offered a learning environment resembling more a café than a classroom, was also very popular with the student teachers. There was a great demand among the CELS lecturers to conduct their classes at the centre because they reported much higher levels of engagement.

The courses were designed bearing in mind that the student teachers were clearly adult learners, able to act as change agents of their own language skills. Such an approach was logical given that the issues facing the Singapore teachers were quite different from those faced by teachers, for example, in the expanding circle countries like China, Indonesia, Russia or Thailand where attaining a basic threshold proficiency level was the primary concern. In the case of the Singapore student teachers, it was much more a matter of increasing the student teachers' language awareness, and having them more consciously reflect on their choices of language variety. After all, it was not that the teachers could not speak English fluently, or use English to effectively teach their classes; it was much more that the variety that the teachers used was deemed by the MOE as not being the preferred target variety; although there were clearly a small number of student teachers who did not have a command of the target language variety and required more intervention. But by and large, what was needed in the CELS courses was the active engagement of the student teachers in key sociolinguistic issues that would allow them to explore the various perspectives of the 'Singlishproblem'. While the teacher educators at NIE clearly provided materials and practice resources based on the target variety identified by the Singapore MOE, i.e., Standard British English, there were also opportunities for the teachers to develop a greater awareness of their own linguistic profiles and reflect on their own choices.

Such an approach which foregrounded the roles of the student teachers as agents in their own learning showed an appreciation of the clear links between language and identity. The more conventional alternative that focuses on drills and practices of the target language variety, i.e. that of British English might have led to the inadvertent devaluation of the teachers' own language variety, thereby undermining the student teachers' confidence in his or her own teaching ability and "an inadequate

language variety, thereby undermining the student teachers' confidence in his or her own teaching ability and "an inadequate sense of professional legitimacy" (Seidlhofer, 1999). The teachers could also have reacted negatively to this devaluing of their language, causing a negative, rather than a positive outcome.

ii. <u>Student-Centered: Accommodation and Flexibility</u>

To ensure high levels of student teacher participation, the program developers needed to meet the challenge fitting these two programs of study into the overall preparation of English language teachers. Thus CELS was conceptualized as a blended program that in-cluded significantcomponents of online modes of study as well as self-directed learning. Instead of having to attend full face-to-face classroom instruction per module, the students would be able to work through the assigned readings and assignments at their own time and complete the learning logs. Contact time was significantly reduced. Web-based learning management systems enabled the tracking of student learning to ensure that all of the student teachers successfully completed the modules.

The language enhancement modules in CELS were designed so as to be offered as two separate components: a 68-hour language experience camp and 40 hours' worth of self-access learning and language support. The self access materials offered as part of the 40-hour language support of the language enhancement component in CELS comprised online resources that the students could access through the web. More importantly, such technological affordances offered the student teachers opportunities to learn and discover at their own pace. These differentiated opportunities also meant that students could in effect design their own learning path ways: they could practice those parts of language that they wished to focus on, so that some might work on aspect of their pronounciation while others might choose to read about the development of English as an international language to develop a more global perspective of English language teaching while others might choose to do more grammar activities.

The differentiated pace and learning opportunities were an important element of the innovative approach taken by the ELL department because it accommodated the highly varied linguistic backgrounds of the different students. Student teachers requiring more help in understanding the target variety forms and structures were also able to avail themselves of consultations with tutors during 'language clinic' sessions.

On the whole, the CELS program, which has now been running for the past seven years (which is equivalent to 5 different student cohorts), have received positive feedback from the students as seen through the student feed-back framework set up at NIE. The annual course evaluation exercises conducted by the curriculum team have also meant that the students have input into helping improve the courses. Notably, the use of online leaning systems to increase stu-dent teacher autonomy in offering different pathways has continued to offer technological affordances that help respond to the challenges in timetabling and scheduling of classes in a packed curriculum, as well as meet the differing needs of the students.

CONCLUSION

As English continues its unrelenting spread across the globe, the aggregate profile of speakers and learners of English will see exponential change. The number of learners will far outstrip the speakers of English; the speakers of English who use the language as part of their multilingual repertoire rather than their sole means of communication - what has been characterized as L2 speakers - will outstrip the number of monolingual English speakers what has been traditionally characterized as 'native' or L1 speakers. In addition, as Canagarajah (1999) points out, the number of English language teachers who are L2 or Non-native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) will greatly out- number Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs). Even the Three Circle Model, which paved the way for more progressive approaches to English language teaching, will have to evolve to include even more expansive and dynamic perspectives of the changing landscape of English as an international language (Alsagoff et al, 2012 ; Jenkins, 2006).

And as English takes root in an increasing number of countries, the Expanding Circle countries that Kachru's model (Kachru, 1992) has been criticized for neglecting can no longer be unproblematically characterized as using English as a foreign language. Many of these countries, for example, China, Japan, Thailand and Indonesia, require students to learn English from an early age, and as the years wear on, we will see an increased spread and level of expertise in the use of English. Criticisms of Kachru's model with regard to these countries also include characterizations of Expanding Circle countries as norm-dependent. Thus, in many ways, the model still perpetuates the native speaker myth in seeing Inner Circle countries as norm providing. Much more likely, NNESTs in Expanding Circle countries, as with Singapore, are simply speakers of some other variety of English; they are also speakers who use English for very specific reasons, and as part of a wider linguistic repertoire. The norms by which they speak and use English will likely be different from what we know of English language use. The concerns of such speakers may include communicative goals rather than ones which measure these speakers against native English varieties as standards.

However, given that the reasons for the widespread adoption of English by the governments of many countries continue to be primarily economic in thrust, it is likely that the language policies of most countries will continue to encourage the teaching of some international 'high prestige' variety of English, namely, British English or American English. While much of the extant literature in this area advocates resistance to such policies, what the Singapore case study demonstrates is the need, instead, of creative enactments of such policies that balance a global outlook with one that still values language as local practice (Pennycook, 2007). These enactments fulfill the nation's need to have teachers recognize the value of an international variety of English while at the same time appreciating the complexities of appreciating the teachers' identities of themselves as speakers of other varieties of English.

Of particular note in the Singapore case study was the way in which the program developers leveraged learner autonomy and created opportunities for student teachers to plan and direct their own learning. Technology was a key feature of the programs

which allowed diffe-rentiated pacing and pathways for the student teachers. Such an approach enabled the fine ba-lance of acceding to national policies yet keeping to a constructivist approach toteaching and the recognition ofstudents as agents of their own learning.

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