

The Idea as a Mechanism in Language Teacher Development

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Abstract

In recent decades two broad but distinguishable approaches to language teacher development have predominated: an *informing* approach based largely on the transmission of principles of new theory and method; and a *responsive* approach centering on teachers' understanding of their own practice. Our study offers the notion of the *Idea*, as an element of input that can inspire teachers and be appropriated for their own practice, as a means of synthesising the two traditions. Evidence that teacher learning operates at the level of the *Idea* is presented on the basis of literature, and also from two case studies which examine teacher learning across different language teacher language learning contexts. Based on the observations of the case studies, the paper offers a fully useable characterisation of the *Idea*, offering the notion as a crucial concept for language teacher development.

Keywords: *teaching training; idea; responsive approach; understanding of practice*

Introduction

We can discern two broad approaches to language teacher development over recent decades. One is essentially an informing strategy, presenting teachers with new theoretical perspectives, methods and techniques, and the other is primarily responsive, seeking to engage teachers in analysing and reflecting on their own practice and devising practices which provide for more effective learning. This paper develops a synthesis of the two approaches, based on the *Idea* as an innovative mechanism in teacher learning, and presents two empirical studies illustrating its impact in two different teacher development programme contexts.

The informing strategy draws largely on the notion that the way teachers should teach is determined by developments in theory in language learning, particularly SLA. Jack Richards summarises this theoretical approach to teacher training and development.

Knowledge and information from such disciplines as linguistics and second language acquisition provide the theoretical basis for the practical components of teacher education programmes (Richards, 1990, p.3)

This account of how teacher education and development occur has prevailed, despite evidence that input based on language learning theory has limited impact on teacher learning and performance (for example, Breen et al, 2001; Peacock, 2009; Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010; Hiver and Dörnyei, forthcoming). In fact, the mechanisms through which teachers come to make use of theory in their own practice are by no means clear. Teacher cognition research findings, (for example, Freeman, 2002; Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009) suggest that classroom practice derives from teachers' "BAK" (Beliefs, Assumptions and Knowledge; Woods, 1996), which are shaped by experience and context factors rather than theories and research findings.

The responsive approach to teacher learning has its origins in mainstream education, such as the views of Dewey (1933) and Stenhouse (1975), and in theories of work-based learning such as the reflective practice of Schön (1983) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). An important ancillary strand in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been engagement with the role of context in the tasks of teacher development. Context, in terms of the set curriculum, class size and educational traditions and values (Bax, 1997, 2003; Kumaravivelu, 2006; Ur, 2013;), determines what teachers view as possible, and therefore should shape teacher education and development strategies.

Rod Ellis's recent (2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2013) comments regarding the role of new theory in pedagogic and curriculum enhancement reflect a shift from a theory-centred, to a teacher-centred process for development. While knowledge of SLA can be useful to teachers, "it can feed only **indirectly** into the practical knowledge that informs actual acts of teaching" (Ellis, 2009b, p.141-142 **emphasis** added). Ellis here not only acknowledges the limitations of training that assumes practices can be derived directly from academic theory, but also (implicitly) concerns that practitioners' development must proceed subtly and personally, in alignment with their identities, beliefs and understanding of local conditions (see 1.1.2 below). Ellis also suggests that the "topics covered in an SLA course should consist of 'ideas' rather than 'models'" (2010, p. 196). "Models" in this description are instances of academic theory (such as Krashen's monitor model, or the Interlanguage hypothesis) held to provide pedagogically useful descriptions of language and language learning phenomena. He suggests that rather than focusing teachers' attention on such abstract constructs, educators should instead help them to develop plausible personal positions on language learning issues. "Theoretical positions", in other words, " should emerge out of the 'ideas'

discussed in the course” (2010: p. 196). The “ideas” in Ellis’ description are the topics or inputs provided to teachers as potential starting points for transformative new thinking. From such ideas, personal explanations of practice and new personal professional directions can be formulated.

We perceive Ellis’ notion of an ‘idea’ as one which offers a powerful starting point for a reassessment of the role of, and orientation to input for teacher learning. We seek to extend and operationalise the Idea (capitalised hereafter to show our particular use of the term¹) as a concept in this paper: we extend the work of Ellis, and link it to perspectives on management of change in ELT (for example Li & Edwards, 2013). The Idea is posited not as something which works in theory, but rather, something which can be made to work, which through teacher engagement and investment, can be appropriated. As such, it constitutes a fundamental unit of teacher learning and change.

The next section examines conceptual developments in recent literature which lay the foundations for our approach. Then we set out our investigative strategy, and describe two case studies of teacher learning. The case studies investigate how teachers learn in a UK accredited masters programme, and in a professionally-oriented teacher development programme set up as part of an initiative to enhance the English language learning curriculum in a region in East Asia. In the discussion section, we consider ways in which Ideas have the potential to both promote and track teacher learning in the field.

