

Language Teacher Training: We May be Doing the Thing Right—But are We Doing the Right Thing?

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Abstract

Most teacher training programmes focus on the knowledge and skills it is assumed teachers will need. This focus rests on the assumption that we can predict what they will face in the classroom. Moreover, that what we teach is what will be learned. While the acquisition of core knowledge and skills remains necessary, it is not sufficient to bring novice teachers to a state of preparedness to deal with the unexpected.

I propose that an alternative strand should be added to programmes. The strand would focus on helping teachers acquire the teacherly attributes needed to create a positive atmosphere and develop spontaneous response skills. The strand would entail refocusing on the teacher as a 'person' rather than 'technician' and moving from a directive to a more responsive paradigm.

I will suggest a number of practical ways in which this might be done.

Keywords: Affective dimension of teaching, empathy, language teacher training, developing preparedness for the unpredictable

Introduction

In a recent webinar, a teacher made this comment, "*Now that I've finished my teacher training, I know how to teach. But I still don't know how to be a teacher.*" This comment set me thinking about what this recently qualified teacher could have meant? This article is a response to that comment, which goes to the heart of teacher education.

Language teacher training has come a long way in recent years, with increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive content and processes.

The training has had many beneficial effects. However, it has also led to an exclusive focus on the technical knowledge and skills imparted and a corresponding neglect of the human qualities so essential to good teaching.

The focus on measurable aspects of teaching has come at the expense of those intangibles which are a key to deep learning. As van Lier (2013) remarked, “Intangibles are often more influential than tangibles. If you can’t see it, that doesn’t mean it isn’t there. If you can’t count it, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t count.” (p. 2)

Some Current Features of Teacher Training

There is a focus on professional knowledge and skills. These are undoubtedly *necessary* parts of a teacher’s expertise. Nevertheless, in themselves, they are not *sufficient*. What of the affective, personal dimensions of teaching/learning? These dimensions would include empathy, rapport, attitudes, relationships, the creation of atmosphere, and the teacher’s presence (Rodenburg, 2007). Research has shown that what learners value most about their teachers is not their technical proficiency but their human qualities. (Maley, 2010; Maley & Kiss, 2018; Prodromou, 2002; Ur, 1996)

*They don’t care how much you know,
Until they know how much you care.* –Theodore Roosevelt

Another assumption underlying the current training paradigm is that the teaching/learning process is largely predictable. If you go through a methodical algorithmic process, learning will take place. The focus is then on a detailed preparation of lessons believing that the plan will be realized. In fact, unpredictability is the rule, not the exception. As Prabhu remarks, “teaching is at most hoping for the best.” (Prabhu, 2019). The current model does not provide for helping teachers to deal with the spontaneous unpredictability of the classroom. *Preparation* for the predictable is one thing, *preparedness* for the unpredictable is quite another (Underhill, 2014; Underhill & Maley, 2012). Many would object that it is not feasible to prepare teachers for the unpredictable or build the human qualities mentioned above. I would beg to differ. In the remainder of this article, I will suggest some elements which would go some way in this direction and restore the current imbalance.

Four Ways to Develop ‘Preparedness’

The four ways to develop preparedness are, (a) building personal growth, (b) developing experiential skills, (c) Awareness-raising of broad educational issues, and (d) incorporating the unexpected. These ways are discussed as below:

Building Personal Growth

Teachers are people, not just professionals. To function well, they need to nurture their personal qualities and continue growing towards personal maturity. These are some ways this might be achieved.

Meditation. We live in an age of info-glut and constant distraction. Some form of quiet time for reflection every day can help deal with this. There are many resources available.

For example, Johnson (1996).

Exercise. Teachers have bodies as well as minds, and these need to function well and be well-maintained. My preference is for quiet forms of exercise such as yoga (Wilson 1995).

However, other recognized systems, such as Feldenkrais (1980) and the Alexander Technique (Gelb, 1994), work just as well. Furthermore, even a long daily walk has its benefits.

Wider Reading. Teachers tend to read professional books and articles, leaving little room for more varied reading. I suggest we need to break out of the English Teaching ghetto and read as widely as possible, both fiction and non-fiction. The benefits of extensive reading are laid out in Krashen (2004). As teachers, the creative imagination we need can rarely be stimulated by narrow professional reading alone (Callil, 2011; Miller, 2014).

Personal Journals and Creative Writing

Keeping a professional journal can be an effective way of reflecting on what we do—almost like a way of talking to ourselves. Whether poems or stories, creative writing can further sustain our creative persona (Spiro, 2004) and foster playfulness (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Nachmanovitch, 1990).

Breaking Routines. Habits save time and energy, but we should not become a slave to them, whether outside the classroom or in. Fanselow’s book, *Breaking Rules* (2012), offers many valuable ways of ‘doing the opposite of what we normally do.’

Developing Experiential Skills

Voice and Presence. What learners most often remember about their teachers are the quality of their voices and their physical presence in the classroom. The teacher's voice is their single most powerful resource, yet it is woefully neglected. Voice awareness and training should be made mandatory. (Campbell, 1989; Maley, 2000; Newham, 1994; Rodenburg, 1991, 2007).

Working with Drama and Improvisation

Engaging with drama and Impro is beneficial to the teacher's personal development and providing activities to promote creativity with learners (Almond, 2019; Hillyard, 2016; Maley & Duff, 2005; Wilson, 2008).

