An Attempt to Empower Teachers in Education: An Epistemological Look

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Abstract—**A teacher, as a cultural broker and the inheritor, critic and interpreter of culture, can be used to orient discussion and action in a particular direction. The knowledge that teachers need to have is more complicated than just knowing and using facts. The paper, incompatible with positivistic epistemological movement, holds that the complexity of classroom dynamics cannot be achieved simply by transmitting knowledge. Teacher education is an attempt to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and skills that they require to perform their tasks more effectively. Thus, training teachers obviously involves equipping them with various objects of culture and different types of knowledge essential to their cultural training. The present study, in disfavor with the simplicity orientation in positivism, holds that the reality in the classroom life is so complicated that we cannot achieve it by setting up clinical experimental designs.**

Index Terms—**knowledge base, positivism, teacher education, socioculturalism**

I. INTRODUCTION

Human learning is embedded in a social context and is distributed across persons, tools, and activities. Unlike behavioral and cognitive theories of learning, a sociocultural perspective argues that higher level human cognition in the individual has its origins in social life. This perspective is inspired by the work of Vygotsky (1978) who assumes that human cognition is formed by getting involved in social activities, and that it is the social interaction and the culturally constructed materials, signs, and symbols (semiotic artifacts) that mediate those relationships that create high level human cognition. Consequently, cognitive development is an interactive process, mediated by culture, context, language, and social interaction. In fact, language development in individuals, unlike physical growth, does not happen in isolation. Put differently, Davis (2002) holds "whether or not thereis, as some maintain, a language faculty in the mind. Those who are brought up in isolation… do not acquire language or do so only minimally" (p. 49). In effect, as to Davis, "language is as much social as it is psychological or cognitive" (p.49). Along the same vein, Johnson (2009) puts forth that cognitive development is neither a matter of enculturation nor even appropriation of existing sociocultural resources and practices, but the reconstruction and transformation of those resources and practices in ways that are responsive to both individual and local needs. On the critical role of social dimension, Davis (2002) claims, "it is the social that provides the cultural and political norms that make the use of that structure appropriate and meaningful" (p. 49). Thus, language teachers cannot be value free (Pennycook, 1994, cited in Davis, 2002). In a sense, it calls on a necessity for language teacher education to consider both micro and macro concerns in the very field. By micro concerns, it is meant that learning takes place through social interaction, while macro concerns are deeply embedded in the claim that speech communities are associated with norms and values. Accordingly, Davis (2002) puts forth:

This micro-macro contrast captures a traditional division in sociolinguistics. The micro view considers the ways in which society intersects with language, dealing with topics such as accent stratification by social class and gender influence on language use, while the macro view takes account of the involvement of language in society and is concerned with topics such as language they plan to teach; they know the rules cognitively. (pp. 49-50)

The epistemology of teacher education is concerned with empowerment. That is, to facilitate the process of education, students have to be made powerful through their knowledge. Henceforth, to the present writers, the so-called power cannot be achieved without an adequate grasp of social dimension.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

If we take a broad view of educational trends and approaches, we can outline three phases of thoughts: (1) perennialism, (2) positivism, and (3) progressivism. The first phase that emerged in Middle Ages pursues the

perennialist perspective in philosophy. That is, "there exists a ready-made body of knowledge; a set of objective truths which is essential for the individual to acquire" (Darling &Nordendo, 2003, p. 293). Accordingly, perennialism reflects conservatism of ideas and looks to the past for subject matter in the curriculum (Ediger & Rao, 2003). Perennialism, as Noroozi (2010) puts forth, deals with a realistic philosophical base. Its instructional objectives are to educate the rational person; its main focus is on preserving the past. Thus, as Darling and Nordendo (2003) maintain, "the job of education is, put simply, to transport the divine truth to the human-soul from beyond, for the sake of the salvation of this inner soul" (p. 298). The mimetic nature of such philosophy elucidates that nothing is going to be discovered as everything is uncovered and will be presented. However, Darling and Nordendo, argue that what is transported is often not really knowledge at all as it makes no impact, is not permanent and involves no understanding.

