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The CATESOL Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4hb2b649>

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 32(1)

ISSN

1535-0517

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/B5.35919

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Peer reviewed



Can Theory Meet Practice in Online Master's TESOL Programs? Reflections from Program Graduates

The emergence and development of online M.A./M.Ed. in TESOL programs has created new possibilities for language teachers around the world to become part of a learning community that may not have been previously available to them. Online education means anywhere/anytime learning, continued employment and continued residence. Yet, online learning has brought challenges as much as celebrations; one being fear of disconnect between theory and practice. In this paper, through qualitative study, the authors address this concern by sharing the experiences and reflections of 22 teachers who completed a fully online TESOL master's degree program at a university in the South Central United States. Their voices specifically reflect the *connect or disconnect* of theory and practice in their online courses in one particular M.Ed. TESOL program. Overall, the voices of the students reaffirm that a strong connection of theory and practice is in fact possible in a virtual learning environment.

Keywords: Online TESOL Program; Online Education; Student Reflection

Researching the theory and then making a plan to implement it in my classroom...First I needed to learn about the theory behind it. I needed to be won over. Next, I had to tackle the question how I can implement it. From there I looked for elements I could incorporate into things I was already doing (Lisa, EFL instructor).

These words are from Lisa (pseudonyms used throughout), an American English language instructor enrolled in an online TESOL master's program while she was teaching English abroad. In her first year of the program, she was teaching in Oman and in her second year in Kuwait. Having enrolled in an online program provided her the possibly to learn and teach anywhere. Based on her reflection, Lisa did not immediately buy into the theories she learned and wanted to test them herself to see if these theories seem applicable in her own context. As the professors who teach in an online program, we believe this is an indication of strong theory-practice connection and personalizing the theoretical content. We want to help our students to be able to apply their growing theoretical knowledge in their respective teaching contexts, which could be challenging compared to a face-to-face learning setting. It is important that theories taught go beyond textbook definitions and become personal practical knowledge.

The Issue

Online education has allowed "education to transcend boundaries of brick and mortar schools and classrooms" (Tan, Nabb, Aagard, & Kim, 2010, p. 9) and enabled students and teachers to share knowledge with others from all around the world. Online education means anywhere/anytime learning, continued employment (i.e.

teaching position), and continued residence rather than being uprooted and travelling to a specific location to complete a graduate degree (Nunan, 2012). As much as there are benefits to online education, there are also challenges. For example, in online TESOL programs, is there a risk of disconnect when connecting the theory and practice due to their fully online nature? In this paper, we attempt to address this question by sharing the experiences and reflections of 22 teachers who completed a fully online TESOL master's degree program at a university in the South Central United States. Their voices specifically reflect the *connect or disconnect* of theory and practice in their online courses per se and the overall program.

Online TESOL Education: Theory-Practice and Reflective Practice

It is important to provide a brief overview of the limited literature regarding online TESOL-related studies which emphasize theory and practice along with reflective practice. Verity (2014) described MA TESOL training as a blend of “apprenticeship” and “scholarship” (p. 257). Students often enter TESOL programs with practical experiences, yet they do not have the skills or training on how to make sense of their teaching experiences. For example, Verity wrote about her experiences teaching theories of second language acquisition in an online MA TESOL program and her initial biases that the online component would hinder meaningful interaction (i.e. scaffolding and mediation) among students, and she would therefore be ineffective. In her findings, she shared her attempts to create connections between the students' lived experiences and the theoretical constructs that had been introduced in the course. She stated:

Through strategic use of personal experience and narrative, the students can see how “life” and “theory” are not opposing constructs, but dialectical ones: Theory is a way of knowing what depends on practical activity, and all practical activity has some kind of theoretical stance inherent in it, even if that stance is entirely unconscious and unarticulated (p. 261).