Literature Review

Informing strategies in language teacher development

Informing strategies in language teacher development have their most recent origins in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research in the 1960s and 1970s. Michael Wallace in a seminal text on language teacher education notes that “the explosion of scientific knowledge” and “the revolutions in the study of linguistics which have taken place in our lifetime, quite apart from the creation and rapid growth of totally new disciplines such as psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics” (Wallace, 1991, p.7) have the potential to enhance classroom language teaching.

However, despite Wallace’s confidence, at least three of the messages derived from the new communicative and SLA consensus, and transmitted to teachers to form the basis of

¹ ‘idea’ is used uncapitalised when referencing its use in another writer’s (e.g. Ellis’) discussion,

informed pedagogic change, have not achieved a lasting impact. First of all, exclusive use of the target language in the classroom (usually promoted as a means of maximising exposure and thus facilitating learning) has been challenged as a suggestion for practice. Arguments for the principled use of L1 in the classroom have been offered to nuance this position (Johnson, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2012; Shin, 2012). Second, the role of group work and collaborative learning, such that well-designed tasks construct learning opportunities (Long & Porter, 1985; Skehan, 1998) underplay the role of the teacher in organising and actively managing such activities (Ellis, 2000; 2013; Andon & Eckerth, 2009). Third, the promotion of learning through engineering of psycholinguistic processes, in SLA informed instructional strategies such as Task-Based Learning (Skehan, 1998) and Processing Instruction (Van Patten, 2002; Benati, 2005) appear to ignore the contribution that the teacher can provide in such activities (Allwright & Hanks, 2008; Huettner *et al*, 2012). The informing approach to enhancing effectiveness focuses on instructional techniques without sufficient regard for the social nature of the classroom, and the role of the teacher in managing that social space. The task of enhancing effectiveness has to focus on transforming teacher cognitions in terms of perceptions of, planning for, and managing learning in classrooms. This focus is reflected in what we broadly frame as a responsive approach to teacher development.

Responsive approaches to teacher development

This approach to the development of ELT through teacher development has diverse origins: the action research paradigm of Lewin (1946) and Burns (2009); the reflective practice school of Dewey (1933), Schön (1983), Richards & Farrell (2007); the classroom evaluation approach of Stenhouse (1975) and Kiely & Rea-Dickins (2005). The key feature of these approaches is the focus on practice and on the teacher. Thus, the language learning curriculum is to a large extent what happens in classrooms as managed by a given teacher, rather than what is planned at a macro-level. To enhance the curriculum, it is important to work with each teacher, so that change is managed through teacher analysis and learning about their own pedagogic values and beliefs, about the possibilities for their students and classrooms, and in terms of the narratives which shape their teacher identities (Allwright, 2005; Walsh and Li 2013; Hiver and Dornyei, forthcoming). In post-method terms, the teacher has to engage in an analysis of particularities, practicalities, and possibilities (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) of their classroom contexts. Participation in such analyses enables teachers to understand the factors which shape practice (Breen *et al*, 2001; Kiely & Davis, 2010; Butler, 2011), and also to conceptualise what is possible for them at a personal level, for their students as increasingly active and agentive learners, and for the school context in

terms of norms, values and expectations (Kiely, 2013). An active strategy of research engagement which facilitates investigation and analysis of classrooms by teachers can benefit such a process (Borg, 2010; Breen et al, 2001; Kiely & Davis, 2010; Burns, 2009; Allwright & Hanks, 2008).

Compared to the informing tradition, the limitations of the responsive tradition in relation to language teacher education have not been expounded as rigorously in the literature. Two factors contribute to somewhat uncritical acceptance. First, the responsive approach is teacher-centred and teacher-empowering, and as such, is difficult to argue against in the context of developing practice, and developing the profession. Second, it has not been implemented widely: studies (for example, Breen et al, 2001; Kiely and Davis, 2010; Farrell, 2015) suggest it is successful in teacher by teacher development initiatives, rather than in large-scale, organised teacher development programmes such as those described in the case studies below. Nevertheless, Wallace's (1991) observation, noted above, that teachers' practice can stagnate in the absence of exposure to fresh professional theory, cannot be dismissed. A reflective and research-oriented process to analysis that is limited to the experience of each teacher is unlikely to promote change on its own. Reflective practice is difficult for new teachers to achieve (Berliner, 1994; Hobbs, 2007; Akbari, 2007) and the assumption that all teachers become reflective practitioners is absent from Dewey's original (1933) formulation of the concept. Studies of teacher learning in initial teacher education programmes show that teachers do learn from input-based programmes (Richards, Ho & Giblin, 1996; Andrews, 2007; Farrell, 2007; Kiely & Askham, 2012). Professional development does not automatically continue in practice: organised programmes are necessary, and increasingly are provided for as part of quality management policies and initiatives. Such programmes are typically accredited programmes at masters level (as in Case Study One below), or professionally-oriented courses, (as in Case Study Two below). It is our contention that such learning experiences, in the informing tradition, stimulate teacher development and change in practice.