Learning a New Language. Many courses offer a 'taster' of a new foreign language. I suggest that an entire course in learning a new foreign language, preferably with an unfamiliar script, is highly beneficial. It raises teachers' awareness of the difficulties their own students face when learning English and keeps teachers' minds engaged with the nature of language.

Information Technology (IT) Skills and Critical Awareness of Technology

No teacher can now afford to lack competence in using media and IT. A strand of any programme should include a critical appraisal of technology and proficiency in using it. Technology is not a solution. It is only a tool, not a panacea. Claire Kramersch's critique is particularly pertinent here (Kramersch, 1997). Many useful resources are now available to teachers (Clanfield & Hadfield, 2021; Dudeney & Hockly, 2007; Hockly & Clanfield, 2010; Stannard, 2021a, 2021b).

Learning to Listen. We hear a lot; we rarely listen carefully. Yet non-judgmental listening is one of the keys to empathetic teaching. And learning to pay attention to the soundscape, in general, enhances a teacher's appreciation of the importance of sound in our experience of the world (Matthieu, 1991; Rogers, 1969). Conscious attention to this faculty would repay the effort.

Building a Creative Resource Base. In addition to the standard teaching techniques covered in any training course, regular exposure would be needed to more innovative and creative activities. Teacher trainees would be encouraged to build a personal repertoire on which they could

then draw. (Clare & Marsh, 2020; Maley, 2018; Maley & Peachey, 2015; Peachey, 2019; Pugliese, 2010; Seelig, 2012).

Awareness-Raising of Broad Educational Issues

The objective of the following activities is to extend the range of reflection to broader educational issues and to think more deeply about what is involved in the learning process.

Discussion of Quotations. Group discussion of provocative quotations can stimulate engaging and wide-ranging debate. Here are just three examples.

'I never let my schooling come in the way of my education.' Mark Twain

'Don't just play the notes; play the music.' Toscanini.

'Nothing is inevitable until it happens.' A.J.P. Taylor.

Book Circles. Trainees in groups of 6 or more all read the same book, then discuss it in one or more sessions. The books I have in mind would include biographical accounts by teachers such as Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* or Kate Clanchy's *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me*. They could also include critiques of education, such as John Holt's *How Children Fail* or J.T. Gatto's *Weapons of Mass Instruction*.

Discussion of Wisdom Stories. Wisdom stories, such as the Nasruddin stories, Zen stories, stories from the Panchatantra, etc., can be read at several levels. Because they are open to multiple interpretations, they always give rise to a lively and rich discussion (Maley, 2021).

Micro-Observation. Videos of class teaching would be a regular feature for critique and discussion. Fanselow (2017) has drawn attention to the value of close observation of very short extracts, often revealing surprising results, as teachers notice that they had not been doing what they thought they were doing. His book is particularly useful as it also contains sample videos.

Incorporating the Unexpected

Impro Activities. These are activities to promote fast reactions to unexpected situations.

For example, one trainee begins to tell a story. Listeners interrupt at intervals with a word which the storyteller must then incorporate in the story. There are excellent ideas in Johnstone (1989, 1999) and Poynton (2013).

Clowning. Theatre clowning (not circus clowning) has been shown by Lutzker (2007) to be an excellent way to develop the skills of anticipation, spontaneity, creativity and empathy in teachers. Davison (2015) offers basic training advice, and the Nose to Nose clowning courses can be accessed at <https://www.nosetonose.info/uk/>.

Breaking Expectations. “You cannot run everything by improvising but you can’t run anything without it.” (Poynton, 2013) So although it may not be possible to train people for the unexpected, it is possible to introduce it into their training. Trainers can develop their own methods for doing this.

For example, trainees all prepare a PowerPoint presentation. On the day, the trainer arranges for the projector to ‘break down’, leaving the trainee needing to improvise. Alternatively, trainees all prepare notes for a 5-minute presentation. On the day, they are told to exchange their notes with another trainee.

Conclusion

My main contention is that an exclusive focus on professional knowledge and technical skills is inadequate if we wish teachers to be more than technicians delivering a ‘learning package’. The suggestions I have made would, I contend, help develop those personal qualities which research has shown are more critical for learners than mere ‘expertise’. Such teachers would be mentally and physically ‘alive’, well-informed, reflective, critically independent and articulate. They would be well-rounded characters, well-adjusted and showing empathy for others. They would be real teachers!

Some of these suggestions would be introduced in a one-month induction to help trainees develop personal routines (e.g. yoga, keeping a journal, etc.). Others would be incorporated into the formal teaching programme (e.g. learning another language, impro activities, etc.)

It is easy to object to such ideas as being fanciful and impractical. Given the will, however, they have been shown to work. It is heartening to note the cases presented by Giridhar (2019) of ‘ordinary people’ becoming ‘extraordinary’ teachers in rural India. Helgesen’s (2019) work on using ‘Positive psychology’ is also encouraging. Furthermore, recent work by Dornyei (2018) on engagement and by Donaghy (2021) on developing empathy also give cause for optimism, as does Rayan’s (2020) Hindu article.

Doing nothing is not an option since doing nothing is actually doing something that is not right. "A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right" as Tom Paine reminds us in *The Rights of Man!*

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