Liu and Berger (2015) also argued that MA/M.Ed. TESOL programs are not designed to provide English language teachers with “ready-made techniques that will guarantee success in any teaching context,” but to include “more context-dependent and reflective aspects of becoming a language teaching professional” (p. 51), emphasizing the importance of reflective practice. Verity (2014) discussed how it might be the first time students truly reflect on their experiences. In a well-designed online TESOL master's course, through focused reflective tasks, students not only gain knowledge of theoretical content, but learn how to incorporate theoretical knowledge into their own activities or teaching practices. Furthermore, Dooly (2104) argued that teacher education must go beyond teaching theory, it should move from “knowledge telling” to “knowledge transforming” (p. 241). Teacher education can promote this transformation and connect theory and practice by engaging the students in reflective thinking and reflective practice (Farrell, 2015). In this study and paper, the reflective practice became the catalyst that gave voice to our participants' experiences.

In our research of literature, we found very limited discussion on the successful integration of theory and practice in online M.A./M.Ed. TESOL programs (England, 2012; Hubbard & Levy, 2006). We wanted to address this gap by exploring our students' reflections on their online TESOL coursework. We believe our practice is work-in-progress toward bridging theory and practice and building students' personal practical knowledge.

Context and Practice

Our study employed the theoretical perspective of reflective practice, “where teachers actively collect data about their teaching beliefs and practices and then reflect on the data in order to direct future teaching decisions” (Farrell, 2015, p. 7). Qualitative research methods were adopted. The context of the study is an online master's TESOL program with variety of courses, which are offered from ESL/EFL Methodology to Action Research. Twenty-two graduates who completed the program between the spring 2013 and summer 2015 shared their input. About 90% were teachers who worked as ESL, EFL, or bilingual teachers in K-12 or university settings while enrolled. The others were employees in nonteaching fields, typically seeking a career change to become ESL/EFL teachers. It is

important to note that prior teaching experience is encouraged yet not a requirement of the program. An open-ended question survey was used for data collection. Participants' responses were coded using "in vivo" and "focused coding" in an effort to "honor the participant's voice" using their actual words and terms (Saldana, 2013, p.91). These codes were categorized to analyze the emerging themes.

Before we share the voices of students, it is important to note that during the initial stages of creating the TESOL courses the TESOL faculty paid close attention to who the graduate students were. The majority of students have been and continue to be practicing teachers. They need particular practical knowledge they could immediately implement in their classrooms (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997). Therefore, in our courses, we select textbooks, design assignments, and create assessments in an effort to achieve meaningful integration of theory and practice.

Results

Three significant themes emerged from the analysis of our graduate students' voices; (1) Theory and practice connectedness, (2) Effective methods and strategies, and (3) Teacher confidence and versatility.

Theory and Practice Connectedness

Students commented on the advantages of immediate application of what they learned in their courses. Maria noted "theories get translated into practice directly or indirectly. I see myself following many theorists that I learned about in this program". For another example, Nancy appreciated the connection between theory and practice in her applied linguistics course despite the theoretical nature of the course. She explicitly complimented on the textbook by stating:

One of my classes was based on teaching grammar and it has been amazing, because as a teacher I don't understand the rules for grammar and in this book we were given examples on how to teach, [addressed] some misconceptions students might face, and [examined] examples. This book helped me tremendously in my first year.

What Nancy refers to is Folse's (2009) *Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners: A Practical Handbook*. This book was specifically selected by faculty since it demonstrates grammar in context and makes it accessible through practical explanations. For program objectives, we avoided overly theoretical books. The courses in the program aimed to promote practical knowledge that incorporates theories in linguistics and second language acquisition. Cynthia commented on how she used the strategies and assignments from her courses with her students in a 9th grade ESL class:

During the first half of the program I was a full-time teacher. As assignments came in I was able to use my own students as my example for my assignment. Also, as we learned new theories, I was able to look to see if they are true. It gave me a basis to see if I agreed with the research and discussions. There are a lot of practical uses for information learned in the program. CALL was one the classes that I was immediately able to put into practice and use in coaching conversations. Also, language assessment was a class that was immediately applicable. I have been on assessment writing teams for my district and I immediately wanted to put the theories learned in this class into practice.