We propose that they achieve this, not through application of theory, or transfer of established techniques, but rather through the proffer of concepts, models, demonstrations and explanations which have the potential to be appropriated by teachers, transforming thinking and practice. We focus on input as a resource from which Ideas can be selected and adapted by teachers to guide the development of their personal theory. In the specific context of the role of SLA in teacher education programmes, Ellis states that;

The key question has become not: What do teachers need to know about SLA?, but 'How can SLA contribute to teacher learning?' (2010, p.194).

We see this as indicative of a more general shift in understanding how teachers learn and change. The emphasis is not just on a transmission mode of training, directed at aligning teachers' practices so as to accord with attested theory, but rather teacher engagement with suggestions ('ideas' rather than 'models'; Ellis, 2010, p. 196) that teachers can appropriate for use in the context of their own teaching. Ellis provides an example of such an 'idea' later in the same paper when he outlines a series of principles or points of awareness that teachers can take from the findings of SLA research. Principle 3 (of 10) suggests that:

For example, it would be preferable to tackle an idea such as 'learners inevitably and naturally commit errors' and 'learners sometimes make errors and sometimes don't' than to examine models such as Krashen's Monitor Model or N. Ellis' emergentist theory of learning.

The 'ideas' here are propositions which might be derived from summaries of research studies, which can serve as a starting point for teacher exploration of their own thinking and practices. As teachers explore the proposition, and its capacity to contribute to their own learning as teachers, there is potential for transformation in their thinking, and subsequently in their practice.

In this paper we develop the notion of the Idea more broadly, as any unit of engaging input which can be offered to practitioners, and which becomes a mechanism for transformation. This particular form of teacher learning is likely to be supported by organised programmes such as those in the case studies below. A starting conceptualisation of the Idea, consistent with the concepts that have explored in this review of contemporary literature is that it is a concept which is:

- i. an element of input within a programme of teacher education, identified as valuable by a participant and stored for potential future use;
- ii. personally appropriated by the teacher to form part of their own knowledge;
- iii. a resource for the transformation of practice .

This description is consistent both with Ellis' view that the transformation of input into personal theory is dependent on the agency of the teacher, as well as Richards, Ho & Giblin's (1996) practical observations that individual teachers will interpret and act on course content very differently. The aim of our study is to attempt to progress from this theoretical, hypothesised description to one nuanced by, and consistent with the observed experience of teachers. By tracking the responses and insights of teachers undergoing programmes of pedagogic development we will derive a fuller characterisation of the Idea as a useful unit of educational input, presented during a programme of formal training, which can transform teachers' practice. Finally, by developing the Idea into a workable concept for practitioner development, we aim to provide a means of synthesising the informed and reflective traditions; combining the former's capacity to offer teachers' fresh perspectives and challenge routine practices, with the latter's harnessing of their ability to identify locally appropriate solutions.

Research Design

This study explored the experiences of two groups of teachers who participated in a teacher development programme. The first group were teachers on a one-year MA TESOL programme in a UK university. The second was a 40-teacher cohort of working teachers, from a fast-developing region of Asia, on a professional training course aimed at refreshing local practice. The case study programmes differed considerably in terms of objectives and scope; the first being a primarily academic course of study over one year, the second a shorter four-month programme directed at teachers' professional development. Both programmes however, shared the goal of post-experience learning, furnishing teachers with learning opportunities that would subsequently transform and improve their teaching. The contextual differences of the case studies were both a limitation and a potential strength of the study. The immediate uses of learning were different – academic assessments in the MA case study, and innovations in classrooms for the professional development group - but the capture of changes in teacher thinking was equally relevant to both groups and the two sets of findings provided triangulation in relation to our focus on teacher learning. The characteristics of each programme are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. *Summary of features of the two case studies*

	Case Study One	Case Study Two
Nature of programme	MA TESOL at a UK University	Teacher and trainer training professional course
Curriculum focus	TESOL Applied Linguistics, with a range of courses exploring language learning and teaching; pedagogical description of English; research methods, language testing and assessment and materials development	Professional development for teachers and trainers, with strands exploring pedagogic theory, classroom techniques and recommendations for local practice
Duration	1 year	4 months (1 month 'in-country', 3 months at UK institution)
Research participants	8 Students, 4 each from two MA programme year cohorts.	29 out of a 40 person cohort
Participant experience/ background	L1 & L2 teachers (3 without practical experience, 5 experienced)	L2 teachers All experienced (at least 3 years of practice) teachers
Sampling Phase One	Convenience/ voluntary : 8 of 16 possible respondents participated	Convenience/ voluntary : 29 out of 40 (73%) possible respondents participated
Sampling Phase Two	Quota sampled: 3 teachers, 2 experienced, one without experience	Quota sampled : 5 teachers

Design

A linked but responsive research procedure was applied across both case studies. The procedure involved three stages designed so as to culminate in interviews based on teachers' well-stimulated recall of programme input and its impact on their practice.

