GRAHAM CROOKES

A Practicum in
TESOL
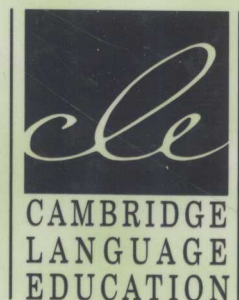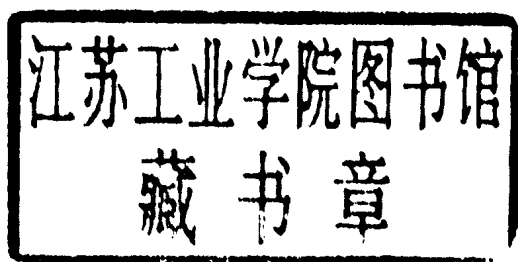
Professional Development
through Teaching Practice

A Practicum in TESOL

Professional Development through Teaching Practice

Graham Crookes

University of Hawai'i at Manoa

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

To my parents, Brian and Vicki;
my wife Hildre;
and to Alison, Paul, and Ellen.

Series Editor's Preface

While the practicum is considered a core course in most TESOL teacher education programs, compared to many other areas of professional theory and activity it has received relatively little serious study, in terms of conceptual orientation, content, or practice. Hence, as the author of this book states, it remains undertheorized and under-researched. What little research it has received has primarily been descriptive in nature.

This book seeks to do several things. First, it describes how a course in teaching practice can be organized. Based on extensive experience in teaching the practicum course in a MATESOL program, Dr. Crookes explores the issues involved and describes how many of the practical questions that arise can be addressed. Simplistic answers are avoided, however, in favor of a further probing of the questions and an introduction to a rich knowledge base in educational theory and philosophy as a source for insight and clarification. A parallel agenda of the book is to open up the whole nature of teacher development in language teaching and evaluate the assumptions, values, and practices on which it is constituted. The perspective presented as this process of reflective analysis takes place can be described as one grounded in critical pedagogy. Thus, throughout the book the author offers a critical questioning of commonly held assumptions and practices and leads us to further examine our ideas about many aspects of teaching, including its social, moral, and political dimensions. And lastly, Dr. Crookes seeks to present an approach to the practicum that is collaborative and that facilitates long-term teacher development and does not merely provide substance for a one-semester practicum experience.

This is not, then, simply another "how to" book of techniques. Although valuable insights are presented throughout concerning the basic issues involved in the organization of teaching practice, including relations with mentor teachers, lesson planning, observation, motivation, classroom management, and the role of teacher development groups, the development of teaching skill is viewed as a complex phenomenon involving many layers of learning. Beyond the level of practical learning are issues that involve the development of personal theories and teaching philosophies. The

development of social and interactional skills and the recognition that teaching has a moral and political dimension are also involved. Dr. Crookes is hence concerned with exploring both the outer and inner worlds of teaching and teacher development, and in the process he invites us to revisit many of the working assumptions from which we operate in teacher education. His ability to draw on his extensive knowledge of the fields of educational psychology and the philosophy of education adds both breadth and depth to his narrative.

This book is therefore an important addition to the literature on teacher learning in language teaching and to our understanding of how the practicum course in TESOL can be conceptualized and taught. It will be a valuable source book for both teacher educators and classroom teachers. It offers a fresh and challenging perspective on the nature of the practicum, written from the unique perspective of a leading scholar and theoretician in the field of applied linguistics who is actively involved in both classroom teaching and teacher education. It is hence a welcome addition to the Cambridge Language Education Series.

Jack C. Richards

A Practicum in TESOL

.

Contents

Introduction

In this Introduction, let me first say what this work is for and how it arose. I'll then give a quick orientation to the structure of the text, introduce myself, and finally present a few key background areas.

This book is designed to accompany a period of teaching practice, or practicum, for teachers of English to speakers of other languages. It should also be of use and interest to any group of ESL or EFL teachers working together to improve their practice or develop their understandings of teaching. It reflects my experiences as a teacher and teacher educator in many locations and over twenty years, and it addresses issues which I believe transcend local contexts. At the same time, I should mention that it also naturally reflects my experiences at my home institution, where I work particularly with student teachers completing the MA in English as a Second Language (ESL) at the University of Hawai'i. These students are an international group of individuals who are still within the first part of their career, with classroom experience in ESL or EFL, in a variety of different countries, typically ranging from one to five years. The teachers I have worked with in short courses in other locations have generally been teachers in midcareer. In conducting regular teaching practica, I usually work with a course lasting about 15 weeks, in which developing teachers either work directly with a cooperating teacher, or in their own class, and I (as supervisor), the cooperating teacher, and their peers observe them regularly and provide feedback on their classroom practice.[1] At the same time, they attend weekly meetings providing supporting material for this intensive period of reflection and professional development. Our concerns range from organizing a course and planning lessons to one's moral and social responsibilities as a teacher; they also include how the latter relate to the former.