These comments regarding course delivery informed the MA TESOL instructors' course design, instructional decisions, and evaluation of students' needs and interests. The readings and the assignments were designed to help teachers create new learning materials or evaluate the effectiveness of existing ones, using certain criteria and guidelines. For example, in the second language assessment class, Cynthia evaluated a formative assessment tool she used regularly in her classroom, utilizing the benchmarks, washback, authenticity, reliability, practicality, and validity (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). In another example, Betsy commented on how theory informed her teaching objectives:

I feel like this program was aimed at providing a theoretical foundation to better explain and enhance the practical side of education—what is, and will be, effective in the classroom. I believe I was exposed to both the "what and why" which ultimately gave me a better understanding of not only how to more effectively

teach my future language learners, but a knowledge of the research and concepts behind what has proven effective.

In all of these quotes, our graduate students shared that they were able to link what they learned in their courses with their classroom practices.

Effective Methods and Strategies

Students commented on how they benefitted from their coursework to create a personal library of research articles, classroom activities, assignment ideas, and effective teaching strategies. They were able to experiment with these methods and strategies as they evaluated them for their own instructional purposes. The discussions and assignments in their coursework specifically sought for reflections with respect to their local contexts. For example, in the applied linguistics course, students analyzed an ELLs' speech focusing on pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and word choice. They later presented their findings and prioritized more pressing needs to be addressed in instruction. Based on their findings, they created grammar lessons and designed practice activities and questions to teach a certain grammar point. These assignments often led to a discussion of common ELL errors in their contexts, and students left with a variety of strategies and practice ideas to teach these points. For example, Tara commented on how she was able to use effectively grammar and reading strategies with her adult ESL learners:

I often used the techniques that I learned immediately. For example, in [the] applied linguistics course, I learned some very useful methods for teaching grammar to ELLs. I knew first-hand how it felt to be in the "hot seat" when ELLs asked questions about a grammar aspect that I knew, but didn't know how to explain (a fault of a native speaker). Also, in the second language literacy course, the specific reading strategies that are required of ELLs are not the same as a native speaker. During that course, I began to teach differently (with more intent upon the strategies my students needed). I felt I became a different teacher because of what I was learning at that time.

In addition, they developed a strategic mindset to address various teaching and learning problems in their classrooms. Identifying the needs and challenges in their local contexts and addressing these issues was a central theme in their coursework. For example, in the action research course, students identified a problem from their own teaching and classrooms and conducted an action research study to address that problem. Each student focused on an individual topic (e.g., how to provide small group instruction more effectively), did a literature research for this topic, ran an intervention or experiment, and analyzed their results to propose implications. Students often shared their results in regional conferences or as publications, and presented their findings to their principals or other administrators to promote an institutional change in their context.

In both ESL/EFL methodology and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses the students were asked to create lesson plans and even a curriculum (in the ESP course as their final project) in the context they taught or were interested in teaching. In creation and implementation of such lesson plans the students were taught that four language skills did not exist in isolation but were interwoven. For example, Ann commented on her changing and developing ideas about the integration of language skills:

I have changed in that I am much more mindful of integrating reading, writing, listening and speaking in my lesson planning. I also understand much more about the development of English in my second language learners.

Teachers were also able to use the theoretical knowledge from their coursework to strategize their teaching and course designs toward building personal practical knowledge. Dan commented on how the theoretical content informed his practice in specific ways like writing a lesson plan:

The theoretical knowledge helps me understand language learning in new contexts. The theories have provided me with more of a foundation and a backbone. When possible, I like to write my lesson plans that reflect a theoretical approach/theory. This helps me feel more confident about my lessons and also this helps me take a reflective approach to learning/teaching.

As evidenced in these quotes, our students were able to utilize their growing theoretical knowledge to improve their teaching and seek theoretical support to gain confidence in what they are doing.

Teacher Confidence and Versatility

A common outcome of the program was newly gained confidence and versatility as a teacher. After completing the program, they reported they felt more competent and confident in their abilities to teach in diverse contexts. For example, Mei commented on her increasing confidence to teach students in the U.S. contexts:

I used to teach middle school students in China, and felt more comfortable with students [within] that age group, but now I feel quite comfortable when I teach adult students as well. Before completing this program, I was more willing to teach [pre-teen] Chinese students [primarily]. However, after completing this program, I became more open-minded because I gained many practical approaches, hence, I am ready to teach students from all over the world.

