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Teaching, Teacher Training and Applied Linguistics

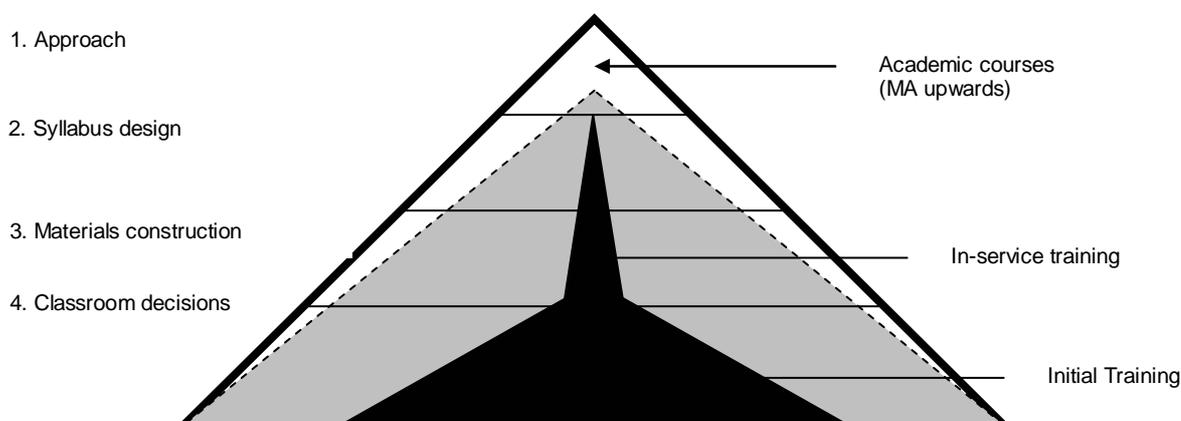
by Rod Bolitho

Language teachers, and particularly teachers of English as a second or foreign language, are under ever-increasing pressure to acquire a master's degree in addition to a post-graduate teaching certificate. A glance at the appointments columns in the educational press will confirm what many teachers already know to their cost: that state and private sector employers in many countries are, for whatever reason, insisting more and more on academic credentials as well as a basic professional qualification. In a 'buyers' market' it is clearly their perfect right to do so, and yet it is a worrying trend for those of us who value professional know-how at least as highly as academic excellence in a classroom teacher.

It is my contention that this trend is persuading far too many teachers to set their sights on professional advancement through academic prowess rather than through a more humanistic assessment of their own development needs. Add to this the worry shared by many in the field of language teaching that Applied Linguistics is an ill-defined field of activity – a young discipline with a mild identity crisis, perhaps – and some of the very real concerns of this essay begin to crystallise. In it, I will examine some recent contributions to the discussion of the relationship between theory and practice, and suggest a basis for a more healthy relationship.

In an article published in 1982 in *English Language Teaching Journal*, Christopher Brumfit and Richard Rossner offer their 'decision pyramid' model as a point of departure for their discussion of teacher training and the structure of the language teaching profession. They postulate four levels of decision (see Figure 1) and three levels of teacher training.

FIGURE 1
Decision Pyramid Model



From this it will be seen that they regard pre-service training as being essentially concerned with classroom-level decisions, and only very marginally concerned with superordinate issues of approach. In-service training is seen as legitimately concerning itself with all four levels of decision. Academic courses at M.A. level and beyond, however, are seen as only slightly concerned with the classroom, and primarily occupied with questions of syllabus design and approach. If, as I suspect, this is a fairly accurate representation of the status quo in teacher training, or even if it represents an ideal for Brumfit and Rossner, the implications are worrying for several reasons:

1. The pyramid model is hierarchical, and it implies the closing-off of avenues of professional development for all but the privileged few.
2. Even if the implied dynamic of the model is 'bottom-up', it is all too easy to see it as 'top-down' (most hierarchies work this way), in which case it places superordinate decisions, which ultimately affect what goes on in the classroom, in the hands of academics who rarely if ever see the inside of a classroom. In this sense, the model is also paternalistic; it encourages teachers to trust in those 'higher up' rather than to seek ways of tackling their own professional problems. So it is open to abuse as a justification of superiority by academics and as an excuse for doing nothing by teachers.
3. It therefore devalues teaching as a lower-order activity.
4. It is a convergent, academically-oriented model, apparently taking no account of all the other factors which might contribute to the personal and professional development of a teacher.

An alternative view, more difficult to realize graphically, would be to classify syllabus designers, material writers, teacher trainers and applied linguists (not to mention publishers and examining bodies!) as 'service providers' to the teaching profession: essentially parasites who depend on the classroom encounter, on the teaching/learning activity, for their very existence. This might help teachers to take a more robust view of their own worth and to increase their self-esteem.