i. Inventories of themes and topics presented during teachers' training were compiled to stimulate teachers' recall (Gass and Mackey, 2000) of the programme content as a first step in exploring practitioners' response to input. Inventories were compiled with the assistance of lecturers/ trainers so as to reproduce the organisation and chronological order of topics and

themes in each programme's presentation. No effort was made to modify inventories so as to align content with best curriculum practice; the purpose was to replicate what was taught as faithfully as possible so as to maximise participants' recall of their training experience.

ii. The inventories were presented to participants using an online tool developed to deliver surveys. Participants were asked to assess the potential usefulness of each element to their present (or for Case Study One, imagined future) practice. Response scales were used which required participants to provide a clearly differentiated positive or negative response (Dornyei, 2007). Despite the survey-like delivery of the inventories, the primary purpose of the stage was to stimulate respondents' recall of their training as a preparation for the final stage of in-depth interviews. The survey-like evaluation of items, it was felt, would deepen teachers' response to the inventories and prepare them for interview participation. It was however also hoped that the inventory responses would prove useful to the researchers by 'scoping' (Cohen *et al*, 2007) respondents' assessment concerning the usefulness of various kinds of input.

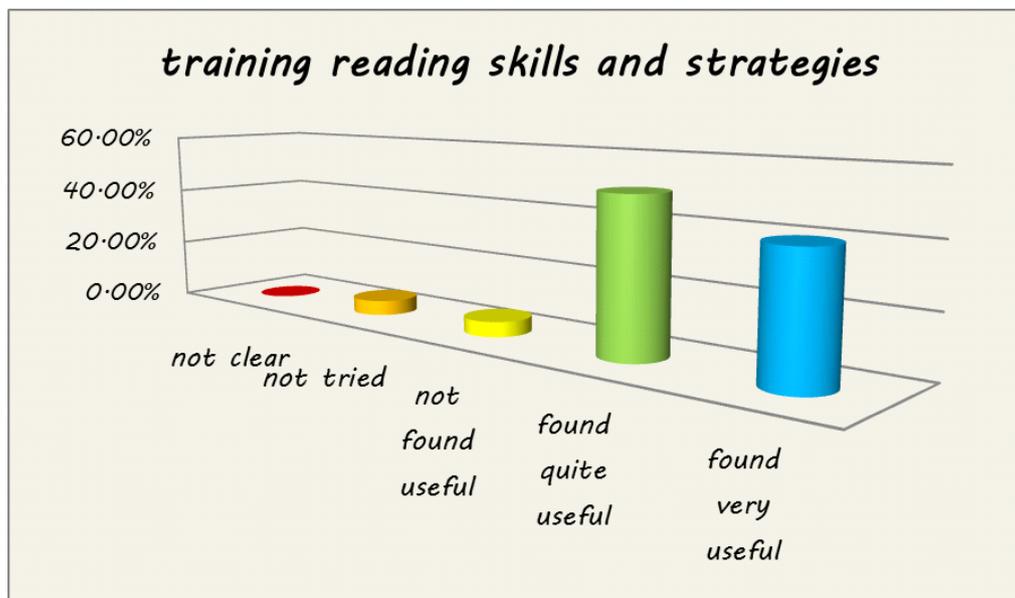
iii. In the final, culminating phase of the research semi-structured interviews (Richards, 2003; Dornyei, 2007; Talmy, 2011) were carried out which explored teachers' engagement with topics from the programme, focusing on input they had considered to have had real impact on their practice. Respondents were selected for interviews using a simple criteria selection model; invitations were extended to balance investigation of novice and experienced practitioners as far as possible.

As the investigation continued, it became apparent that teachers needed time to assemble their reflections; researchers also needed multiple opportunities to prompt respondents to reveal attitudes and expand their descriptions of change. A number of researchers (e.g. McLeod 2003) have noticed the opportunity for greater reflection that is furnished by a longer-term, multiple interview process. Longitudinal interviewing, in McLeod's view, "recognizes that understandings, for both the researcher and the researched, are incremental and recursive" (2003: 209). This proved particularly true for participants in Case Study Two, where teachers were contacted by email and engaged in sometimes lengthy (up to six) exchanges. This meant that both researchers and teachers had ample time to craft queries, prompts and responses to reveal their lines of enquiry. The rich and emergent nature of data emerging from such electronic exchanges has been noted in studies carried out under similar conditions (c.f. Hobbs & Kubanyiova, 2008).

In the data analysis stage of the project, quantitative data from teachers' survey-like evaluations of inventories was assembled into visually striking charts that exposed underlying trends and exceptions. These were examined first by the present authors. Further inventory response analysis took place in the form of a collaborative workshop with three additional tutors involved in the two programmes (see Fig 1). The team's discussion allowed researchers to scope respondents' experiences and, where possible, identify broad patterns of response to particular types of input. The chief purpose of the inventories, as already stated, was to thoroughly stimulate respondents' recall of programme content as a prelude to interviewing.

