An Investigation into the Nature of Good Language Classes

Rosemary Senior
Centre for International English,
Curtin University of Technology

Abstract
In this study the personal belief systems of a sample of practising, experienced teachers of English as a second language to adults were investigated, with the objective of uncovering the essential features of 'good' language classes. This research, conducted from a symbolic interactionist perspective, used grounded theory methodology for data collection, coding and analysis. Preliminary findings indicate that a key feature of 'good' language classes is the fact that class members have bonded together into a cohesive group. Within the protection of the 'bonded' classroom adult learners of English appear to feel more comfortable about expressing their ideas and making linguistic errors, features which current research indicates are essential for the development of communicative competence in a second language.

BACKGROUND

At the present time there is a considerable degree of interest in the area of teacher thinking research. However, research in the area of teacher thinking is not yet moving forward in a uniform way. As Calderhead (1987, p.6) says: "The situation in the mid 1980's is that research in teachers' thinking is becoming characterised by considerable diversity in approach". Much teacher thinking research to date is of the small-scale descriptive kind (Clark and Peterson, 1986, p.292), with researchers seeking to identify and categorise the complex network of influences governing teacher thinking and behaviour. Bussis et al.(1976) found that their results "highlight the wide variation in teachers' belief systems even within a sample of teachers who shared a commitment to open education and informal learning". Berliner (1989, pp.3-21) questions the utility of research which generates large numbers of taxonomic categories.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research was therefore to integrate teachers' beliefs, by identifying similarities between teacher perceptions concerning the nature of good language classes, rather than to focus on the differences in perceptions. Grounded theory seemed to be the most appropriate methodology to use for this piece of research (Merriam, 1988). Not only does grounded theory give the researcher detailed guidelines as to how to categorise unstructured data, but it also has as its goal the development of
theory at the grassroots level - theory which is grounded in the data provided by informants in a particular setting (Glaser & Strauss, 1973).

METHOD

The data for this study were gathered through open ended questionnaires and focused interviews gathered from a sample of 20 teachers working in a particular language teaching setting on a range of English language teaching programmes, and four teachers working in other locations. It should be noted that the informants represent a wide range of ages, countries of origin, qualifications, teaching styles, and experience of English language teaching (both in Australia and abroad), and that their diverse personal views on the nature of English language teaching are based on accumulated personal experience, rather than on experience gained solely from working together in one particular institution.

The interviews averaged 50 minutes in length, with the researcher following each informant down his or her path of individual interest and concern, using cues in the appropriate initial questionnaire as a starting point. The data were triangulated with the perceptions of students from 7 different classes, sometimes provided in point form by individual students and sometimes gleaned from small group or whole class discussion (depending on the linguistic level of the class).

For data analysis the researcher followed the procedures of constant comparative data analysis (outlined in Strauss & Corbin, 1990), whereby data are grouped together, and then regrouped, in categories of increasingly high levels of abstraction. The process of finding patterns in the data and then thinking about whether they are causes, properties, dimensions, conditions or consequences of aspects of the phenomenon under study can be conceptualised as doing a jigsaw puzzle without seeing the box with the picture on; it is essentially a flexible process whereby the researcher moves the data around and groups pieces of a similar pattern together, until an image gradually emerges into which all the data can be fitted. With this methodology negative cases are welcomed, because they encourage the researcher either to modify the picture to accommodate them, or else to find cogent reasons why they may be discounted.

An essential step in the process of developing grounded theory is the writing of memos. Memo writing is a way of capturing transient thoughts and of developing sensitivity, enabling the researcher gradually to gain a deeper understanding of the
phenomenon under study. Memo writing is essentially a creative process, similar to mind mapping or brainstorming (Buzan, 1974), whereby the researcher develops ideas and makes new associations by playing around with metaphors and exploring the range, positive and negative connotation of individual words.

The findings of this study were validated in a number of ways: (1) they were shared with two postgraduate support groups (one an educational group and the other a grounded theory group), (2) they were fed back to the informants themselves in a workshop situation, and (c) they were sent to selected individuals in alternative language teaching settings. In all cases individuals were supplied with a summary of the findings and an integrative diagram and were encouraged to comment and criticise freely.

FINDINGS

The key preliminary finding from this piece of research is the identification by a sample of experienced English language teachers of a range of features associated with the construct of the 'bonded class'. The bonded class itself is described in a variety of ways: the class has 'gelled', there is 'group cohesion', 'good class dynamics', 'team spirit', 'rapport between students', 'a sense of one-ness', 'no isolated islands', 'a sense of ensemble', 'being like a family'. Around this central phenomenon it is possible to group a variety of beliefs and insights supplied by the informants. For example, there appear to be a range of factors which inhibit the bonding of a class, such as the students having disparate goals, the pressure of impending exams, a syllabus which is constraining, or having too many students of one nationality in a class. There are a number of factors which enhance the bonding process, such as well-selected warm-up activities, developing the syllabus according to the needs and interests of the students, or having a class party or outing at an appropriate juncture. Informants described a variety of necessary conditions for the bonding process to occur, and could itemise a range of psychological features which characterised a bonded class. Finally, informants could identify a range of educational and self-development benefits, both for their students and for themselves, resulting from membership of a bonded class.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A preliminary investigation of the literature in the area of the social psychology of education indicates that, although there has been much research concerning the beneficial effects of cooperative small group work within the classroom (Johnson et
al., 1984, Slavin, 1985), there has been little research concerning the positive effect of the class as a whole developing a corporate identity. Evidence suggests that a key function of the bonded class is to provide a protective cocoon within which adult learners of a second language can practise their linguistic skills without fear of ridicule and subsequent loss of face. A search is currently being made for literature which relates to the protective function of groups.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

The above findings indicate that a key objective for experienced language teachers is the fostering of an environment in which language learning is likely to take place. Such teachers focus primarily on the process of language learning, and assume that different learners will take different things away from the same lesson. However, with the introduction of competency based assessment into certain sectors of the language teaching profession, it is likely that language teachers will be required to foster a more utilitarian atmosphere in their classrooms, developing their programmes around those specific elements which are to be assessed, rather than spending time cultivating a positive class ethos. As a result some adult students of English may be deprived of an environment in which they feel comfortable enough to develop their English language skills.

References


