

Maximizing Target Language Use in a Pre-service Practicum: Tensions, Power, and Identity Formation

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Abstract

This study draws from a cultural-historical perspective to explore the experiences of two pre-service ESL teachers in terms of their efforts to maximize the use of the target language during a school practicum. Both student teachers were fluent in English, had received training in maximizing target language use during their university studies, and were keen to implement this goal during their practicum. Through contrasting case studies, the study illuminates how aspects of their respective activity settings variously facilitated or constrained their ability to do so. Amongst the findings, the study demonstrates how the power wielded by the cooperating teacher was exercised through the choice of both symbolic and pedagogical tools (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). The study also highlights how the socio-political context in which the study took place mediated students' willingness to use the target language.

Introduction

Within second and foreign language teaching, one issue which continues to generate debate is the use of the target language for the purpose of teaching. Although different positions have been voiced (Auerback, 1993; Cook, 2001), many researchers and practitioners advocate maximizing the use of the target language in the classroom (Crichton, 2009; Turnbull, 2006). This position acknowledges that in certain instances the use of the first language (L1) can be justified but also warrants against those practices where recourse to the L1 may be deemed excessive. Although a number of studies have investigated this issue (for a review, see Lin, 2013; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002), few have focused on pre-service teachers.

To help fill this gap, the present study examines from a cultural-historical perspective the experiences of two pre-service ESL teachers in terms of their efforts to maximize the use of the target language – English – during a practicum in Francophone schools in the province of Quebec, Canada. The specific question addressed is: How is the goal of maximizing the use of the target language in ESL classes taught by pre-service teachers variously mediated (i.e., facilitated or constrained) by aspects of their respective activity

settings (i.e., the schools where they were doing their practicum)? Following a brief review of the theoretical framework and relevant research, I will present the methodology and the findings.

Teacher development through the lens of cultural-historical perspectives

Until recently, research on teacher education has been situated within cognitivist and psycholinguistically oriented approaches where teacher development has largely been viewed as an individual endeavour (Johnson, 2006, 2009; Smagorinsky et al., 2004). In contrast, cultural-historical perspectives which arise from the work of Vygotsky (Ellis, Edwards & Smagorinsky, 2014) focus on how teachers develop their identities as they engage in practices in specific contexts. More specifically, this line of research involves a “conceptualization of learning to teach as a continual, mutually mediating process of appropriation and social action, where practitioners take on the cultural practices that are valued in the social situations of their development – whether these settings are schools or universities – and employ them in turn to shape that social situation” (Ellis, Edwards & Smagorinsky, 2010, p. 4). Pertaining to the present study, three issues are of note: tensions which arise between the cooperating teacher and student teachers, power, and the role of agency and development of teacher identities.

Although tensions between cooperating teachers and student teachers have frequently been noted, a particular contribution of cultural-historical theory pertains to the notion of tools. Within this perspective, tools may be material (e.g., a hammer, paper, a computer) or symbolic (e.g., language/discourse). Thus, in school settings, pedagogical tools (e.g., activity types, strategies, routines) act as mediating artefacts and can be associated with various teaching approaches (Engeström, 1991; Parks, Huot, Hamers, Lemonnier, 2003, 2005; Wells, 1996). In this regard, a study by Smagorinsky et al. (2004) reported on the case of a student teacher whose constructivist approach to teaching clashed with the cooperating teacher’s traditional approach. To explain the tensions, the researchers demonstrated how the tools favored by the cooperating teacher were the tangible means by which she exercised her power and control over the pre-service teacher.

Although tensions are associated with specific activity settings, the source can originate in activity settings within the broader society (Engeström, 2005). Thus, as in Smagorinsky et al., the constructivist approach favored by the student teacher had been emphasized during her university teacher education program. Although the conflicting discourses or multivocality which typically characterize activity settings may cause stress to the actors involved, they are nonetheless viewed as integral to the emergence of change and innovative practice (Engeström, 2005). As illustrated by Feryok (2012) with respect to a case study of an ESL teacher in Armenia, both individual agency and the ability to position oneself within activity systems at particular points in time appear to be crucial to the ultimate emergence of innovative practice.