Interview data was transcribed, coded, and then analysed collaboratively to identify themes that: a) recurred frequently across participants' responses; or b) occurred less frequently but which could be regarded as 'telling' (Ellen, 1984) in terms of the insights they provided. Themes emerging in the data were initially coded and re-coded according to researchers' qualitative evaluation. Themes deemed relevant to the present enquiry were isolated (see Tables 3 and 5, below).

Figure 1. An example of an inventory results item visually processed to expose trends and exceptions



Results of Case Study One: UK-based Masters programme

The first, smaller case study examined the experiences of students studying an MA in TESOL at a UK university. In line with the educational requirements of a Master’s level programme, the curriculum sought to link elements of educational and linguistic practice to theory, and included content of a critical and abstract theoretical nature. Students were introduced to such disparate disciplines as educational psychology, sociolinguistics and philosophy of language. Nevertheless all of those attending the course saw it as a means of professional development, seeking to return to, or find new work in the TESOL field.

Overview of Inventory Results

Table 2. *Topics/ themes evaluated by participants as most and least likely to be useful in their practice*

Most useful	Least useful
Research skills (most topics) Communicative Language Teaching , Task Based Teaching Teacher learning (reflective practice, CPD) Motivation and autonomy Language testing (all topics)	Speech act theory The co-operative principle SLA theory Sociocultural theory and language learning

The researchers’ and lecturers’ panel considered that participants’ responses supported the observation that teachers favoured topics in input whose applications to practice were least abstract, and whose applications seemed most immediate and transparent. Teachers’ valuing of research skills might represent a special (but not inconsistent) example of this tendency; since participants were engaged in dissertation research at the time of being canvassed, research training appeared particularly valuable. Conversely, those topics which elicited less enthusiasm in the survey were generally those whose immediate value to practice was perceived as less obvious; ‘unpopular’ concepts such as speech act theory and the co-operative principle had both been presented in the programme’s Language Analysis module, whose application to practice many (all but one) programme participants had struggled to reconcile with their teaching needs. The issues as to whether these topics were regarded as more relevant owing to the *manner* of their presentation (the extent to which

they were introduced interactively so as to take account of the practitioners' experiences) is a limitation of the study.

Overview of Interview Results

Table 3. Major study-relevant Themes identified via coding for Case Study One Interviews

	Immaculata Expert practitioner	Rebin Novice practitioner	Sabrina Novice practitioner
Ideas derived from variety of <i>theory types</i>	X	X	X
Described <i>existing practices confirmed by input</i>	X		
Describes Ideas through their usefulness/ application to practice	X		
Mentioned Ideas as having exposed deficit of knowledge/ competencies exposed		X	X
Commented on positive role of experience in making sense of input		X	X

A sense which emerged strongly from the interviews was that interviewees, perhaps as a result of their careful priming through the stage of inventory recall, were able to recover their experience of training and identify possible applications for practice. All three interviewees cited as influential Ideas which they referenced using terms from educational theory (Rebin, “the reflective practitioner”; Sabrina “language awareness”; Immaculata, “sociocultural theory”). Sabrina and Rebin both independently (and unexpectedly from the interviewer’s perspective) described the experience of the inventory as having engendered a sense of insufficiency (for Sabrina, the feeling that her Teacher Language Awareness needed rapid development; for Rebin, that his lack of experience made him incapable of making sense of crucial theory). Both also described a sense that much of the potential of topics presented to them during training remained latently useful; both agreed that experience was needed to activate their potential for application in their practice.

Results of Case Study Two: A Cross-national Training Programme

The second, larger case study examines the learning experience of a group of 40 experienced teachers, who were participants in a professional development programme, an international initiative to refresh teacher pedagogy similar to that described in Li and Edwards’ (2013) study. At the time of the reserach, participants in the second case study

had returned to practice in schools. This meant that in most cases they had received ample opportunity to consider which Ideas they found useful, as well as to trial practical means to implement them in their own classrooms. Given the geographical distance between interviewers (in the UK) and participants (in East Asia) , the most effective means of ‘interviewing’ respondents was via email. Email interviews were a useful solution to the issue of distance posed, allowing discussions to emerge naturally over several exchanges, with opportunities for both interviewers and respondents to reflect on the content of messages before crafting responses.

Overview of Inventory Survey

Table 4. *Topics/ themes evaluated by case study two participants as most and least likely to be useful in their practice*

Most useful	Least useful
training reading skills and strategies (as a technique) skills and strategies (as an area of theory) Task based Approach Constructionism and collaborative learning	delaying focus on form autonomy and learner difference

Teachers responded enthusiastically to a variety of topics in the inventory. In the first case study, the most popular topics were frequently those where links to practice could be most easily perceived by respondents. In this study a similar and related tendency could be detected in the data, which was that teachers tended to favour topics supporting beliefs and practices already valued in their working context; this is discussed further below.

