Contemporary Themes in Language Teacher Education

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Introduction

In this talk I provide a contemporary overview of the field of language teacher education (LTE). Following brief comments on the global and varied scope of LTE and its relatively recent history as a field of inquiry, I examine in turn a number of central themes highlighted in current LTE literature. They are: (1) Teacher cognition; (2) The knowledge base for LTE; (3) Knowledge about language; (4) Reflective practice; (5) The practicum; and (6) Teacher research. For each theme, I highlight key specific issues of interest but also note that strong empirical evidence in relation to these central aspects of LTE is lacking. My two general conclusions are that (a) an international cross-sector review of research in LTE would be desirable and (b) that continuing enhancements to the volume and quality of systematic programmes of research in LTE are required.

Overview of LTE

Before discussing key themes in current LTE research I will comment on some issues which provide a backdrop for the subsequent analysis. For the purposes of this talk, LTE covers teacher education at both pre-service and in-service levels and in relation to second and foreign language teaching generally. In reviewing literature for this talk, it was my aim to take a global view of the field and to consider LTE research from different language teaching sectors and different parts of the world.

1. LTE as a Field of Enquiry

I’d like to make a distinction between LTE as a field of activity and LTE as a field of inquiry. As a formal field of activity, LTE dates back perhaps one hundred years or so. It isn’t a long history, but I am more concerned here with LTE as a field of inquiry. By field of inquiry I mean a field which has been theorized and which is being researched. Historically, LTE as a field of inquiry is a relatively new field, as I now explain.

2. Volume of Research in LTE

Richards & Nunan (1990) noted that the field of teacher education was a relatively unexplored one in both second and foreign language teaching; they also noted that only few of the LTE articles published in the twenty years before 1990 were data-based. Since 1990 there has been a sharp increase in the volume research on LTE. But relatively speaking, the volume of the research which is available to us is still modest. There is probably much research taking place which is not published in English and which therefore does not attract international attention. This is perhaps the case in China, where I am aware that there is great interest in LTE research; one of the challenges for you is to disseminate this work more widely so that it can have a broader impact on the field. The point I want to make here, though is that, as a field of
inquiry, LTE is still a relatively new area. There is still so much that we don’t know about the processes of LTE.

Another indicator of the status of LTE research comes from an analysis of current journals. I examined the contents pages of six well-known applied linguistics journals for the period 2005-2009. Roughly nine percent of the articles were related to teacher education. I would not say this is a very high percentage, though clearly much progress has been made in the last 20 years. I must stress here that when I say that research on LTE remains limited I am referring specifically to empirical outputs. Of course, a large volume of valuable material on LTE exists which is anecdotal, based on the writer’s experience and opinions. I am not suggesting that this work has no value for us as a field. We do, however, need to achieve a greater balance between anecdotal and empirical work in our field, and to do so we need more LTE research.

3 Six Themes in LTE

I will now move on to discuss six themes central to the LTE today: teacher cognition, the knowledge base for LTE, KAL (knowledge about language), reflective practice, the practicum, and teacher research.

3.1 Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition is a field of enquiry which focuses on the what teachers think, know and believe (Borg, 2006). It has become an established area of inquiry in the last fifteen years. Karen Johnson acknowledged the importance of teacher cognition research in the following way. She said that "many factors have advanced the field’s understanding of L2 teachers’ work, but none is more significant than the emergence of a substantial body of research now referred to as teacher cognition” (Johnson, 2006: 235).

As a result of teacher cognition research, there are a number of issues which we can take for granted today in LTE. One, for example, is that how and what teachers learn is shaped by their prior experience, knowledge and beliefs. Another established point to emerge from teacher cognition research is that what teachers do is shaped by interactions between cognitions and context. It is now clear too that teacher education initiatives will be more effective when they take account of teachers’ cognitions. Of course, although teacher cognition research is well-established and has contributed greatly to our understandings of LTE, there is still much more work to be done in this area.