In terms of the development of a satisfying teacher identity, Tsui (2007) emphasizes that in addition to access to practice (i.e., having a teaching position), being viewed by the community as a valued member is also crucial, what she refers to as *legitimacy of access to practice*. This latter observation also helps explain why student teachers, due

to lack of support, may abandon innovative approaches introduced in university courses. As observed by Smagorinsky (2010), university programs which provide a more sustained, unified conception of teaching may reinforce students' commitment to new approaches and prevent them from giving up on them too easily.

Target Language Use: Pre-service Teachers

Although as previously mentioned target language use has attracted considerable attention, this issue in regard to student teachers is rarely discussed (Macaro, 2001). However, one study of particular relevance is Winer's (2007) research, which focused on novice teachers enrolled in a teaching English as a second language (TESL) program in the province of Quebec. Drawing on data obtained from a questionnaire and documents produced by the teachers, Winer identified five concerns which constrained their ability to use the target language: ambivalent or hostile attitudes toward English on the part of students and teachers, (non)use of English in the ESL classroom, low motivation of ESL students, and the nature of the English language and culture in Quebec. Winer stressed how the problem of ESL teaching was intertwined with historically defined societal attitudes and Quebec government language policy. In another study by Burnett (2011), which focused more generally on the difficulties encountered by two foreign language high school teachers as they attempted to implement communicative approaches to language teaching, students' resistance to using the target language was also related to the broader social context.

Methodology

Setting and participants

The student teachers who participated in this study were enrolled in a four-year Bachelor of Education in TESL program in a Francophone university in the province of Quebec (Canada). During their program they had been sensitized to strategies they could use to maximize the use of English with their students. The students who participated in this study had completed their fourth and final practicum (15 weeks) in the fall of 2006. At the time the study was undertaken, the new ESL curriculum, which emphasized maximizing the use of the target language, had been implemented up to secondary 1 (Grade 7) and was optional for secondary 2 (Grade 8).

Of the potentially 45 students who were eligible to participate in the study, 16 agreed to do so. For the purpose of this article, two contrasting case studies (Patton, 2001) will be used to focus on how aspects of the student teachers' activity settings mediated their ability to maximize target language use. Both case study participants – Debby and Sara (pseudonyms) – had been educated within the Quebec Francophone school system, were fluent in English (so resorting to French could not be attributed to lack of proficiency), and were committed to maximizing the target language with their students during their practicum.

Data collection and analysis

Drawing on a qualitative research paradigm (Merriam, 1998), data for the study were collected from two sources: documents and interviews.

Documents. The documents retained for the study involved the assignments completed for an online seminar which took place concurrently with the practicum: (1) the forms used by the student teachers to analyze their target language use at three different points in time, (2) the completed reports, and (3) the posts from a discussion forum which was ongoing during the practicum.

Interviews. The interviews, approximately 45 minutes in length, were conducted by the researcher following the end of the fourth practicum. To explore target language use, participants were asked to comment on various factors which could have facilitated or constrained their ability to do so (see Appendix). To focus their attention on these factors, participants were first asked to read over the list and check off whether they considered each item as *very relevant*, *somewhat relevant* or *not relevant*. Following this questionnaire, they were asked to discuss each in turn in the form of a semi-structured interview (Merriam, 1998). The interview also provided an opportunity for clarification of points brought up in the reports or the forum posts. The transcribed interviews and the documents were coded in function of the factors which appeared to facilitate or constrain their ability to maximize the use of English.

Findings

Case study 1: Debby

Debby was an Anglophone Quebecer who was perfectly at ease in both English and French. For her fourth practicum, she was assigned to teach English in a five-month Grade 6 intensive program. In her interview, Debby confirmed that she had been highly successful in achieving her goal of maximizing the use of English to the point that students were generally not even aware that she spoke French. As she put it: “I never ever spoke French with the students, only the last day, the last day they asked me – *can you speak to us in French?* – but then half of them were like – *oh no, it’s weird, don’t* – “. Aspects of her activity setting which facilitated her achievement of this goal are explained below.

