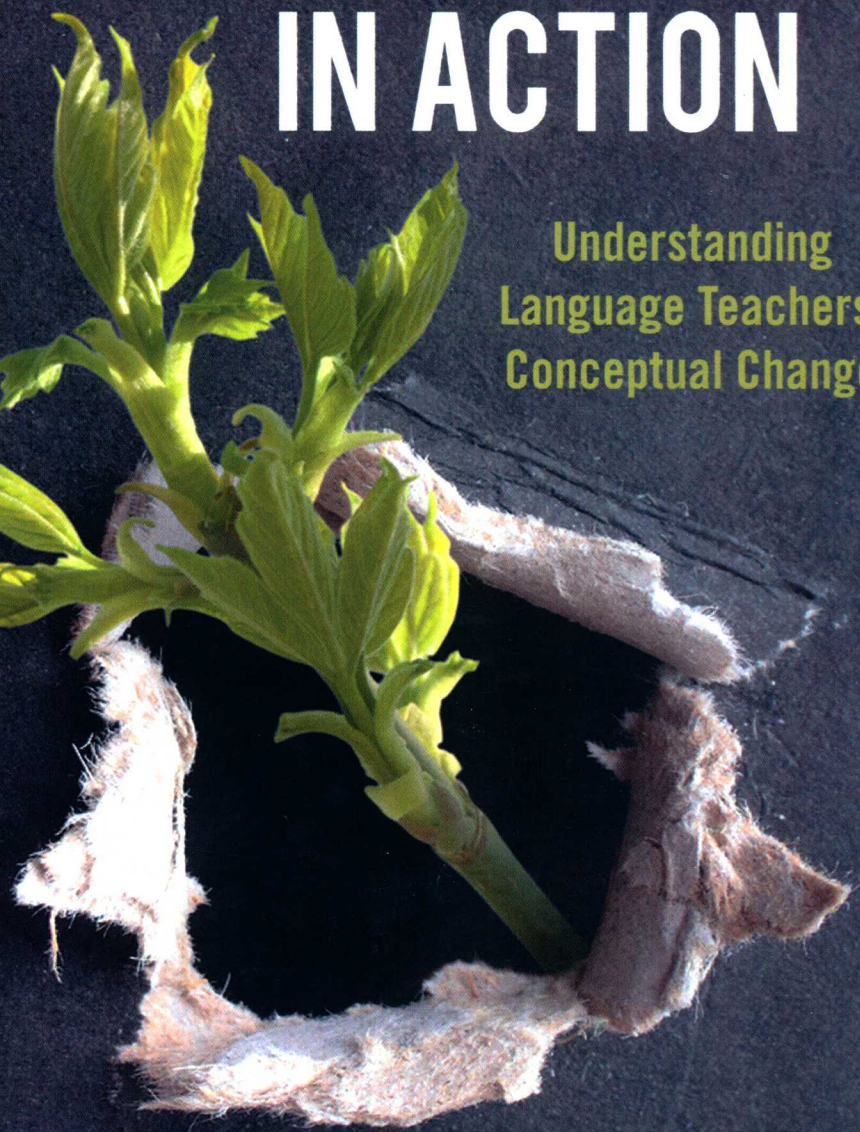


TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION

Understanding
Language Teachers'
Conceptual Change



MAGDALENA KUBANYIOVA



Teacher Development in Action

Understanding Language Teachers' Conceptual Change

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Teacher Development in Action

To Mirka

In memoriam

Prologue

As part of their supervised teaching practice on an MA in TESOL course, student teachers were preparing to teach a class of undergraduates for one semester. The English course in question was literature-based and required the student teachers to design their own teaching materials and tasks rather than rely on a standard textbook; something which most of them had no prior experience of. To inspire them and help them enlarge their repertoire of suitable tasks and activities, a series of practical workshops was organised on teaching English language through literature by a team of supervisors.