Although these quantitative findings were useful for the purposes of scoping-identifying broad brushed preferences, it was clear that quantitative data often contained nuances not immediately apparent through examination of trends. This came across most strongly in cases where topics, often those associated with concepts or practices at odds with normative practices, could be seen to engender mixed –both highly positive and negative- responses. One such item was “delaying focus on form in teaching”, which while eliciting the largest (20%) number of “not useful” responses, was nevertheless evaluated highly positively (15% ‘found very useful’) by a slightly smaller group of respondents. The topic thus represented a site of conflict between teachers, related perhaps to its radical implications for, and divergence from norms of local practice.

Overview of Interview Results

Table 5. Major study-relevant Themes identified via coding for Case Study One Interviews

	Rachel (Expert)	Michael (Expert)	Lucy (Front-line)	Susan (Front-line)	Karen (Front-line)
Ideas derived from variety of <i>theory types</i>	X	X	X	X	X
Described <i>new practices stimulated by input</i>	X			X	X
Described <i>existing practices confirmed by input</i>	X			X	
Described useful concepts through their usefulness/ application to practice	X			X	
Described obstacles to application from context		X	X		X
Described willingness to champion new Ideas		X	X		X
Cited ready-to-use techniques as useful			X		X
Trialled Ideas to test their application in lessons			X		X
Organisation/ separation of Ideas did not conform to their structuring in input		X		X	

Interviewees had worked hard since their return to practice to implement new Ideas in their classrooms. Most noticeable about interview responses was the fact that participants had drawn inspiration from many different types of input; educational, psychological and applied linguistics theory; Task Based Teaching methodology training and demonstration of particular classroom principles such as ‘personalisation’ had all been identified as useful. All of the teachers described the changes they had effected in terms of the obstacles they had needed to overcome, or the resistance to change that they had needed to managed. They perceived the value of introducing innovations as existing in tension with the demands on local practice placed by parents, local tests and students’ expectations. In terms of the purposes of our study, case study two interviewee responses were more useful, as a result of their re-engagement with practice, in helping us to conceptualize the nature of Ideas they had distilled from their educational experience which had had the potential to transform their practice.

Discussion

The purpose of our project was to explore teachers' experiences of learning so as to extend the hypothesised characterisation of the Idea that formed the starting point of our study.

While findings broadly supported the broad features of the Idea we attributed to it in our original description, our staged processing of data permitted us to develop a more nuanced, practitioner-oriented and data built characterisation. Several further characteristics, reconcilable with our starting definition but extending our conceptualisation of transformative Ideas, were identified.

i. Ideas are distinguishable from less transformative concepts found useful by teachers.

Analysing the interviews that described teachers' experiences, it was generally possible to distinguish Ideas as a separate class of cognitive resources that had proved generative of wholly new plans and practices. In the first case study, opportunities for teachers to demonstrate practices based on new Ideas were limited. Nevertheless, even before returning to practice, Sabrina reported that models of Language Awareness presented in sessions had stimulated a sense that "I wanted to know more", and to formulate a plan to boost her language awareness before teaching. Rebin, similarly, had developed a plan for self-observation, based on models of Reflective Practice, to speed his professional development as a classroom teacher since he felt "we can learn from our practice by thinking about it". Because the teachers involved in case study two were both experienced and in practice at the time of research, their data provided stronger evidence of this characteristic. Teachers' interview accounts indicated that Ideas can be appropriated to become generators of whole new avenues of practice. Lucy for example noted that, despite local obstacles and difficulties, she had been successful in her wish "to conduct communicative activities" in order to get students "to talk about themselves" when working with new language. In a similar vein, Karen, meanwhile, had taken the Idea of "priming" into reading lessons, to "focus on the purpose and content of the text", before working on the language forms.

A feature that these Ideas held in common was that they were open-ended and interpretable, leading to different outcomes in practice between teachers. Notably, two teachers responding to the same Idea of "personalisation" as a means of deepening students' encounters with new language, described very different ways in which they had mobilised it for classroom use. Lilian described a lesson in which she asked students to

make use of the target language to describe themselves. “When we learn different jobs, I ask the students to talk about their parents' jobs, and I also ask them to imagine their jobs (using some special working tools) and talk about them.” Although speaking around the same notion of personalisation, Susan described different outcomes. One was an activity in which students drew pictures of their “dream house”. Susan noticed that students had played close attention to the details in their drawings and descriptions (furniture, “school things”, activities of family members); “They drew very well and wrote very wonderfully, too.” The accounts furnished by both teachers implied a pleasure in the creativity and originality of outcomes they had identified. Not a mere blueprint or ‘one-off’ recipe for classroom activity, such Ideas were therefore generative of varied practices.

Not generative of new practices, and therefore clearly distinguishable from the ‘Idea’ hypothesized in our introduction, were descriptions of ready to use techniques that teachers had found useful in their classrooms. Two teachers in particular focussed on such items. Lucy described dictogloss, (Earl Stevick’s Islamabad technique), picture techniques for text memorisation and “silly grammar” (in which nonsense sentences were generated deliberately to highlight grammar features). Karen described a variety of techniques which were alternative forms of drilling, which she had attempted to implement in her classroom since training.