In another article in English Language Teaching Journal, Henry Widdowson argues that teachers should concern themselves more with theory:

'No matter how concerned teachers may be with the immediate practicalities of the classroom, their techniques are based on some principle or other which is accountable to theory.'

and then:

'I would wish to argue, then, that language teachers have the responsibility to mediate changes in pedagogic practice so as to increase the effectiveness of language learning, and that such mediation depends on understanding the relationship between theoretical principle and practical technique. To dismiss theory is to undermine the possibility of such an understanding and to create the very conditions for the "bandwagon effect" that many who belong to the "practical brass tacks" school so vigorously criticize.'
(Widdowson 1984)

These are arguments which Widdowson reiterated emphatically in his opening address to this seminar (Widdowson 1986), and they deserve attention and comment, both in relation to the situation of schoolteachers in Hong Kong, and with a more global perspective.

Let me state straight away that my own stance is not anti-theoretical, and that I do not belong to the (largely mythical?) 'brass tacks school' which Widdowson refers to. Operating between the extremes of the spectrum which extends from an unthinking preoccupation with technique all the way to an unhealthy concentration on the abstract, there is a population of principled practitioners who, fully

aware of the priority they must accord to the routine demands of the classroom, nevertheless realize that there are areas of theory which deserve their attention as they work their way towards a better understanding of the teaching/learning process. These practitioners do not need reminding of the value of theory, but to suggest that they should be mediators between theory and practice is to misunderstand the role which theory plays in their professional lives. Applied linguists, like most people who work in academic institutions, write because publications are expected of them. It is right that they should put up their views for consideration by a wider public. Teachers, on the whole, do not need to write. Much of their creative energy goes into the classroom encounter. It is right that it should. Does that necessarily mean that teachers ought to read what applied linguists write? Most teachers would prefer to choose what they need to read, basing their decision on a realistic assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses. Like other professional people, they will need only to have the options laid out for them.

Theory is often perceived as gratuitous on pre-service courses (rightly or wrongly) since few trainee teachers have the basis of classroom experience they would need to furnish a proper perspective for theoretical issues which are dealt with, whether these are drawn from linguistics, psychology or elsewhere. Teachers in-service are constantly confronted with practical problems and may feel themselves, particularly in state education, to be too busy mediating between their students and inadequate textbooks, between their students' parents and the institution and between 1,001 other conflicting demands, to consider any more remote form of mediation. Indeed, they may point, with some justification, to areas of theory which have contributed more confusion than enlightenment to their practice in recent years: the 'communicative revolution' with all its half-baked interpretations in various contexts has led to a great deal of insecurity; conflicting theories of second language acquisition have also caused uncertainty.

A principled practitioner, however, will continue to glean what he/she can understand and use from these theories, through careful reading of journals attendance at conferences, etc. He/she will also pose questions to the theorists along the lines, maybe, of those posted by Richard Rossner to Pit Corder in a recent interview:

'But an implication of this view of language learning* is that there will be great uncertainty in the teacher's mind about what he or she should do precisely. Even if one accepts that optimum conditions for language learning have to be provided by the teacher, involving "comprehensible input" and meaningful tasks, as well as language awareness-raising activities, some tremendous questions still remain. What kind of comprehensible input – does it matter? What kinds of task – does it matter? In what order – does that matter? What guidance, if any can applied linguistics offer to these areas? Is it still the teacher's responsibility to provide a programme of work for his or her learners? What is to go into that programme?'

(Corder 1986)

* In an exchange of views with Dick Allwright, Corder has just expounded on the merits of acquiring language while focusing on something non-linguistic, allowing learners to make use of their knowledge of the world to help them to learn the 'structure' of the language.

The answers to these (any many other!) questions will, however, be worked out co-operatively if at all. It is unreasonable to expect theorists to answer them unless they spend more time in classrooms, and to expect teachers to answer them unless they have more time to think. Teachers do not take kindly to imposed decisions, handed down directly or indirectly, from higher up the pyramid, or to guilt-inducing admonitions to concern themselves more with theory.

It is, of course, to be expected that those who populate the higher slopes of the pyramid will seek to protect their own positions in the hierarchy (especially if this involves them in teaching only a few hours per week to small, motivated groups of postgraduate students, leaving abundant time for thinking, research and work in publications), and even to sell their wares.

Those who run courses at Masters' level can be expected to extol the virtues of the content of such courses, just as a double-glazing salesman might be expected to be vigorous in his attempts to sell his product. However, double-glazing has some known side-effects which are far from pleasant; in providing better heat and sound insulation to a building, for example, it often creates problems of condensation. This is clearly unsatisfactory, as the consumer's initial decision to purchase was almost certainly solution-oriented. Similarly, a teacher's decision to take, say, an M.A. in Applied Linguistics,

or in ELT is often solution-oriented, in which case the potential for disappointment is already there. The analogy had better end here, however, for a double-glazing salesman inhabits a different career pyramid from most of his customers and wields no power or influence in their respective professional spheres. Those who run Masters' courses in Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, by contrast, seem to wield considerable power and influence, and it is difficult for those lower down the pyramid to see other solutions to the dilemma surrounding professional advancement.