When I first began to conduct classes of this sort, more than a decade ago now, there was surprisingly little material in the area of TESOL, ES/FL, or ELT[2] for developing teachers that went much beyond the "tips for teachers" model, and first efforts at research in the area were merely descriptive (e.g., Richards & Crookes, 1988; cf. Johnson, 1996). As TESOL has continued to grow, and as applied linguistics professionals have drawn more on the

field of education, more resources have become available; though scholars continue to comment that how S/FL teachers develop is still a topic little understood (Cumming, 1989; Freeman, 1996), and the practicum remains an undertheorized and underresearched area. I think this area is so crucial to the needs of generations of ES/FL professionals that a wide range of perspectives and orientations in support material should be on offer to developing ES/FL teachers and teacher educators, including, of course, the present one.

The structure and content of this book

As I hope you can see from the Contents page, the chapters reflect a deliberate sequence of ideas. Starting off, I will urge readers, in the first chapter, to think about what it is they are trying to achieve in a period of professional development. Some setting of goals might be facilitated through flipping through the book and dipping into it at some points, rather than trying simply to begin at the beginning and move steadily forward. I next introduce what is for me an underlying concept: the idea that teachers can improve by working together, and accordingly I review the techniques that can be used to gather the material for such development: observations of classes and one's own reflections on teaching; I also address the important process of sharing them with other teachers, preferably in a group setting. Elements for structuring those reflections come in succeeding chapters. I draw on material originating in the philosophy of education – an area which provides personal or values-based structures for organizing what one knows, thinks, or believes about teaching and learning generally. I also suggest a review of what formal content readers may have accumulated or may be accumulating from academic coursework in TESOL, SLA, SL Studies, and so on, or (of course) from independent study in those areas. These are interleaved with three chapters on various more down-to-earth matters to do with general (nonskill–area-specific) aspects of classroom practice, which while basic do in fact intersect with, and should reflect, our views about our educational practices. Continuing my emphasis on teachers helping teachers, a review of social skills serves to connect the classroom, and issues of student-teacher rapport, with professional life, where we work with or sometimes against our colleagues, and for which similarly social skills are needed. All this reflection won't happen, of course, without appropriate institutional structures, so unless teachers working with this book are prepared at some point in their career to attend to those, there won't be much point in our joint engagement with these issues. Hence the final chapters address what is needed, at the institutional level, if long-term professional development

is going to occur as an integral part of our careers. The reader may wish to pick and choose, of course – but that's the long and the short of it.

Sections of the text

Besides the main expository sections of this book, there are two other types of text here. Most important, there are substantial extracts from the reflections and comments of student teachers I have worked with. Some of these are quite experienced teachers, some less so. I personally have found their reflections and comments extremely valuable in advancing my own thinking; I hope you will, too.

The other kind of text is headed *Warm-up*, *For Discussion*, and *You try it*. . . . These short sections are particularly appropriate when the book is being used by groups of teachers, whether with or without a group or discussion leader (or supervisor). The first of these is simply to get the reader thinking at the beginning of a chapter. The sections headed *For Discussion* simply contain discussion questions pertinent to the section or subsection they terminate. Much benefit can be obtained through sharing views of material one is reading or studying with another person, and comparing different perspectives and experiences. Talking through the ideas of a section can also assist by moving the reader to a more active use of them. Sections headed *You try it* . . . are written more directly to the individual reader (whether part of a group or not) and relate principally to encouraging you to apply some idea just discussed in the text. Occasionally in both of these text sections I write specifically about how the main material in a chapter could be worked with, prior to suggesting some discussion topics or activity. In all these cases, aiding reflection is the goal, and there are no right answers.

For groups working with this book: in some cases, where an activity is suggested the actions proposed may take time, and their feasibility will definitely vary according to the circumstances of the group. In some instances, however, it may be possible to choose one such activity after concluding reading a chapter, and then have group members report back on their attempts to carry it out at the beginning of a subsequent meeting.

Positionality

In the sciences at the beginning of the new century there is an increased consciousness of the importance of context in determining or limiting knowledge claims. Closely related to this is a rise in acceptance of the local, personal, and interested (i.e., not *dis*interested) nature of knowledge. For

me, this means that it is essential that the author of a work such as this disclose himself to readers, rather than assume common interests and understandings, or take refuge in impersonal, anonymous, yet authoritative prose. In addition, in the context of material which will stress personal and professional development, it may be desirable to see individuals as not fixed, but "positioned," in a shifting web of relationships that temporarily define a person.[3] Consequently, and with that caveat, I'm white, male, middle-class, raised in London, and have lived most of my adult life outside my country of birth. I've taught in high schools in London and Sarawak, in the business training sector and English conversation schools in Japan, and in the English for Academic Purposes sector in the United States. While my Masters is in ESL, my Ph.D. is in Educational Psychology.[4] I've been primarily based in EFL/ESL teacher education as an academic and teacher at the University of Hawai'i since 1988. In that role and status, I've had experiences working with teachers at other U.S. institutions, and further afield, in Singapore, Australia, Colombia, Japan (again), Denmark, and Kyrgyzstan. These days I'm particularly concerned, professionally, about the poor working conditions of many ES/FL teachers, and the lack of support for professional development in the administrative structures in which they are involved. Broadly, in my work I'm trying to find ways of fostering S/FL education that will lead to a better world.