The second phase, positivism, appears from the Renaissance onwards. Although the existence of ready-made knowledge is still existed, this knowledge, as Darling and Nordendo claim, is not a divine revelation from the world beyond, but it is constructed in the secular realm during continual realm of scientific development. "Still knowledge is transported but now it is for the sake of the salvation of existing world" (Darling & Norendo, 2003, p. 298). What is common both here and in the first perspective (i.e., perennialism) is the mimetic. Mimetic learning, learning by imitation, constitutes one of the most important forms of learning which were dominant in these two phases. Recall that mimetic learning does not, however, just denote mere imitation or copying. As Wulf (2004, cited in Wulf, 2008) insists:

Mimetic learning is productive; it is related to the body, and it establishes a connection between the individual and the world as well as other persons; it creates practical knowledge, which is what makes it constitutive of social, artistic, and practical action. Mimetic learning is cultural learning and as such it is crucial to teaching and education. (p. 56)

To better appreciate the concept of mimetic learning, a contrast made by Wulf (2008) between Plato's and Aristotle's views seems to facilitate our understanding. According to Plato, young people's education and learning is made possible by their mimetic desire to follow a role model. The philosophy behind the role model is that human shortcomings will be overcome and improvement will be achieved if individuals follow the very model. Aristotle, in contrast, held that negative role models must also be available. In fact, he believed that it is only in dealing with negative role models that resistance to them and personal strength can develop. The educational implication of Aristotle's mimetic perspective is present in political education, for instance. Accordingly, stead-fast political opinions develop by dealing with different opinions critically rather than avoiding them.

In progressivism, mimetic principle is finger-nagged (Darling & Nordendo, 2003). Knowledge is acquired personally through learning from experience. Parallel to this argument, in experiential learning, learners' immediate personal experiences are taken as the point of departure for deciding how to organize the learning process (Nunan, 1999). Kolb (1987, cited in Nunan, 1999) is also of the contention that experiential learning builds a bridge from the known to the new by moving from the learners' experience. Similarly, Kohonen (1987, cited in Nunan, 1999) believes that experiential learning not only facilitates personal growth, but also helps learners adapt to social change. Moreover, it takes into account that the differences in learning ability are responsive to learners' needs.

This shift from perennialism to progressivism, according to Sadker and Zittleman (2006), has a strong inclination toward pragmatist philosophy. There is not much space to deal with pragmatism except to maintain that the cornerstone of it is the linking between theory and practice. Pragmatism describes a process where a theory is extracted from practice. Here teachers are not simple consumers of theories constructed by other practitioners, but they themselves are theorizers constructing theories and making use of them. In effect, inspired by Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, Flanagan (1994) stresses the priority of experience over theory.

A. A Shift from Positivism to Socioculturalism

Richards (1990) used the term teacher education to refer to the preparation— both training and education of L2 teachers. To Richards, second language teacher education serves goals such as offering opportunities for the novice to discover and acquire what effective teachers do. Nevertheless, research into how best to train teachers to maximize their effectiveness in the classroom only really took off in the last decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it still lacks a pre-paradigmatic and epistemological base (Grenfell, Kelly, & James, 2003). To refer to teacher education as pre-paradigmatic is to see it as somewhat lacking a consensual view, not only concerning what it is and what its processes are, but indeed the very language we employ to talk about it. From epistemological point of view, two co-lateral movements are now having direct influence on English foreign language instruction at all levels, that is, positivism and socioculturalism.

Positivism, according to Shulman (1986), has had the greatest impact on the concept of language teacher education of the past century. Positivism rests on the idea that reality exists apart from the knower and can be discovered through systematic processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Positivists consider knowledge as objective and identifiable and represent generalizable truths. In other words, knowledge is out there and can be captured through the use of scientific methods. In educational research, positivists are in search for identifying patterns of good teaching and finding out what effective teachers do that leads to student achievement. In an educational field, from a positivist epistemological perspective, knowledge about teaching and learning can be transmitted to teachers by others usually in the form of lectures and readings which often take place outside the walls of classroom. Consequently, classroom is considered as a site of decontextualized knowledge. Since the early 1980s, critics take a very clear stance against

positivism. The most common complaints are the oversimplified, depersonalized and decontextualized nature of the underlying assumptions of the very teaching.

However, from a sociocultural epistemological perspective, learning to teach is based on the assumption that knowing, thinking, and understanding come from participation. In fact, knowledge is valued for its utility; it must prepare us for the rest of life. In the same vein, Davis (2002) puts forth that a sociocultural perspective on human learning feeds several interrelated aspects of L2 teacher education. First, it provides a theory of mind that helps us to trace how teachers come to know. Second, teacher education is not only a process of enculturation but a dynamic process of reconstructing and transforming those practices to be responsive to both individual and local needs. Lastly, it provides both the content and processes of L2 teacher education. In a sense, it is well established in teacher cognition literature that teachers typically ground their understanding of teaching and learning as well as their notions about how to teach. Thus, L2 teachers typically enter the profession with largely unarticulated, yet deeply ingrained, notions about what language is, how it is learned and how it should be taught.