Less easily distinguishable from our hypothesized Ideas were concepts extracted from input that teachers had found useful since they confirmed or reinforced principles behind their existing practice. In the first case study Immaculata said of the constructionist, sociocultural theory she had studied that it “explains what is behind what I do”. As a result of her reflection on this area of theory, she felt more confident about encouraging such practices as frequent classroom groupwork within her own school. The teachers in the second case study were likewise frequently attracted to Ideas which supported, and provided a framework to explore previously noticed phenomena. Susan, for example, mentioned the benefit of her re-exposure to the precepts of the classic three stage (pre-, while and post- reading) lesson. Although she had been familiar with the model prior to the programme, she had been challenged by demonstrations to renew her application of the model. Rachel’s interest in concepts surrounding task sequencing (task chaining, facilitating tasks, target tasks, etc.) arose from their alignment with her own existing personal position that lessons could be sensitively staged so as to scaffold learners’ progression towards target activities. Although

not Ideas supportive of novelty in practice, such concepts had therefore in some cases clearly stimulated helpful developments in professional thought.

ii. Ideas can be synthesized from a variety of types of input

It was not easily possible to characterize input that seemed most likely to stimulate teachers' synthesis of generative Ideas. Teachers seemed capable of deriving inspiration from apparently abstract theory (Immaculata's "sociocultural theory"); training in methodology (Michael's "TBLT") or from demonstrations and models of a more concrete practice-oriented nature. Teachers on both programmes were eclectic, all selecting as highly useful items from the inventories such topics as reflective practice, scaffolding, creative drills, and activities with texts, valuing a wide range of kinds of input. However, an obvious and easily-observable tendency in the summary of inventory evaluations is that teachers found it easier to appropriate Ideas whose applications to their professional life seemed most plausible and imaginable. For teachers in the first case study, the concepts of "cooperative principle" and "speech act theory" from philosophy and linguistics were evaluated least favourably. For the case study two teachers, however, the data implied that teachers' preferences for Ideas correlated with their proximity to local pedagogic norms. Teachers' strongest preference was for innovations related to reading skills and strategies. Skills teaching, even in the demonstrations delivered during UK-based training, can be conducted in a fairly 'traditional' teacher-centred manner. The unfavourable response gathered for "delaying focus on form", conversely, seems clearly related to its distance from the presentation/practice procedures observed in the region. Another of the techniques rated most commonly as 'not useful' was for learner autonomy, a notion that also diverged from the teacher-fronted norms observed in local practice. This suggests that concepts likely to prove useful were not only those whose applications for practice were most easily perceived, but also those that seemed desirable or possible (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Kiely, 2013). Overall, the observation that teachers were most likely to derive inspiration from suggestions that they deemed personally likely to succeed aligns strongly with the central insight of Prabhu's (1990) article, 'There Is No Best Method-Why?'. In this, Prabhu suggests that it is teachers' sense of *plausibility* that must be engaged in order for particular teaching practices to achieve positive impact. Effective teaching, in his view, "depends centrally on whether it is informed or uninformed by the teacher's subjective sense of plausibility" ; the goal of teacher education should therefore be to "develop teachers' varied senses of plausibility" (175) .

iii. Ideas are transformed in the process of their appropriation from input.

Teachers' descriptions of Ideas also confirmed our starting assumption that they are appropriations individually synthesised from input, rather than concepts transferred in an unmediated way to form a part of the teachers' own inventory. It became clear in particular that teachers selected, modified and reorganised elements of input so as to reframe them in ways that differed considerably from their organisation in presentation. A clear example was that while two teachers spoke extensively about Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a source of inspiration, neither showed particular interest in the package of TBLT in its unified 'method' (theory and practice) form. Michael, for example, referred extensively to individual principles for practice that he captured using the label of "TBLT", but which he seemed to have detached from the methodology as more generaliseably useful Ideas. He valued for example the TBLT principle of "priming", as the need to "stimulate students' curiosity and challenge them to grope for target language points by establishing a real context/purpose". Rachel, also referring to "TBLT" as an approach label, extracted the notion of the "lesson task sequence" itself, rather than the whole ethos or approach of TBLT in general, as a key Idea that had the potential to transform local practices. In her opinion, the principle of linking facilitating tasks so that they led to the achievement of ambitious target tasks was immensely valuable, and would in future support her own assessment and training of teachers.

Highly supportive of the sense of teacher's agency in selecting and modifying content from input potential Ideas was the widespread practice in the second case study of selecting and trialling Ideas. Teachers in the second case study were willing to eliminate, or trial but drop concepts which they did not perceive as appropriate to local conditions. Lucy described an approach which was explicitly pragmatic and empirical. "In my teaching, I like to compare which way is better, if it's ok, I take it, if not, I give it up."