Students. The students in the intensive program were selected based on their academic qualifications. Debby readily acknowledged that students in such classes tended to be highly motivated, and she considered the clientele as an important factor in terms of her ability to maximize the use of English.

Cooperating teacher. Debby described her cooperating teacher, Mrs. Tremblay (pseudonym), as “awesome.” As it turned out, Debby and Mrs. Tremblay both agreed in terms of their general approach to pedagogy, in particular the almost exclusive use of the target language. In terms of mentoring, Debby greatly appreciated the fact that Mrs. Tremblay allowed her to take initiative while being there to provide her with timely and relevant pedagogical guidance. As she phrased it: “she let me do what I wanted, but she said OK you are free to go, I’ll be there for you if you need me, I trust you and go for it.”

Tools: strategies. In terms of understanding the success Debby had had with using the target language with her students, an important factor was her extensive use of strategies to facilitate comprehension and participation. In an excerpt from her report, she commented on some of these strategies in the following terms:

When it came to visual aids in the classroom there were many English language posters, also daily expressions and idioms. As special strategies to help the students understand English, I would mime, use hand gestures, use the dictionary, etc. However, for bigger projects, I would write the step-by-step instructions on the board, which would help the students have a clear reference and for those who are visual, to refer to the board for help. I would also use another student to explain in English what their tasks were for certain projects. In addition, circumlocution was also a big part of my teaching; it consisted of describing the unknown words or sentences.

When students would address her in French, she would help them reformulate their ideas in English. In the interview, she explained how she managed to teach grammar in English by using an inductive approach with sentences on the board and a lot of interaction on the part of students.

Classroom management. In addition to strategy use, Debby also benefitted from a school policy which encouraged teachers to work in teams at their grade level to plan projects. To facilitate this, one afternoon per nine-day cycle was set aside as a reward period for students who had behaved well and done their homework (including English homework). As explained by Debby, the reward period also tied in with her own classroom management system, one rule of which pertained to speaking only in English. To keep track of how students were doing, students' names were displayed on a chart with a square for each school day. To further motivate students to speak English, she gave coupons to those who made an effort and had language monitors during group work. With respect to the effectiveness of her classroom management system, Debby commented that "after a month, I almost had them eating out of my hand, I could have fun with them and I didn't have to be stressed anymore because they knew my limits."

Case study 2: Sara

Sara grew up in Montreal. Due to extensive work experience, she was fluent in English. For her fourth practicum, she had been assigned to a regular secondary 3 (Grade 9) class. Although at the start of her practicum Sara was keen to maximize the use of English in the classroom, she ended up speaking in French about 75% of the time. In the section below, I discuss how various aspects of Sara's activity setting constrained her ability to attain her goal of maximizing target language use. As following her practicum, she taught her own ESL classes as a substitute teacher, this experience is also discussed.

School context. As one factor related to her difficulty with getting her students to speak English, Sara pointed to the general school culture and to what she referred to as the "unspoken rule", the perception that outside the ESL classroom only French should be spoken either with students or colleagues. Although in her first practicum Sara did find herself with an ESL teacher who spoke with his students in English both in and out of class, this appeared to her as the exception rather than the rule. She stated:

(...) except for what I said for my first school, my first practicum, the other ones, most of the time if I would speak English in the student-teacher lounge or in the lounge for the teachers, they would tell me – it's a French school, speak French,

how come you are speaking in English? – (...) so yes school context somehow has a relevant role in the use of English versus French.

During her fourth practicum despite her efforts to encourage her cooperating teacher, Mrs. Bourassa (pseudonym), a Francophone, to speak with her in English, she refused to do so even in front of the students when she was teaching.

