

The Transformative Language Teacher Training

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Abstract

Experiential language teaching training programs are a good example of transformative training for FL instructors in a post-method era. Experiential language teaching training programs which are following the premises purported by Kolb experiential cycle (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation) best illustrate and represent the transformative learning process by providing a multilayered process. Language teachers often start by learning in place and only later go back to receive a formal language pedagogical education. Thus, the common traits of thinking, knowing and reflecting essential to the professional growth process tend to drift back and forth from contingent needs to pedagogical inquiries. Consequently, the model of professional teacher training programs, especially for those who teach their own language, mirror the internal self-referential nature of what we do in the classroom. The reflective process included in experiential professional development programs should also include a direct confrontation with a multitude of realities that are becoming part of our changing profession. In this presentation, I will illustrate the phases of the reflective process and interface them with the corresponding inner and outer work that the FL teacher must undertake. I will provide samples of experiential and reflective activities useful to the profession.

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1. Introduction

In *Educating second language teachers: the same thing done differently* [1] Donald Freeman lists three main paths undertaken by language teachers' education within the disciplinary track of teachers' education: with the born expertise, the made over time; and the learning in place track. These do not occur in the same sequence for everybody. Language teachers often start by learning in place and only later go back to receive a formal language pedagogical education. Thus, the common traits of thinking, knowing and reflecting essential to the professional growth process tend to drift back and forth from contingent needs to pedagogical enquiries. Thus, the nature of professional teacher training programs, especially for those who teach their own language, mirror the internal self-referential nature of what we do in the classroom. It can be a challenge and an opportunity to overcome the limitations of auto-referentiality.

What do we mean by self-referentiality? Languages are the lifeblood of social interactions, and the language teacher can become the content and the agent of his own classroom.

It means to see yourself as the agent and instrument at the same time. Let's make the example of a native speaker of English who teaches English as a second or foreign language. It requires a specific effort for such an instructor to detangle from *what* he or she may teach and *being* the object of what it is taught. As the Irish poet Yeats once wrote "*how can you know the dancer from the dance?*"[3].

Consequently, a coherent professional development track is quite complicated by the asymmetric path that may lead the language instructor into the teaching profession. For these reasons, the reflective process included in professional development programs not only is essential but should also include a direct confrontation with the multitude of realities that are becoming part of our changing profession, from migrations to globalization and the reshaping of language the class. It is unsettling to forget such debate in the name of market demand.

In this presentation, I will outline the main characteristics of concepts underpinning professional developments programs, and illustrate the phases of the reflective process interfacing the inner and outer work that takes place during some specific moments of elaboration and professional growth. Moreover, I will provide samples of experiential and reflective activities and techniques useful to the profession.

Let's begin by differentiating between Teacher Training and Teacher Development. As Freeman points out, training is characterized by a direct and specific intervention normally focused on a timely purpose. Development instead, is normally framed as an indirect intervention or an individual and idiosyncratic path. Training and Development do not always follow the same path, in fact, sometimes they collide. How is it possible? What happens after the collision?

It happens when there are differences within the institutional structures that enable the training and the sense-making of the individual. For example, if the school where one language teacher works organizes a training events focused on a specific intervention and the instructor is operating solely based on the experience acquired in the classroom, we could predict that the training will not be very effective in transforming the views of that individual. We will come back to expand on the concept of transformation and transformative processes.

M.J. Wallace's *Training foreign language teachers: A reflective approach* [2] marks the metamorphoses of the concept of experience, henceforward experiential learning. Wallace singled out four models that delineated the professional initiation to the teaching profession(Fig. 1).

Models:

- the craft model (apprentice-expert)
- the rationalist model (scientific knowledge/ application of scientific knowledge/ practice/ refinement/practice)
- the case study model (observations)
- the integrative model (knowledge/experience/practice/reflection)

(Figure 1. Four Models of Teacher Education)

First and foremost, starting with Wallace the notion of "experience" dramatically takes an epistemological turn: from practice to process and back. Reflection is now the trigger of the new experiential cycle. Metacognitive processes which had already being introduced by Dewey provide the necessary ground for the inclusion of the personal knowledge and experience of the practitioner in the mix pivoting professional development, training and education in the last 20 years.

Traditionally, the transfer of content into practice was the domain of methods. Teaching competencies were measured by acquiring skills and techniques dictated more or less coherently by various methods. The communicative approach brought more flexibility to the classroom by allowing a transactional relationship between teacher and student. However, in the current post-method era, classroom roles have become more fuzzy. Student-centered classroom have decentralized the instructor's role and pushed him to embrace the role of the enabler or facilitator. This new role implies the refinement of skills that might have not been so central in the past. Namely, observation skills, metacognitive skills and the willingness to self-examine their own professional efforts and challenge their assumptions, needless to say, the ability to address change and re-direct any coveted achievements, if necessary.

The tools used in the classroom can be difficult to untangle from daily social and professional dynamics and interferences from the outside world. One of the most effective example of transformative training for FL instructors in a post-method era are the experiential language teaching training programs that are following the premises purported by Kolb experiential cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation. Experiential teaching and training models provide a multilayered approach to allow the instructor to translate observations into decision-making and directions. Experiential training also combines a closer examination of strategies: thinking as problem solving, organizational strategies and delivery strategies, all attributes that are normally the domain of instructional design. However, training based on the experiential cycle does not focus on an endless chain of reflections and speculations, on the contrary, it allows the unpacking of ideas while experimenting on learning.

I will conclude with an example that may illustrate how the skills described above get activated in the application of the Kolb's experiential cycle.

1.2 Example

Training instructional objectives: task design and implementation of task principles.

Phase 1. (Kolb's concrete experience). The facilitator introduces the following scenario to a group of FL instructors (trainees) who will act like students in an ESL class: you are working as tour guides of this area for one day and have been assigned a group of 30 teenagers from (language specific country). 2 of them have special needs (facilitator distributes 2 cards describing the needs). You also have a limited budget of \$600. Write an appropriate and complete itinerary for the day, include as many details as possible since this itinerary will be submitted to the group Team Leader.

The FL instructors (student's roles) will prepare the itinerary and present it to the class. If the group of trainees is large, they should be divided in several small groups (4-5 people). The presentation simulates what would actually happen in the classroom, therefore, it is important that it is performed entirely, including the possible competitiveness that would arise in the classroom.

Phase 2. (Kolb's reflective observation). The trainees will be re-directed by the facilitator to think about the activity that they have just performed. The facilitator will be asking questions prompting the instructors to think about what happened during the activity when they were operating as students/guides. Facilitator will help in breaking down the learning process in all its components.

Phase 3. (Kolb's generalization). The facilitator captures the main points expounded by the trainees and help to generalize the concepts of task design, guiding the trainees to find the correlations in the itinerary-building task. Facilitator invites the trainees to consolidate the conceptual understanding into publishable principles.

Phase 4. (Kolb's experimentation). The facilitator invite the trainees to explore other situated applications of task design and why would a task-like activity would be useful for language learning instead of another kind of activity.

The experiential cycle can be applied for virtually all the activities and practices commonly used in the classroom: from info gaps to structured input activities. In my 10 year experience as a trainer and workshops designers, the most relevant factor is the heightened awareness that I witness throughout the training. The outcomes are usually very tangible and I had the opportunity to collect evidences from a variety of quality control and assessment tools, which include follow-up classroom observations, direct testimonials and input from the language instructors stating that the experiential training helps the instructor to thoughtfully sequence their instruction and organize their lesson.

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