Some scene-setting comments ...

General aspects of S/FL teaching practice

Many parts of a language teacher's professional expertise are not exclusively associated with the teaching of a specific domain, "skill," or aspect of the language. Accordingly, the program of professional development contained in or implied by this book does not specifically relate to, for example, the teaching of reading, or literacy, or oral communication skills, or content ESL, or any other equivalent area. There are many handbooks, not to mention journal articles, which provide advice or empirical evidence concerning how best to handle such matters. I believe there are also *general* aspects of practice which deserve attention (cf. Shulman, 1987), and that is what this book addresses.

Professional development and a practicum

There is not enough time in a practicum, or for that matter in an MA or Certificate course, to do all the teacher development that might be desirable.[5]

Consistent with this, the basic qualification in most areas of teaching is really little more than a license to begin: it implies that the relevant authorities would be willing to accept a person as a teacher, at a basic level of competence, and does not imply that this person knows all there is to know about teaching (cf. Reynolds, 1992). While an MA, particularly when it is taken after other certificate-level qualifications in ES/FL, is an indication of a fair measure of proficiency as an educator, those who hold it and have gone on in their career may sometimes reflect (as I do) on how little they really knew after completing the course, compared to what they know now.

A way to address the problem of the brevity of supervised teaching within formal coursework (whether BA, Certificate, or MA) is to see the formal period of practice and learning as just *one* brief period within what should be a more extensive period, indeed career, of less formal learning. But few of us will have those careers or learn as much from them as we could if there is not an initial emphasis, in our first periods of teacher education, on structuring our teaching so as to learn from it – engaging, that is to say, in reflective practice – and on structuring our career and our working conditions, so as to be lifelong learners. And that is a major underlying concern of this book.

Teaching as performing a social role

Becoming a teacher means, among other things, learning to perform a particular social role. In performing the social role of "teacher," an actor necessarily engages with a script partly constructed by the expectations of our audience of students, fellow-teachers, administrators, and (possibly) parents and community members. As Cazden (1988, p. 44) says, "School is always a performance that must be constituted through a group of actors." I think it is this conception of teaching which is recognized by the beginning teacher as fundamental (and why such teachers-under-construction can be impatient with what they call "theory"). Knowing a large amount about, say, the psychological processes involved in acquiring reading strategies in a second language is of little importance if one cannot enact the teacher role in front of students.[6] Enacting that role includes knowing what can (initially) be said and done, and doing so in a way that will elicit the complicity of the students, who often know their role better than does the beginning teacher.

However, even as one is gaining a command of the basic or historically well-established aspects of the role, one can begin to refine technique and rewrite the script (cf. Grossman, 1992). For me, technique includes not only standard aspects of ES/FL pedagogy, but also those aspects of

human interpersonal communication skills that can facilitate complex communication, which in turn range from those needed to transmit information clearly, to those through which one sustains the relationships that support communication.

The possible need to rewrite the script is suggested by a number of factors. For most of us, the basic understanding of "school" comes to us from our own experiences as children and young adults. Much has changed in the world since that time. And if the state of the world as a new century begins is not one to be complacent about, perhaps the old script of "school" is implicated in that. The right to rewrite the script is something that the more highly paid professional actors ensure is entered into their contracts. In a parallel manner, we can also hope that the more professional teachers reflect on the roles they have stepped into and explore the full range of possibilities available within them, and consider to what extent they may want to or be capable of altering them (given the constraints they are under: Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). Teachers' explorations are partly dependent on understanding how their roles relate to the rest of the script – that is, to the other characters in the play and the thrust of the storyline. In the real world as it encompasses teaching, this means the nature of schooling and of education, and what it means to be a teacher in terms of both one's effect upon students and also of one's effect upon society. The university-based S/FL teacher education curriculum has a role to play in developing this understanding (Hudelson & Faltis, 1993). To drop the metaphor, life is not a play, and people can get hurt, or helped, by what we do. Teaching is not a technical exercise, but a moral[7] enterprise enacted through social means.

Teacher learning/reflective teaching

The present book is intended to support teacher learning. A variety of understandings of how teachers, including ES/FL teachers, learn has coexisted in the professional literature and the minds of teachers for as long as this topic has been discussed. Probably those which have been most treated by academics at any one time have been those most consistent with the dominant understandings of learning at that time. One feature of modern scientific disciplines is their much greater size, complexity, and diversity than ever before. This allows a much greater range of theories to coexist; or, for a single phenomenon to be explored from multiple perspectives. Teacher learning can be conceptualized as having both individual and social dimensions. Hitherto, much of the small literature in our field on teacher development has crowded under the heading of "reflective teaching," in which a somewhat individual perspective is taken.[8] Presently, there are increasing