Students. As with the unspoken rule referred to above, Sara felt that the tensions pertaining to the use of English in the broader Quebec society also influenced students' attitudes toward the use of English within her classes. According to Sara, the lack of motivation to learn English was evidenced amongst her students at two levels: those who thought that English was not important for functioning in Quebec society where French was the official language and those who considered that English could only be learned in an immersion context, not in school. Commenting on these issues, she noted:

Sara: (the students were) a bit closed, indeed if I can express myself that way, they didn't like English, that was one of my first problems, so I'm talking about most of the students, not everybody (...) so that made my life harder too.

Researcher: Do you have any idea why they weren't interested in English?
Sara: (...) some of them I asked said – oh my parents told me already, I don't need that, and I will learn it when I go to Ontario– because they have a preconceived idea they can't learn in class, they have to go in an English immersion to be able to learn English, like I tell them all the time, even if you learn a little bit, it's better than nothing (...) but for them it's a waste of time, for most of them.

Researcher: So they really see English as being something you have to learn in an immersion situation?

Sara: Exactly, exactly (...) you have to be in an English environment to do it, you can't just learn in school, it's impossible, for them it's a preconceived idea, and probably it comes from the parents who didn't have the chance to learn English in school.

Another factor Sara considered as contributing to her difficulties with getting students to interact in English pertained to the type of teaching they had been previously exposed to. As she pointed out, students were “used to being taught a certain way, grammar in French, discipline in French, so it's hard to change.” She also criticized the teacher-centered approach, which emphasized traditional teaching activities such as fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises and individual whole class oral presentations. She considered such activities typical of the type of teaching fostered by the old ministry curriculum. By contrast, she personally favored the new ESL curriculum and teaching strategies which emphasized grammar in context, cooperative learning, and project-based learning.

Cooperating teacher. In terms of personality, Sara described her cooperating teacher, Mrs. Bourassa, as “a great person, she was funny, she was laid back she didn't stress me out.” However, at the pedagogical level, there were wide divergences both in terms of how they viewed the use of the target language as well as their preferred teaching

strategies. With respect to target language use, a major problem resided in the fact that Mrs. Bourassa believed that grammar had to be taught in French and insisted on Sara doing the same. As Mrs. Bourassa also taught a regular Secondary 3 (Grade 9) group, she expected Sara to cover the same material as her so the students would be ready for the end-of-term exams she had prepared.

With respect to the grammar lessons, Sara initially tried to avoid using so much French by reverting to strategies that maximize the use of English and by calling on students to translate. However, Mrs. Bourassa, who sat in on some of her classes, pointed out that such a tactic was too slow and stated "...at the beginning I was wasting so much time that my teacher told me to stop – you can't do that, you have to do it my way if you want to get to the end of the unit on time" (Sara's report). In a forum post, Sara commented on the lack of effectiveness of the strategies she tried to use to keep the class in English:

Yes, we have tricks to use instead of speaking in French, but when I repeated 5 times, mimed, drew, etc. – I lost 10 minutes of the class – and with the schedule that I have to respect, it is hard to keep doing mime and drawings for every sentence spoken in class. I try to ask good students to help me in class, but what happens then, it's everything I say in class – someone translates automatically for the class to be able to follow...SEE THE PROBLEM!

Although Sara did try to discuss the problem of speaking French with the students, her teacher advised her against such a tactic:

(...) my teacher said don't ever ask the opinion of the students because you will create chaos: "you are the boss in class, and you NEVER (in any context) ask the students how they see or how they want certain things to be done, because you will lose control." Every time my teacher observed a class, it was one of the first criticisms she gave me: "Don't give choices to students", which goes completely against my training at the university.

Because passing her practicum depended on her ability to meet her teacher's demands, Sara ultimately felt obliged to adopt a conciliatory attitude: "...she imposed her way on me so I was teaching like her I would have to say."