Conclusion

Based on our interview data, it is possible to offer a conceptualisation of the Idea that takes into account the nature of real teachers' experiences of professional change. Building on the three characteristics offered in our introduction (an input element identified and stored by a teacher as valuable; an entity appropriated rather than received from transmission; a resource for the transformation of practice) it is now also possible to propose the Idea as a class of cognition that:

- i. is distinguishable from other concepts that teachers find useful such as ready to use techniques, or theory confirming present practices
- ii. can be inspired by virtually any kind of input, but is most likely to be used by teachers when realisations for practice are both readily imaginable and apparently plausible within their own classroom
- iii. is transformed in the process of its appropriation from input; a concept selected, synthesized and adapted by the teacher and no longer necessarily (or apparently usually) framed in the same terms as it appeared in educators' presentation

Re-considering the first of these characteristics, it becomes possible to accommodate the observed features of transformative Ideas to existing theory concerning teacher cognition. An important task in making sense of our interview data has been to distinguish Ideas, as concepts that have led to transformation of practice, from other input-derived cognitions that are less productive of change. While it was a relatively simple matter to recognise in teachers' accounts the uptake of ready-to-use 'techniques' as falling into this category, our study also identified the more liminal category of concepts that teachers valued as explanatory or justifying of theories and practices that formed part of their existing repertoire. While such cognitions may no doubt have a useful impact on teachers-confirming best practice, and spurring the refinement of 'private theory'- their effect on practice is less transformative, or likely to lead to identifiable changes in practice.

Applying the perspective of teacher cognition theory, in particular Wood's (1996) model of teacher BAK, transformative Ideas can be distinguished from other forms of non- (or less-) transformative input in that they appear to represent elements of distinctively new Knowledge. They are not merely a refinement or extension of elements teachers' existing schemata, but represent new avenues of cognition which permit experimentation and investigation of novel practices. This confirms observations which can be made concerning our data which are that transformative Ideas are those which:

- i. led to avenues of teacher endeavour in areas of practice previously not undertaken (e.g. priming, communicative work above)
- ii. were generative of a variety of outcomes for practice, being flexible and reusable so as to give rise to a range of different practices (e.g. the notion of personalisation which teachers seemed able to purpose towards different kinds of lessons)

Ideas, by definition, represent understanding that is not part of teachers' present Knowledge, but have which have been catalysed by the teacher's action on new concepts to form new offshoots of (BAK) Knowledge.

Based on the second and third of the Idea characteristics derived from the study, it is possible to derive implications concerning the existing traditions of teacher training (*informing* and *responsive*) expounded in our introduction. Neither, in their current configuration, can be seen to support procedures that are ideally conducive to teachers' appropriation of useful Ideas. Based on the descriptions of change offered in teachers' interviews it can be said that the responsive tradition, with its dependence on organically emerging insights, has taken takes too little account of teachers' willingness and ability to seize apparently abstract concepts, including those belonging to 'academic' theory, and re-purpose them towards their own context. Absent from the responsive tradition is acknowledgement of the power of fresh models, frameworks and demonstrations to stimulate new thought. Procedures belonging to the informing tradition, meanwhile, with their reliance on transmission of supposedly transferable input, fail to systematically support the key process of appropriation via which concepts become the property of practitioners as soon as they are selected as potentially useful. Considering accounts of teachers' successful synthesis of transformative Ideas in our study, it is clear that their synthesis requires the active agency of the practitioner, not only at the stage of training but also in their active trialling and piloting by teachers in practice. Teachers, as we have seen, select notions they find potentially useable and plausible, frequently detaching them from the larger models that packaged them in presentation. They also carry out extensive trialling, often championing Ideas they see as useful even in the face of contextual obstacles or resistance.

Teacher education and development initiatives will benefit from a better understanding of how teacher learn and change through organised academic and professional development programmes. Programmes conforming to the informing tradition, based on policies for educational change and improved language learning on the one hand, and the expertise of teacher educators on the other, are likely to continue to be largely input-focussed. Such input is often learner-centred, and learning-centred, with limited attention to teaching and to the teacher. This can lead to a marginalising of the expertise of participating teachers, and to a diminution of the teacher agency which is means by which innovative practices are developed in classrooms. What is needed to support a process supporting teacher change is a bridging the input-classroom implementation divide. This involves engagement in a

dialogic process, where analysis of new concepts and putative practices leads to a transformation of BAK, and gradual change of lesson plans and classroom activities. A principle which can be seen to underpin our data-derived characterisation is that it positions teachers as meaning makers. They have an expertise in the requirements of their work situation, and in what is possible for them personally as teachers, and for their students in the classroom. Educators' support for and involvement and tracking of teacher initiative during and crucially after training may play an important role in itself: in the studies reported in this paper, there is a possibility that the impact on teacher learning was supported as much by the research process as by the teacher development activity. A key issue for the management of such programmes is the creation of such opportunities where a formal research process is not engaged. This calls for a teacher development curriculum, where the new can be seen as already existing, and where the rationale for doing things differently is complemented by a focus on the transition to a different set of practices. This approach is not a choice between analysis of context and personal practices on the one hand, and the transmission of new theories and techniques on the other: rather it is achievement of the former through engagement with the latter.

Biodata

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