It is difficult, too, to go along unreservedly with the elitist position suggested by Brumfit in his otherwise excellent chapter in this book. He maintains (Brumfit 1986) that in any system there should be a 'minority of teachers who have had time off to reflect'. What are the criteria for allowing such periods of 'time off'? What are the options open to a teacher? Most paid time off is granted to teachers who are prepared to devote it to gaining a higher qualification usually on a taught course. Unpaid leave may be the only solution for those who really do need time to reflect. All too often, financial support is allocated on an arbitrary basis, or is available only to a privileged few. Unpaid leave can be contemplated only by those with considerable private means, and thus almost never by breadwinners in families. Nice as it may be for those running Diploma or Master's courses to have a steady population of sponsored or rich postgraduate students on their courses, this is not a solution to the need for professional development felt by the vast majority of teachers at some time in their careers. As long as a hierarchical system is seen to operate, there will be those who make progress and those who don't. As long as applied linguistics remain in universities and express themselves in terms which teachers find difficult to understand, but somehow feel they ought to understand, as long as the rules for professional advancement are devised by academics so that training takes place on their territory and on their terms, teachers will continue to feel inferior. As long as teaching continues to be regarded as a lower-order activity, involving high stress, large numbers of contact hours and low pay, and as long as those involved in theory have visibly less of the first two and considerably more of the last-mentioned commodity, there will be imbalance in the profession. It is unfortunately true that, for every Widdowson or Brumfit, with their valuable ideas about language and language learning, there are dozens of academics who provide little or no impetus in the profession, and who nevertheless spend long years occupying privileged positions in the hierarchy. How many university lecturers go back to teaching? And it simply will not do, given the impact of their discipline on language teaching and learning, for applied linguists to assert (as some do!) that they lay no claim to practical relevance on their courses, and that teachers who come on them have no right to expect any practical orientation. As the decision pyramid makes clear, it would be wrong to expect applied linguists to concern themselves much with technique, but the concerns of language learners and teachers must also remain those of applied linguists, otherwise their very 'raison d'être' will surely vanish.

So what ways forward are there for teachers who wish to develop personally and professionally? This is the current concern of the IATEFL* special interest group on Teacher Development, formed in 1987 in the UK. Conceived resolutely as a 'bottom-up' movement, this group has begun to explore different ways of breaking with established thinking on professional advancement. It is neither anti-intellectual nor anti-establishment in its approach. It seeks merely to explore as many different avenues as possible, thereby widening the choice for teachers. However, given the traditional emphasis on the acquisition of qualifications (very much part of the 'having' mode identified so clearly by Erich Fromm (1979)), it is perhaps natural that many of the early contributions to the work of the Teacher Development group have been concerned with 'being': being a better teacher, a better listener, a better colleague, a more balanced and integrated person. Adrian Underhill, the founder of the T.D. group, put it this way:

'What is missing from our thinking about teacher training and teacher development is a real understanding of precisely how teachers grow and change, based not on armchair theory but on the vigorous experience of what actually happens and what could happen inside ourselves, our colleagues and our students.' (Underhill 1984)

The central impetus provided by the special interest group and its newsletter 'Teacher Development' has led to the formation of local and institutional support groups of teachers in many parts of the U.K., and this seems to be helping teachers to identify and define their own development priorities, instead of having them laid out before them by those higher up the hierarchy. It is too early to say what effect these groups might have, but there must be, at the very least, a move to engage school managements in both state and private sectors in a discussion of staff development needs. The huge state investment (in most countries, not just the U.K.) in the pre-service training of teachers leads employers

to expect delivery of batches of well-prepared professionals to their institutions. The realization that all teachers need professional refreshment after a spell of wrestling with problems thrown up in the daily classroom encounter is an uncomfortable and potentially expensive one for employers. Yet the need for both personal development and professional updating remains. If it is articulated clearly and often enough by those who feel it, pressure will eventually mount for appropriate provision to be made in the career structure of every teacher, and not just the privileged few. If this involves a major shift of resources and manpower from pre-service to in-service training, and a consequent re-examination of the relationship between classroom and practice and theory, between teachers, trainers and applied linguists, so much the better. We might even see teacher-training relocated in schools and applied linguists in classrooms, listening to students and teachers, and remembering what it feels like to teach. By doing this, they will be making themselves available to teachers to co-operate on 'here and now' problems such as the preparation of suitable tests for communicative teaching programmes, designing new syllabi and teaching materials, formulating realistic learning objectives for learners at different stages of development and analyzing learners' errors and thereby they will be engaging themselves at first hand in the real world of language learning. If they were able to take this step, the basis for mutual respect and genuine interchange would soon be established.

*IATEFL – International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

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Note

'Teacher Development', the newsletter of the IATEFL special interest group is available from IATEFL.

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