Classroom management. As Sara readily pointed out, classroom management, in particular the use of French, was a serious problem in her class. To discourage the use of French, Sara initially tried using French tag. Typically, this strategy involves placing an object on the desk of a student caught talking in French and moving it around so that the last person who ends up with it gets a penalty. In Sara's case, the object was a comical looking bird referred to as "Freddy." At times when Sara tried it, students would simply refuse to say anything. At other times, trying to manage Freddy with students who continued to talk and resist her efforts was in itself problematic. The fact that Mrs. Bourassa did not use French tag with her own group further undermined Sara's efforts. At the end of the practicum, two students rather facetiously bought her her own Freddy as a good-bye present with the comment: "*Voilà votre propre Freddy Madame! Comme ça vous pourrez écoeurer vos futurs élèves*" [Here's your own Freddy for you! With that you'll be able to demoralize your own future students.]

A follow-up: Sara's own class. Following the practicum, Sara had obtained a contract to replace a secondary 2 (Grade 8) teacher. Despite the fact that the school greatly resembled the one she had done her practicum in, she confirmed that she had not given up on her original ideas and as the teacher in charge of her own class was obtaining a fair degree of success in terms of implementing them. Specifically, with respect to the use of English, she reported using it 80% of the time and was teaching grammar in English:

I'm alone and yes I teach my grammar in English – what's that teaching grammar in French, no way! (...) I'm a visual person so I use the board a lot, that helps them a lot also because I write the words...so that's another thing I really couldn't do in my practicum 4, first of all because of lack of time, now I'm responsible for my time so I make time for them to understand.

As in the school she had done her practicum in, Sara observed that her new colleagues tended to teach in the traditional ways she associated with the old curriculum. Commenting on the way they perceived her, she remarked: “(imitating colleagues) *oh you and your ideas ... because you see, we're all together in the office there, they always laugh – oh the new girl, we know with all your university ideas – but I don't care, that's OK, they all laugh at me but it's fun, I still have my big ideas*”. However, what is of note is that despite the differences, Sara had also begun to influence her colleagues. As she reported, some of them viewed her activities and projects favorably and, indeed, had started to adapt them for use with their own students.

Discussion

In this section, I discuss the case studies presented in the preceding section in relation to three issues of relevance to teacher education: tensions, power, and identity formation.

Tensions

Although both Debby and Sara had as a personal goal to maximize target language use, aspects of their activity settings variously facilitated or constrained their ability to do so. More specifically with respect to Sara, an analysis of her teaching context revealed tensions notably in regard to the target language – the symbolic tool – and the teaching of grammar. As discussed in Smagorinsky et al. (2004), tensions also surfaced due to fundamental differences in their preferred pedagogical tools (i.e., activities and strategies), which in fact served to more generally mediate the implementation of divergent pedagogical approaches. Thus, in this regard, Mrs. Bourassa appeared to align herself with the old ministry curriculum, and Sara aligned herself with the new reform one.

With respect to the students, unlike those in Debby's class (who had chosen to be in an intensive program), a number of those in Sara's class – the regular core ESL program – resisted efforts to get them to speak English. This resistance was particularly evident in regard to Sara's attempt to implement a classroom management strategy (French tag) as a means of reinforcing L2 use. As previously noted, certain students in Sara's class did not perceive the usefulness of learning English (Winer, 2007) and/or did not feel they could learn English in a classroom setting (Parks, 2000). Of note, too, is that the

resistance to English was also reflected within the broader activity setting of the school as evidenced by those colleagues who admonished Sara for using English outside her classroom – *the unspoken rule* – as well as by her cooperating teacher’s refusal to speak English with her even in front of the students. As a result, Sara’s efforts to change the historically sanctioned ways of doing things within this activity setting resulted in tensions arising from the rules she tried to enforce or her choice of pedagogical tools. More generally, this study contributes to those few studies which have signalled how aspects of the socio-political context mediate students’ willingness to use the target language in a classroom setting (Burnett, 2011; Parks, 2000; Winer, 2007).