B. Teacher Cognition

The reconceptualization of how teachers learn to do their work and how they carry out their work is now known as teacher cognition. Teacher learning is understood as normative and life-long; it is built through experiences. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) argue that teacher education must lay the foundation for life-long learning, with the ultimate goal of "helping teachers become professionals who are adaptive experts" (p. 359) Adaptive experts, they argue, are able to balance efficiency and innovation. In other words, they are able to master skills and strategies to plan, manage, carry out, and assess teaching and learning activities besides adapting and adjusting to the complexities embedded in those activities so as to make sound instructional decisions within their teaching context.

Teacher educators have to make sense of their learning and teaching. Brandenburg (2008) uses the term *assumption hunting*. To better appreciate the concept of assumption hunting, he referred to Brookfield's (1995) categorization of assumptions—paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal. According to Brookkfield, paradigmatic assumptions bare the basic structuring maxims we use to order the world into fundamental categories. Paradigmatic assumptions represent one's reality of facts that he believes to be true. For example, it is my own belief that democratic practices should underpin teaching and learning. The second type of assumption (i.e., prescriptive) is concerned with what we think ought to be happening in a particular situation. The last one, causal assumption, helps us understand how the world works and the conditions under which processes can be changed.

Besides plausible understanding of one's own learning and teaching, a teacher educator is highly concerned with the notion of L2 teacher knowledge base. The knowledge base refers to not only what second language teachers need to know to be effective, but it also deals with the way that knowledge is incorporated into second language teacher education (Tedick, 2005). In this regard, the knowledge base of L2 teacher education, grounded in the positivist epistemological perspective, is the basis upon which we make decisions about how to prepare L2 teachers to do the work of this profession. Critically speaking, Freeman and Johnson's (1998) reconceptualization of the knowledge base, from positivistic perspective, appears to rest on two charges that are against language teacher education:

First, they argue that people designing language teacher education programs typically fail to take into account, at the level of curriculum design, what we know about general teacher learning; second, they argue that language teacher education programs also typically fail to deal with the social context of schools and schooling (p. 6).

Like Freeman and Johnson (1998) who say teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills, Tarone and Allwright (2005) also claim the belief that a novice can become an effective second language teacher by taking a set of content courses on teaching, learning, and language structures, and so developing a body of declarative knowledge about what language teaching and learning involve is an academic fallacy that should be ruled out. What Tarone and Allwright (2005) refer to as *the non-interface fallacy* asserts that language teachers can only acquire the ability to teach language in the context of the language classroom itself; no teacher learning can take place outside that context. Accordingly, they claim that things consciously learned in academic content courses can have no impact on actual language teaching. However, one needs more than the ability to speak a language fluently and to manage a classroom if one is to be an effective second-language teacher.

Needless to say, courses in applied linguistics do seem to have the potential to be successful in changing novice teachers' conceptions about language and language teaching. However, "helping teachers acquire knowledge and conceptions about language learning alone is not enough to significantly change their teaching, perhaps because the learning activities the teacher engaged in were not analogous to those activities they engaged in as teachers" (Bartels, 2005, p. 408). In fact, subjective understanding of what teachers can do enhances their effectiveness in classrooms. By the same token, teachers are supposed to be the theorizers or constructors of their own knowledge. Seen from this stance, the teachers will be able to transfer this knowledge to the activities and context of L2 teaching (Bartels, 2005).

C. Processes of Language Teacher Education

Richards and Nunan (1990) speak of a paradigm shift in teacher education from "approaches that view teacher preparation as familiarizing student teachers with techniques and skills to apply in the classroom," (p. 11) to "approaches that involve teachers in developing theories of teaching, understanding the nature of teacher decision

making, and strategies for critical self-awareness and self-evaluation" (p. 11).This movement in teacher education has resulted in viewing learning as knowledge creation.