3.2 The Knowledge Base for LTE

The knowledge base for language teaching refers to what language teachers need to know. Decisions about the knowledge base are central to the content of teacher education programmes, as such content will reflect views about what teachers need to know. Traditionally, the knowledge base of language teaching has been divided into two separate domains—knowledge of language and knowledge of teaching. Current thinking in the field, however, conceptualizes the knowledge base for LTE in much more complex terms. Richards (1998), for example, proposes a scheme made up of six types of knowledge (theories of teaching, teaching skills, communication skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning and decision-making skills, and contextual knowledge). One feature of such contemporary typologies is the inclusion of knowledge which is internal to and created by teachers (e.g. personal theories and beliefs). This contrasts with views of the knowledge base for teaching which see it exclusively in terms of external knowledge which teachers must acquire and then apply.

Current views of the knowledge base for LTE thus acknowledge that:

- Teacher knowledge is not just a simple matter of language and methodology.
- It is multi-faceted and integrated. This is a key contemporary concept in LTE and it suggests that, in working with teachers, keeping knowledge of language and knowledge of methodology separate may not be the most productive way to proceed. Teachers need to utilize their knowledge of language and their knowledge of methodology in an integrated way. So the challenge for us is what can we do to prepare teachers for that challenge?
- Both external and internal knowledge inform the knowledge base for LTE. External knowledge is knowledge generated externally by others, not by teachers themselves. Academics doing research generate the external knowledge which teachers may encounter. It is recognized today, though, that teachers also generate
knowledge themselves. Acknowledging this knowledge and supporting its development are important facets in contemporary approaches to LTE. Thus not only have we moved away from the simple dichotomy between the language and methodology but also from the view that the knowledge base for LTE is a purely external one.

3.3 Knowledge about Language

Knowledge about language is of course part of the knowledge base. Stephen Andrews is perhaps the researcher most associated with recent work on teachers’ language awareness. He says that “the possession of an adequate level of TLA is an essential attribute of any competent L2 teacher” (Andrews, 2007: ix) and this raises numerous questions for us as language teacher educators. For most of these questions we currently do not have adequate answers:

- What kinds of KAL do teachers need? What precisely do they need to know about language?
- How best might this knowledge be acquired? Traditionally, knowledge about language has been taught through courses on linguistics. The goal of such courses very often is to equip teachers with sound linguistic knowledge of English. I think there are increasingly questions about whether such courses are the best way to help teachers develop the knowledge about language which they can use productively in the classroom.
- How can the theoretical and procedural dimensions of KAL be integrated? The theoretical dimension of knowledge about language is what teachers know about the language. But there is also a procedural dimension to KAL—how to teach the language. In teaching language, the teacher draws on theoretical and procedural knowledge in an integrated manner. How we can support the development of such integrated knowledge through LTE?
- How do teachers use KAL? What precisely do teachers do with their knowledge about language?

More recently, James Lantolf, has commented on the development of knowledge about language in the context of FLTE in North America. His view is that there is not enough space dedicated to developing language awareness in pre-service programmes for FLT and he suggests that “foreign language teacher education programme need to (re) invest in courses designed to enhance the depth and breadth of explicit knowledge of the target language (TL) of their graduates” (Lantolf, 2009: 70).

3.4 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is another contemporary theme in LTE. It is widely discussed (in education generally as well as in LTE) and the general disposition towards reflective practice seems to be a positive one. There is a general acceptance of the view that by reflecting on experience teachers can grow professionally. For example, Farrell (2008a: 1) states that “the use of the reflective practice in teacher professional development is based on the belief that teachers can improve their own teaching by consciously and systematically reflecting on their teaching experiences”. This is the general assumption much activity in reflective practice in LTE. Burton (2009: 300) also says that “most teacher educators would argue that reflection is an essential tool in professional development”. I do think we can argue with the proposition that reflective practice has the potential to support teacher development. In practice, though, reflection in LTE merits more critical analysis than it is often awarded.

One particular point that deserves closer attention relates to the evidence that exists to support claims about the value of reflective practice in LTE (see also Akbari, 2007). I would argue that there is in fact limited empirical evidence of this kind and that reflective practice is an issue where publications based on opinions or experience or anecdotes have been very influential. We do, however, need more research which documents reflective practice in LTE. In particular, we need evidence of how teachers respond to the challenges that being asked to reflect creates for them. I have encountered many situations where teachers are frustrated because they are told to go away and reflect but they haven’t really grasped what it is they are expected to do. So one fundamental problem with reflective practice in LTE is that very often teachers are not being given enough support in understanding what the concept itself means. Teachers are told to write journals about their teaching. But unless teachers understand what it is they are being asked to do and why the exercise may not be a particularly productive one for them. There are also many contexts where there are severe constraints on the extent to which teachers can reflect. Teachers are of-
ten extremely busy, their main tasks are teaching, planning, and marking students’ work, and there is rarely little time for anything else. So asking them to reflect raises the question as to when precisely that activity is meant to take place.