Power

As predicated within cultural-historical perspectives on teacher education, activity systems are characterized by multi-voicedness insofar as members may hold different, conflicting points of views and by members whose relative power and influence may vary depending on their status. Thus, as a cooperating teacher, Mrs. Bourassa exerted considerably more power than Sara who was teaching in her classes in her role as a student teacher. More specifically, as concerned Mrs. Bourassa, her power within this activity setting can be localized at the level of: (1) evaluation (in terms of whether Sara would pass or fail her practicum), (2) course administration (using a predetermined exam to pressure Sara to use the same content and teach at the same rhythm), and (3) choice of tools (both symbolic – use of French vs. the target language – and pedagogical). As in Smagorinsky et al. (2004), Mrs. Bourassa’s ability to impose her choice of tools on the student teacher was an important means by which she wielded her authority. Although Sara was conscious how her status as a student teacher detracted from her authority in the eyes of the students, she was also aware as to how her change in status as a substitute teacher in charge of a class following the practicum enabled her to more ably introduce her preferred tools into the activity system of her classroom.

Identity formation

As discussed in previous research (Smagorinsky, 2010; Smagorinsky et al., 2004; Tsui, 2007), the way a teacher’s identity develops is influenced not only by access to practice, but also by the nature of the participation within a particular community. In the case of Debby, her cooperating teacher stood back and allowed her to exercise her agency while providing her with guidance and scaffolding in meaningful and constructive ways. In contrast, the authoritative, mimetic approach to mentoring (Jackson, 1986) espoused by Sara’s cooperating teacher provided her with few opportunities to put her beliefs into action. What is noteworthy, however, is that, despite these constraints, Debby did not give up on her goal of maximizing the use of English and turned to implementing it when she became a substitute teacher with her own class. This resistance could be attributed to her personal beliefs about language learning as well as to the emphasis accorded to target language use in her university program (Smagorinsky, 2010).

Beyond this, however, it is insightful to view Sara’s experiences not only in terms of the more circumscribed activity setting of her classroom but also in regard to the broader process of the provincial curricular reform which was in progress at the time this study was undertaken. As predicated by cultural-historical perspectives (Engeström, 2005),

change and the accompanying tensions and contradictions are features of historically situated activity settings. Thus, the tensions experienced by Sara during her practicum may be viewed as local manifestations of clashes between a vision of teaching more characteristic of the old Ministry curriculum and those, who like both Sara and Debby, aligned themselves with the new curriculum.

Of note in this regard is Sara's comment as to how her colleagues in the school she was substituting in perceived her as "the new girl with her university ideas." In terms of the context of reform and the way change may be promoted, both the university (in terms of training) and the Ministry of Education (with its mandated curriculum) represented powerful outside activity systems which were exerting pressure (with subsequent tensions) on teachers within the school system. In this regard, the fact that Sara was teaching a class at a time when the new program was one year away from becoming mandatory in that grade level may have influenced those colleagues who, as she reported, had started using some of her activities. From a personal perspective, the influence which she appeared to exert with colleagues in this school may be viewed as positive in terms of the development of her own identity as a teacher, which is what Tsui (2007) has referred to as *legitimacy of access to practice*. However, at another level, similar to the case of the Armenian teacher discussed by Feryok (2012), her ability to make her voice heard may be attributed not only to personal agency but to the particular historically situated moment in which she as an actor engaged in a dialog with colleagues.

Conclusion

This study explored how two pre-service teachers whose goal to maximize target language use in their classes was variously facilitated or constrained by aspects of the activity settings in which they taught during their practicums. Notably in regard to Sara, cultural-historical theory has proved useful as a theoretical lens for identifying the points at which tensions were surfacing in the activity setting and consequently constraining her ability to maximize target language use. The study also draws attention to how attempts by pre-service teachers to implement pedagogical strategies promoted by a new ESL curriculum and university training programs could lead to conflictual situations due to the historically constituted practices within school settings.

Although in the present exploratory study the activity setting was viewed through the agency of the pre-service teachers, the perspectives of other actors, in particular the cooperating teachers, could further enhance our understanding of the dynamics at play within a particular school context. In addition, more ethnographically oriented, longitudinal studies are needed to explore how new graduates in this particular area are faring in terms of their efforts to maximize the use of the target language as they move into full-time teaching positions.

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