One of these demonstrations included a choral reading task (described in Kubanyiova, 2002) and two of my supervisees decided to try it out in their own lessons. I observed both of them on separate occasions, discussed their lesson with each supervisee in a post-observation conference and concluded with a final evaluation. When the two student teachers next met and compared their evaluations, the one with a considerably lower score almost screamed in disbelief, turning to the other: 'But you did the same thing!'

Yes, having observed both classes, I can indeed confirm: it was the 'same thing'; and yet it could not be more different. The two teachers attended the same workshop. They used exactly the same materials. They 'performed' the same activity. They did it with students of similar language proficiency, age, motivation, socio-economic background, and previous language learning history in the similar-size classroom at the same time of the day. Yet, in one teacher's class, the classroom atmosphere was soaked with enthusiasm and engagement: the students eagerly debating over the right kind of intonation, practising pronunciation of difficult words, often eliciting the teacher's help, the whole class roaring in laughter as they were performing the task together, asking the teacher to let them 'do it again'. In the other teacher's class, however, there was such a strong sense of tension, reluctance, embarrassment and boredom, all of which only intensified upon the teacher's command to 'do it again', that made me want to weep and run away.

Inquiry begins in wonder and this is how mine started: I began and have continued to wonder about what exactly transforms the same task in the hands of different teachers in a way that has such a profoundly different impact on the students' experience. And I have continued to

wonder about whether those who work with teachers can make any difference to what happens in their classrooms. How is applied linguistics research and theory transformed into practice? And what do applied linguists, language teacher educators, language education policy makers and language teachers need to know and do to enhance students' language learning experience? As Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000) has said, 'Much is mysterious about the teaching/learning process, and those who approach it as a mystery to be solved (recognizing that some things about teaching and learning may be forever beyond explanation) will see their teaching as a continuing adventure.' This book documents my journey in this mysterious land.

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I have been blessed with opportunities to meet and work with people I deeply respect and whose ideas, professional guidance and friendship have been invaluable in contributing, directly or indirectly, to the development of my thinking summarised in this book. Special thanks go to Zoltán Dörnyei whose sharp intellect, discipline and rigour with which he approaches his work have pushed me beyond the boundaries of my 'possible selves'. This book, let alone the research project behind it, would never have become a reality without his continuing support and friendship. I am grateful to Simon Borg, Norbert Schmitt, Karen Johnson and Thomas Farrell who engaged with the material in this book at various stages of its development and offered very constructive and generous feedback. I thank my editors Priyanka Gibbons and Olivia Middleton at Palgrave Macmillan for their wonderful support and endless patience as I was nearing the completion of the manuscript, to Melanie Blair for her assistance, and to Philip Tye, my copy-editor, for his efficiency. I am immensely grateful to the academic staff at the University in Nitra, particularly Professor Zdenka Gadušová, Dr Janka Hart'anská and Professor L'udmila Jančovičová, who have been instrumental to the success of this project, and to Chaz Pugliese who contributed generously with his creative ideas to the initial workshop. Special thanks are due to the Overseas Research Scholarship (ORS) awards scheme from which the first year of my study was funded and to the University of Nottingham for supporting my fieldwork. My conversation with Susan Nolen gave me a fresh perspective on my findings and Pat Bazeley's inspirational workshops transformed my thinking about qualitative research. Rani Rubdy, a colleague at the Assumption University in Bangkok and a dear friend, patiently listened to my puzzles about teacher learning and shared with me her vast resources on teacher cognition. I cannot thank her enough for igniting my interest in this fascinating field of study. Alan Maley has had a profound influence on my professional development and without his encouragement in the early stages of my career I would never have found the courage to embark on this project. I would also like to thank Angela Creese, a wonderful colleague, mentor and friend at the University of Birmingham whose care and support allowed me to keep writing when it seemed an insurmountable task. I am forever indebted to my parents and all my family for always being there

for me and to my husband, Jan, for his unwavering faith in me, infinite optimism and support at every stage of this project. I would never have done this without him.