The lack of congruity between research and practice is always a source of tension. In physics, researchers always claim that teachers ignore their findings and teachers complain that researchers never consider the reality of the classrooms. This dysfunction (Clarke, 1994, cited in Johnston & Irujo, 2001), according to Johnston and Irujo (2001), is an ever present source of tension. In second language education, unlike physics, researchers often research their own settings or settings they work in or are familiar with and the topics raised from issues faced by practitioners. Thus, we do not have such a tension since the gap somehow between practice and theory is little. In fact, teachers are not mere consumers of other's products. They take an innovative role, a theorizer. In a nutshell, dealing with programs developed or changed in response to particular contexts, we need information about the effect of such adaptations. In fact, there has been a shift in studies from those concerning "this is what we do," to studies representing "this is why we do it." Now we need studies that will tell "this is what happens when we do it" (Johnston & Irujo, 2001, p. 7).

Wallace (1991, cited in Grenfell, et al., 2003) sums up three culturally centric models for training teachers. The term culturally centric denotes that such models are the product of a particular perspective. In fact, what Wallace sometimes refers to as 'sitting with Nellie' is the *Craft Model Approach*. Here the would-be trainee works alongside with the master craftsman. Skills are passed on by a process of osmosis, conservation, mimicry, questioning, and guidance. The second model, *the Applied Science Model Approach*, involves that discoveries from the human sciences are passed on to trainees as a guide for teaching practice. We can see such a process, not only in the way that behavioristic psychology shaped second language learning and teaching in the 1960s, but also in the way this approach was later eclipsed by Chomskyan linguistics, with its implications in terms of generative language and the human language acquisition device. Third, the *Reflective Practitioner Model Approach* is certainly based on practice. Although scientific theory is available, trainees are encouraged to think about, or reflect on, both.

Broadly speaking, reflection acts as a bridge between theory and practice. It is in the relationship between the two that professional knowledge develops. The term 'Reflective Practitioner' became popular following the publication of Donald Schön's book of that title in 1983. Here, Schön (1983, cited in Grenfell, et al, 2003) attempts to provide an 'epistemology of practice' to show how practical knowledge is unified, integrated, and highly context dependent. Such reflection is a pervasive *condition* rather than a sequence of discrete events. It is also dependent on context: time and place. Schön (1983, cited in Grenfell, et al, 2003) calls on a necessity to differentiate between reflection *on* action and reflection *in* action, and relates this to knowledge *on* action and knowledge *in* action.

D. Sociocultural and Political Contexts of Language Teacher Education

A good teacher always takes into account the sociopolitical and sociocultural context when examining aspects of teacher education and teacher development (Johnson & Irujo, 2001). As Grenfell and colleagues (2003) put forth "the training of teachers has a strategic role in preparing Europe's education systems to meet the challenges of change, and to equip students to respond effectively to those challenges" (p. 20). Grenfell et. al., also, maintain "education is deeply rooted in social and political context, responding to the changes taking place and also helping to shape the pattern of change" (p. 20). Henceforth, to enable language teachers to take full advantage of linguistic knowledge in their teaching, applied linguistic classes must dedicate a considerable amount of time to helping novice teachers develop and engage in a variety of deliberate practice activities. Bartels (2005) holds such activities should have the following characteristics:

1. They should work on solving the kind of problems of procedure and understanding that language teachers regularly face in their practice.

2. They should focus on procedures used in language teaching or which could be used in a cognitively efficient way.

3. They should help novice teachers develop schemata of language learners and language teaching, especially schemata of information that is task-relevant and task-non relevant for a variety of language teaching situations.

4. They should focus on helping novice teachers organize their knowledge.

5. They should help novice teachers develop appropriate "rules of thumb" for their practice. (p. 416)

III. Conclusion

No one denies that the knowledge that a teacher needs to know is more than what is compiled in books. In fact, the given knowledge is more complicated that just knowing and using facts. Teacher education is an attempt to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and skills that they require to perform their tasks more effectively. Long has been written in disfavor with positivistic epistemological perspectives. Undeniably, positivistic thoughts have lots of vocal critics. Johnson (2009) counts the most common complaints:"the oversimplified, depersonalized, and decontextualized nature of the underlying assumptions of this [perspective]" (p. 8). Incompatible with the simplicity orientation in positivistic research, Shulman (1986, cited in Johnson, 2009) adds the complexities of classroom life cannot be captured in neat, clinical experimental designs and that any generalizations that emerge simply whitewash the complex social, historical, cultural, economic, and political dimensions that permeate schools and schooling in the broader social milieu. In sum, what is apparent is that investigating what teachers need to know entails a great variety of research methodology.

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