Learn English' component in the teacher training program improve English education?

4) To what degree can incorporating a 'How to Learn English' component in the classroom improve English education?

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TELL ME ABOUT YOUR LIFE: Narratives of language teacher development

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Introduction

Numerous authors have explained why narratives are useful methodological tools for teacher research (see Carter, 1993; and, Connelly and Clandinin, 1990 for examples). Kelchtermans (2000), however, gives three compelling reasons that are focused more on teachers rather than researchers: "Narratives constitute a powerful starting point for broad

and deep reflection. Narratives seem to be the way in which teachers tend to talk spontaneously about their work. It is their natural voice. Telling stories and sharing narrative experiences can be fun and teachers are easily motivated to take part." (p 18)

Despite their apparent usefulness it is difficult to find many reports of narrative research about language teacher development. One example is found in the work of Johnston (1997) who conducted interviews with seventeen, mainly young, EFL teachers in Poland. The interviews provide a fascinating, if disturbing, insight into the realities of being a teacher in Poland, where it is fairly clear that, unfortunately, many of these young teachers will soon leave the field. Useful and interesting as these stories are the voices of more experienced EFL and ESL teachers are largely absent.

In this article I would like to make an initial attempt to represent the voices of eight experienced teachers as they talk about their own development. The teachers featured are all highly qualified people who have continued to show an enthusiasm and curiosity for teaching through their careers. Through interviewing them I have gained considerable insights into how they have sustained their motivation for such a long time, as well as identifying common features of their

development. The one feature I wish to focus on in this article is the key role that talking about teaching plays in promoting growth. In addition, I found that by articulating their own theories of teaching, and that through talking about their careers these teachers revealed that a narrative interview in itself can be a very effective tool for reflection and professional development.

Data collection and analysis

The eight English language teachers, with an average age of 42 and an average of 15 years teaching experience, are from various countries and have taught across the world in both EFL and ESL. They were all doctoral candidates attending a residential course as part of their studies, after which they all returned to their respective home institutions in various parts of the globe. My interview questions were:

What's your background and how did you get into teaching?

What type of teaching have you done?

How have you developed as a teacher?

After asking these three initial questions I saw my role in the interviews as an active listener; to reflect and reformulate what the participants said, and try to be an 'understander' (Edge, 1992) in the way that I prompted or probed with further questions. My goal was to find out how a successful group of teachers had developed and whether there were any

lessons for others, particularly less experienced or novice teachers. At this stage I was not using the interview itself as a developmental tool. The realisation that it could be used in this way only came later in the research process when the teachers wrote back to me by email reflecting on what they had learnt from being interviewed.

I initially analysed the transcribed interviews using a 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In contrast to fitting the data into an 'a priori' framework I attempted to produce my own framework grounded in the data itself. I did this by repeatedly looking through the transcripts to categorise statements, gradually building up a set of codes with which to form the basis of an analysis. Eventually I identified three main topic areas to use as a basis for description: methods of teacher development; feelings about teaching; and, descriptions of work contexts. Within each topic area there were a number of smaller sub-categories totalling about twenty in all.

My next step was to develop a profile of each interview which I sent as part of an 'interpretive letter' (Golombek, 1998) to each teacher in order to solicit further comments and to confirm or disconfirm my analysis. These replies then became a further part of the interpretive process, and it was at this stage I started to realise that the interviews

had provided an opportunity for the teachers to reflect critically on their careers.

One teacher wrote the following which I think illustrates the growth potential of a narrative interview very succinctly:

"... after that interview I really did begin to reflect on my own behaviour (and have continued to do so) and this has helped me significantly in my relationships with my colleagues at work. Actually voicing what I believe in and how I see myself helped me to critically examine my role in departmental affairs and see myself as others must see me."

In a brief article such as this it is impossible to cover all the issues that emerged from these interviews. Instead I would like to focus on just two connected areas: the importance of talk as a means of past development for these teachers, and talk through the interview itself which can act as a method of current development. I would like to illustrate with extracts from the interviews and email correspondence and intertwine with some commentary from the research literature. Although collapsing the voices of these teachers together means they are context free and anonymous, I have sought to find common ground across them. Some researchers in the narrative tradition are extremely critical of this approach (Denzin, 1989), but, I hope that the reader will find that these voices resonate with some part of their own teaching experience. As Sparkes (1994) points out: "Presenting moments from the lives of other teachers can fracture our taken-for-granted views and lead us to engage in some serious rethinking about ourselves and others as teachers. This in itself, for me at least, is justification enough for conducting life-history research.