Finally, and most importantly, I owe a debt of gratitude to the eight teachers who participated in this study and without whose many sacrifices and admirable commitment this study would never have materialised. I will always be indebted to them for letting me into their lives and allowing me to learn about, with and from them. It is the hardest thing to write these words knowing that one of these eight young and energetic teachers is no longer with us. I dedicate this book to her as a tribute to the work of all educators who are passionate, like Mirka was, in their quest to become the best teachers they can be.

This book includes copyright material and I am grateful to Christopher Logue and Rosemary Hill for their very kind permission to reprint the poem 'Come to the Edge' (from Logue, C. *New Numbers*, published by Cape in 1969) in Chapter 8.

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1

Introduction

1.1 Why a book on failure?

This book documents the impact of a language teacher development programme that had a grand mission to transform language classrooms – and failed. The naivety of such an objective and the predictability of this outcome in the context in which the programme was delivered are admittedly all too obvious in the light of the latest theorising about how language teachers learn. We have come to understand that language teachers develop in unique and individual ways (S. Borg, 2006). We also know that their prior experiences, personal histories, beliefs and knowledge, often gained through many years of the ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975), play a critical role in influencing their teacher education experience. And there is no doubt also that the unique sociocultural contexts in which the teachers do their work shape the influence that teacher education has on actual classroom practices (K. E. Johnson, 2006).

This awareness is a result of important epistemological shifts in second language teacher education research which has moved away from the behaviourist focus on the implementation of discrete sets of techniques and skills to understanding why teachers do what they do in the classroom and how they engage with and interpret the content of teacher education (K. E. Johnson, 2009). Our understanding of the nature of teacher learning and change has been greatly deepened thanks to these shifts and has led to some important and fruitful, if at times a little heated, debates about what should constitute the language teacher education knowledge base and how we should go about the business of educating teachers (Freeman and Johnson, 1998, 2004, 2005a; K. E. Johnson, 2003, 2006, 2009; Tarone and Allwright, 2005; Yates and Muchinsky, 2003).

Yet, the results of the research project described in this book testify that, as illuminating as these debates have been, they have not eliminated the need to study 'failure'.

The teachers who took part in this study can without exaggeration be described as the best of the best, conscientious and hard-working individuals who deserve much respect for the work they do, often in the face of adverse conditions. They are highly qualified professionals open to a wide range of opportunities for continuing professional development (such as attending national conferences and workshops, involvement in national and international educational projects with their students, and pursuing further studies, including MAs and PhDs), even though most of these were, at the time of the project, not formally recognised in the state school sector as professional development and certainly did not count towards the teachers' heavy teaching load. Most of these teachers were highly regarded by their students and colleagues and some held senior advisory positions in their schools. And, quite remarkably, all of them voluntarily sacrificed their time, including their weekends, to participate in this yearlong research project.

At the same time, the teacher development course which was at the heart of this research was carefully developed to reflect, as much as was practically possible, the latest developments in applied linguistics and language teacher cognition. The content responded to the teachers' specifically articulated concerns regarding learner motivation and group dynamics in their English language classrooms. The teacher education processes, in turn, were developed to account for how teachers learn; recognising the importance of experiential knowledge and the need to bring to a conscious level teachers' tacit beliefs about language education through reflection. A conscious effort was made not only to create a caring and supportive environment, but also to extend teacher learning opportunities beyond the confines of the training room.

And yet, despite the conditions appearing 'right', the said teacher development course failed to inspire these teachers' conceptual change; that is, change in their understanding of the principles for creating a motivational climate for language learning, a shift in their beliefs about the role of teachers in creating these conditions and a transformation of their teaching practices, which would make a difference for students' language learning. Individual and variable ways of teacher learning, the unfavourable sociocultural context or, quite simply, an ineffective course may be perfectly valid research conclusions explaining the failure. Yet, without extending the inquiry and offering an in-depth anatomy of the intricacies of teacher change (or, crucially for this book, the lack