Another issue related to reflective practice concerns the extent to which it should be a voluntary or compulsory activity. There’s an interesting tension here because many definitions of professional development include the word “voluntary”, and so the idea of enforced reflection raises interesting questions. Such questions are studied in A’Dhahab (2009). She examined what precisely teachers were doing with the reflection sheets that administrators had provided and which teachers had to complete after their lessons. The analysis of teachers’ comments showed that they were simply fulfilling the administrative requirement to fill in the box, and writing comments such as “the lesson went well” or “students enjoyed the lesson”. The researcher concluded that her analysis “raises serious questions about how precisely teachers are benefiting from the current system of reflective writing. There is a sense perhaps in which for most teachers it is an administrative requirement more than a tool for professional development” (A’Dhahab, 2009: 11).

I sense that this is the reality that reflective practice currently represents for many language teachers around the world—it is something they are required to do, without a clear understanding of why and how, and in contexts where the conditions may not support reflection. There is a need for more LTE research into how reflection operates in such contexts, and in others where more success is evident.

### 3.5 The Practicum

The practicum is an established part of most pre-service language teacher education programmes, and it involves sending student teachers into schools for short or long periods. The basic idea behind the practicum is that teachers will learn through experience of being in a classroom observing more experienced teachers and teaching themselves. If we look at the LTE literature a number of points in relation to the practicum can be made:

- There is much literature about supervising student teachers on the practicum.
- Numerous claims are made about effective supervision of the practicum; for example, the view that supervisors should be non-directive is a common one.
- There has been some periodic research into the practicum. Overall, though, there is no sustained research base. We do not have a solid and extensive body of research focusing on the practicum which allows us to make confident decisions about how to work as language teacher educators. We do need to be very careful as language teacher educators in assessing the extent to which what we read about the practicum is based on sound evidence and to distinguish this from anecdotal claims based on experience.

There are a number of key issues relevant to the practicum which are in need of research:

- What learning occurs on the practicum? The assumption is the practicum is a valuable learning experience to student teachers. What is it precisely that they learn?
- What are the processes through which teacher learning occurs during the practicum? Does observing experienced teachers contribute? Is direct teaching by student teachers followed by post lesson discussion a productive learning experience for them? Is getting student teachers to plan and teach in pairs a process that supports teacher learning?
- What forms of support promote teacher learning on the practicum? We might have a university supervisor. We might have a school-based mentor. Very often it is a combination of the two. Which of these configurations is more productive and under what conditions?
- What roles do supervisors play in shaping teacher learning on the practicum? How powerful an influence are they? A study of the practicum in Kenya (Ong’Ondo & Borg, in press), for example, shows that supervisors’ practices may have actually limited student teacher learning.
- How can we reconcile assessment and learning? The practicum needs to be assessed but assessment and learning do not always sit comfortably together. How can supervisors reconcile this tension?
- What impact does the practicum have on later teaching? Does the practicum have any lasting impact?

### 3.6 Teacher Research

One of many definitions of teacher research is “systematic intentional enquiry by teachers about
their own school and classroom work” (Lytle & Cochran-Smith 1990: 84). Numerous benefits for teacher research are claimed in the literature. For example, it allows teachers to become more autonomous and critical, and even leads to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. But what precisely do we know in empirical terms about these benefits? In education generally, Zeichner (2003: 307), for example, notes that “there are relatively few cases where the professional development process associated with teacher research has been systematically studied”. This applies I would argue to LTE too, where there is a huge gap between claims that are made for the benefits of teacher research and the claims which are actually supported with empirical evidence. I believe very strongly in the value of teacher research but also believe that it also presents teachers with numerous challenges and that perhaps in LTE we haven’t always been sufficiently sensitive towards these challenges. More generally, there are several key issues in teacher research which merit further empirical attention:

- What precisely does research mean to teachers? Teachers will often have a notion of what research is but that notion may not be a helpful one in relation to teacher research. Typically I have found that when you ask teachers “what is research?” they tend to refer to issues such as statistical work involving questionnaires and hundreds of people. That is one type of research, but probably not the type that’s going to be productive for teachers. I am not suggesting that teacher research is a lower-quality of level of research—it does need to be rigorous and systematic. But very often teachers come to teacher research with unhelpful notions of what research is and that interferes with the process.