The importance of talk as a development tool

Firstly, I will look at how co-operative talk is a 'valuable and obvious tool for developing teacher thinking' (Naysmith and Palma, 1997, p. 75). In order to maintain their enthusiasm for teaching over many years these teachers felt the need to be challenged outside formal courses and classroom experience. They built on their experiential learning through several methods including reading, writing, and action research, but one key method seemed to be through simply talking with other teachers, as these brief quotations illustrate,

"We share experiences and talk about materials, activities. We're teaching the same students and find out what works, any particular problems."

"It is formal but it is not so academic. It's more of a group of educators getting together to communicate their ideas."

"...we do a lot of discussion of this sort of thing, so that articulation of beliefs becomes

important."

Teaching is often a very private and isolating profession, perhaps particularly for language teachers who may well feel marginalised in some way. Work is often part-time or temporary, and even those with full time jobs are often left out of any decision making process or find it difficult to belong to a professional community. Feuerverger (1997) characterises heritage language teachers in Canada as 'wanderers in the educational landscape', and Johnston (1997) concludes 'EFL/ESL can be an unstable, marginalised, impermanent occupation'. In such circumstances talking with peers or colleagues can be vital. It is interesting to note that the contacts these teachers made were often outside their institutions through small and informal networks which may be less threatening or pressured. Through 'talk' they can begin a process of structured reflection which will help develop their own knowledge of what it means to be a teacher. One such way is to focus talk on specific 'critical incidents'. Here is one such example as a teacher remembers back to when they first began their ESL career,

"I guess I began to really see the importance of human relation interactions...I started working in small groups, started to make me connect with the learning...just to help students feel comfortable in the learning
situation...we'd go out into the communities and do some activities and using English as a medium versus working with the language. Then I began to think, oh that's the way it should be taught. Students more of a content oriented focus... English as a medium versus language as focus."*

Kelchtermans (2000) argues that by exploring such critical incidents teachers may be able to reflect deeply on their experiences and use them to develop further. Such incidents are probably only identified in retrospect and are often seemingly trivial or at least non-dramatic. However, when explored in detail they can reveal choices and changes available to teachers and act as developmental tools. Conducting this kind of jointly constructed narrative interview may well be an effective way to identify and explore such incidents, and may be especially beneficial because talking about a past incident is perhaps less threatening and as a result more revealing than a focus on other more current issues where teachers may be reluctant to open themselves up to criticism. This is certainly one area of research that could be fruitful to explore, perhaps for example, looking at how more experienced mentor teachers can talk through their own critical incidents with novice colleagues.

A narrative interview as a development tool

Sparkes (1994) suggests, that for researchers, a life history approach (I am using life history as being synonymous with a narrative interview) can:

1). show the subjective reality of teachers;
2). take seriously the turning points and contradictions in teachers' lives;
3). give a totality of experience;
4). give insights into identity and self.

As I interviewed these teachers and later as I looked through the transcripts and email messages I certainly found that the four qualities Sparkes describes did emerge, giving me, as a teacher-researcher, rich insights into the lives of my participant teachers. However, it became clear that the narrative interviews were not just valuable to me as a research methodology but were also being used as a tool for the teachers themselves to use to investigate their own ideas and thoughts, and subsequently their own practice. Here is a brief example to illustrate.

One teacher came to a minor epiphany during a section of the interview about what her own experience of 'failure' meant. She said, " I discovered just now because you interviewed me that I have a prejudiced idea of the reason why I stopped being at university so this is a learning experience."

This teacher had always viewed her teaching experiences at different universities in the same light: as failures. But by talking about them she realised that they were not all the same. She had not 'failed' in all of her jobs. Later the same teacher responded by email on the same theme, this time taking her reflections further to include her students and to relate the topic to the classroom,

"I said that I related my university experience with failure. My thoughts developed on the theme of success and failure after that. I think what it is, is that, I can't stand failure in my work - failure is a disgrace to me. But I realised later that students will also have their own definitions of what success and failure is ... depending on what they are I think their performance and sense of importance in the result of what they achieve will be different... so the interview made me realise that our judgements on students can only be an indicator ... but what the students understand and value from the judgement may be a totally different story."

It is a large jump to say that reflection, growing awareness and an intellectual awakening will automatically result in improved classroom behaviour but I think this small episode illustrates the potential that is possible.

About one year after the initial interviews I had

a chance to interview several of the teachers for a second time. I asked them what had been the effect of the first interview and our subsequent correspondence. For some teachers there had been little impact; as might be expected, one hour long interview and a few emails had not led to any major changes; but there were also some very positive observations,

"It (the interview) helped a lot ...when you actually voice what you are thinking it's like reflecting on it out loud, it makes you go away and reflect more on what you said, examining yourself and how you sound to others ... it triggered off a whole new way of looking at myself because I hadn't done that before."

"... inevitably it makes you reflect on what you've said ... and it does try and make you make more sense of what you've said."

"... the kind of things I said made me think more or a bit further after the interview and I think for example ... that could be part of teacher education in a school ... I think you have to have the right kind of school culture to do it."

In this last quotation is a clue for why such a simple idea as talking about one's profession may not be so common in language teaching. In many schools there simply is not the supportive culture to allow regular opportunities to talk and reflect on one's personal development, but as these experienced teachers have shown it may be a vital mechanism for retaining interest and motivation in order to extend a career. A narrative interview can provide a framework for co-operative talk and if carried out supportively and with sensitivity can be an extremely useful way to help teachers grow. I suspect, however, that may be extremely difficult if not impossible in many schools and that many teachers, such as the ones in this study, will have to look beyond their own institutions to get such support.

One example of this kind of teacher development, termed 'collaborative autobiography', was carried out by Raymond, Butt, and Townsend (1992) with groups of teachers in formal training situations (such as attending a masters course). It would be very interesting to see if this kind of collaboration is possible in less formal, less institutionalised circumstances.

Conclusion

In this article I have described how I interviewed a small group of experienced EFL and ESL teachers about their teacher development, terming these semi-structured interviews a form of narrative in which the teachers tried to make sense of their past teaching lives and the ones to come. One major feature underlying much of these teachers' development processes was the

opportunity to talk about their profession, often in small informal groups outside of their regular school environment. The narrative interview itself and follow up emails acted as a further opportunity for sheltered talk, and many of the teachers used this chance to reflect how and why they have developed, and in so doing may have grown still further. One teacher wrote about this process,

"I think it's difficult to say exactly what the effect of narration was. It was the first time anyone interviewed me. I tend to think a lot and talk to myself internally but it was different. I don't think any changes are due solely to the interview, but I would say that the process of interviews ... does create a process of change because they are about the communication of ideas to someone else ... I think over a period of time you could build up the trust and background to discuss ideas and that process of discussion and the evaluation of ideas ... would probably lead to change."

The results from this study are still very exploratory but I will certainly continue to follow this group of teachers to see how their development changes as they get older. I think that other groups of teachers who are not so geographically spread could benefit from interviewing each other in a more concentrated way, perhaps using written life histories as a starting point for discussion. Out of such narratives may emerge a number of educational issues, such as previously hidden 'critical incidents', which can act as a focus for further reflection and awareness raising, and which may in turn lead to growth and change.

In my introduction I quoted from Kelchtermans (2000) three reasons why narratives are a useful tool for examining teacher development: narratives are a powerful starting point for reflection; narratives are teachers' natural voice; and finally, that sharing narrative experiences can be fun and motivating. It has been my experience through this research that all three reasons were wholly justified and that exploring the narratives of fellow teachers has been a wonderful opportunity for my own development and motivation too. If only to hear such comments as,

"I think actually my challenge, I mean keeping interested is not my problem. The problem is having a life beyond it and that's my challenge really...I'm just endlessly interested...I think I have a passion for teaching it's what, you know, I just love it."

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INCITING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT a new column for the TESIG Newsletter

Robert Croker

In an effort to get you thinking about new and different ways to stimulate professional development (PD), we are starting a special column called 'Inciting professional development'. To start it off, Tim Murphey volunteered to write the first piece which appears below.

John McLaughlin incited Murphey's PD by sending him a chapter from the 2000 edition of the Handbook of Qualitative Research. (When was the last time you sent a colleague something that rocked your boat?) Then Murphey wrote a reflective review of the chapter (something any of you could do for us in the next TE edition). He also looped (Tessa Woodward's *Looped Input* Pilgrims 1988) in the proposed autoethnographic style of the chapter into his piece, which the actual chapter does as well, and thus showed how we might develop ourselves through modeling the writing style of those we are reading in a small way.