As described, our graduate students have taught in ESL/EFL contexts and across various instructional settings, such as face-to-face classroom, private tutoring, and/or online settings that range include various learner profiles and grade levels (i.e. from kindergarten to adult classrooms). Therefore, they often have effective skills as classroom practitioners, but may not have a solid foundation of understanding of the theoretical base that make their instruction effective. Consequently, it was important for faculty to use textbooks, teaching/reading materials that met the needs of all of our students, which has been a fundamental part of course design. For example, for the ESL/EFL methodology course we specifically selected Nation and Newton's (2009) *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking* and Nation's (2009) *Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing* books. These textbooks addressed both ESL/EFL contexts and methodologies, strategies, techniques, and lesson plans for all ages and grade levels. In addition, as part of the classroom observation course assignment, the students were encouraged to *physically* observe through virtual means a classroom setting/level that they were not familiar with. Such inclusion of broader perspectives contributed to an increased knowledge and diversified practice and as a result, their increased confidence as educators. Students' increased confidence in their abilities paved the way for future initiatives and enabled them to take active roles in administrative positions and commitment in professional development. Lisa commented on how her confidence increased her options in her professional context:

Other than improving my broad understanding of theory and improving my practical teaching techniques, I would say one of the biggest things I got from my degree was confidence! I was teaching for years without a teaching degree. Even when I had good ideas, those who had teaching degrees easily intimidated me. This is no longer the case. So along with becoming a coordinator, I also have gone on to chair committees at my university and I have given presentations at conferences all over the world.

In light of the graduate students' reflections, we believe such an online program was helpful providing resources and strategies to connect theoretical knowledge and practical experiences and eventually building confidence in their teaching.

Reflections and Implications of Study

Through the voices of the students, we argue that a strong connection between theory and practice can exist in online courses. We believe this is possible through careful design of courses (i.e. selection of course textbooks, materials, and focused assignments) on the part of faculty. The participants' background and experiences (practicing ESL/EFL teachers) play a significant role on how we construct the courses. A good balance of teaching practices in ESL and EFL settings as well as theory and practice are essential (Liu & Berger, 2015; Verity, 2014).

This program design intentionally sought theory-practice connections and aimed to help teachers integrate theoretical knowledge into their practice by means of ongoing reflections throughout their coursework (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997; Farrell, 2015). Students engaged in reflective practice with their classmates and instructors through online discussions, bringing a virtual community of teachers together, and creating a space for reflection (England, 2012).

The greatest advantage of this design was to encourage theory-practice connections, so teachers were able to see what works in their own educational context and what challenges might emerge. As Garton and Edge (2012) argued;

Course participants must not see themselves as distant from where the learning is; they *define* where the learning is. Their role is less to apply theories than to explore their practice and theorize it, thus taking it forward into *praxis*--aware, informed, socially committed practice (p. 24).

Students in the program also voiced how frequently they were able to immediately apply what they learned when they taught grammar for example. Their emerging knowledge of new content and strategies was often integrated into their lesson plans, activity ideas, and discussions of learner needs in their contexts. Some of the native English-speaking students, were now able to explain the rules of the language and go beyond what sounds correct (Reeves, 2009).

As students learned more in the program, they gained more confidence in their knowledge base and teaching abilities, as documented qualitatively in their survey comments. After the program, many led professional development seminars and presented at conferences, which exhibits a level of confidence and membership to the professional teaching community that they expressed they did not have prior to completing the MA TESOL degree. As supported by Farrell (2015) and Verity (2014), students' reflections on their past educational experiences, present teaching contexts, and future plans served as a catalyst to establish connections between theory and practice. These connections were reflected in their narrative responses and potentially became part of their professional identity.

Conclusion

The emergence and development of online TESOL programs has created new possibilities for teachers around the world to become part of a learning community that may not have been previously available to them. Online learning has brought challenges as much as celebrations; one being concern of disconnect between theory and practice. However, the voices of the students in this study proved otherwise, reaffirming that a strong connection of theory and practice is in fact possible in a virtual learning environment, if reflective practice and selected course design and instructional materials/textbooks are selected well and effectively incorporated.

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