- What are head teachers’ and teacher educators’ views? We mustn’t forget that head teachers, administrators and teacher educators themselves also have conceptions of what research is. Those conceptions very often become obstacles to teacher research. So if as a teacher educator your view of research is that it needs to be large scale and statistical, then that’s the notion you are going to promote with teachers. Research into what those who have influence over teachers think about research is thus another area where more evidence is needed.

- What conditions facilitate teacher research? There’s been some work on this issue, but again much more needs to be done in particular contexts. What kinds of conditions are likely to facilitate teacher research? What kinds of conditions are likely to hinder it? And what can we do to address the hindrances? It’s a fundamental question for us to think about as language teacher educators.

- Can we provide empirical evidence of the benefits of teacher research? Many academics say that teacher research is not really serious inquiry. Can we provide evidence of teachers engaging in teacher research, of the systematic ways in which they do so, and of the way the process benefits them and their learners? If we start accumulating this kind of evidence then we will have more ammunition with which to respond to people who do not believe that teacher research is serious.

- Does teacher research impact on learning? It might be beneficial to teachers but ultimately teachers are there to promote learning.

### 3.7 Other Themes in LTE

Here are some additional themes of contemporary interest in LTE:

- The impact of LTE is an issue that I find particularly interesting at the moment. As language teacher educators we believe that our work makes a difference. But there is limited empirical work which documents evidence of the ways in which LTE does so. How can we collect evidence to demonstrate that LTE does make a difference of some kind?

- Teacher educator development. Very little research evidence exists about the development of language teacher educators themselves. How do they become language teacher educators? What are their understandings of their work? What challenges do they face? What makes a language teacher educator “effective”? These are just some of the questions that merit attention.

- Novice teachers. How do they make the transition from being student teachers to qualified teachers? What do we know empirically about their experiences? I think experientially we know a lot because we all work with these people but empirically in terms of research not much has been published (but see Farrell, 2008b).

- Teacher expertise. The goal of teacher education or of teacher development is to help teachers to become more expert. What processes are involved in becoming an expert teacher? There are one or two well-known publications...
on this topic, but much more work of this kind is needed.

4 Conclusion

There are two general points I would like to make in concluding this talk. One is that, while LTE is a global activity, the work being conducted in different fields of LTE remains somewhat disconnected. For example, how does the work on LTE in TESOL relate to that in MFL in Europe? How does EFL teacher education connect with thinking in the ESOL and English language learner sectors? Cross-sector links of this kind are not particularly evident. However, it is clear that innovative work being conducted in particular LTE sectors may be of value to the field generally. This applies conceptually, empirically, and in more practical terms. It would seem that a review of LTE literature which looked globally at thinking, research, and practice would be an invaluable resource for language teacher educators. The production of such a review, placing it in the context of what is known about mainstream teacher education generally, therefore, is my first suggestion for future work in LTE.

My second concluding point is that, while significant progress has been made in LTE research in the last 20 years, there is much scope for the continued strengthening of the empirical base in LTE. I think we need more systematic programmes of research with scope for replication across different contexts. There is evidence of much uncoordinated research taking place with limited reference to similar work occurring elsewhere; there is also much valuable research taking place which is not reaching a wider audience, and this suggests that attention to ways of disseminating LTE research more globally would also be a worthwhile for researchers in our field. Finally, there is a need in LTE for us to be more aware of research taking place in teacher education more generally, not just in LTE.

References


Notes

① This paper is based on a plenary address given at the Third National Symposium on Foreign Language Teacher Education and Development held in Chongqing in December 2009. The plenary was itself based on a chapter entitled Language teacher education which is to appear in Simpson, J. (ed). The Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics.