



Collaborative Conversations Among Language Teacher Educators

Margaret Hawkins and Suzanne Inujo, Editors

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*To all reflective practitioners who
struggle to better understand
language learning and teaching.*

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
------------------------------	-------------

Introduction

Collaborative Reflection as Critical Practice in

Teacher Education	1
--------------------------------	----------

Donald Freeman and Margaret (Maggie) Hawkins

Changes in Teacher Education

Time, Structure, and Community

LTEC: Language Teachers Educational Collaborative

Why Share These Conversations?

Book Format

Chapter 1

Collaborative Groups in Teacher Education	15
--	-----------

Text: *Francis Bailey and Jerri Willett*

Conversation

Unclear Expectations

Group Dynamics

Appeal to Authority

Learning to Teach

Response: *Tom Nicoletti*

Chapter 2

Can In-Service Professional Development Be Authentic? . 33

Text: *Ellen Rintell*

Conversation

Setting Agendas

Modes and Models of Participation

Social and Institutional Structures

Response: *Ken Pransky*

Chapter 3

Controlling a Negotiated Syllabus 53

Text: *Suzanne Irujo*

Conversation

Reasons to Negotiate a Syllabus

Successful Negotiation

Types of Negotiation

Self-Doubts

Response: *Avrom Feinberg*

Chapter 4

The Nature of Linguistics in a Language Teacher

Education Program 69

Text: *Diane Larsen-Freeman*

Conversation

What Linguistic Knowledge Language Teachers

Need and How They Learn It

Importance of Context

Knowing and Using

Response: *Ellie Schmitt*

Chapter 5

Examining Language Teachers' Teaching Knowledge 87

Text: *Donald Freeman and Kathleen Graves*

Conversation

Disciplinary Knowledge

Experiential and Conceptual Knowledge

Learning to Teach

The Uniqueness of Language Teaching

Apprenticeship Into the Discourse of Teaching

Responsibility and Agency

Response: *Amy Powell Faeskorn*

Chapter 6

The Role of Research in Language Teacher Education 105

Text: *Margaret (Maggie) Hawkins*

Conversation

What Is Research? What Kind of Research

Is Relevant?

Teacher-Researcher Relationships

Response: *Jo-Anne Wilson Keenan*

Conclusion

Closely Examined Work: An Epilogue to the

LTEC Conversations 121

Donald Freeman

An Uneasy Balance

Joining the Teaching Club

Authority and Control: Who Knows What?

The Facts of the (Subject) Matter and How to

Package Them

Using Knowledge in Teaching/to Teach

Contributors 137

Collaborative Reflection as Critical Practice in Teacher Education

Donald Freeman and Margaret (Maggie) Hawkins

Changes in Teacher Education

Teacher education is not what it used to be. The thinking and practices that have characterized teacher education and professional development programs are changing. The broad sweep of these changes has moved from focusing exclusively on how to do things in the classroom and why these technicist solutions work based on rationales drawn heavily from academic disciplines, to focusing on teachers' work as it evolves, as reasoning in action (Johnson, 1999) in the contexts of time, place, and individual history.

Following trends in education more generally, the preparation and professional development of all teachers has been transformed in the past decade. Zeichner (1999) described the dynamics of these changes in his 1998 vice-presidential address to the Division on Teaching and Teacher Education of the American Educational Research Association. In his address, titled "The New Scholarship in Teacher Education," he outlined how teacher education has moved from "discover[ing] the most efficient strategies for training teachers and prospective teachers to perform particular actions in classrooms" (p. 4), through a recognition of the importance of teachers' cognitive processes, to a more reflective and critical approach.

In English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), teacher education has followed a similar path. In their seminal volume, *Second Language Teacher Education* (1990), Richards and Nunan delineated ESOL teacher education as an area for research and theorizing in its own right. Since then, the research base has expanded as researchers have examined teacher learning in ESOL contexts (Freeman & Richards, 1996), and debates over the knowledge-base in ESOL teacher education (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Yates & Muchisky, 2003) have addressed the relative primacy and balance of knowledge derived from academic disciplines, from participants' experience, and from teacher education more broadly.

At its core, this evolution represents a shift from emphasizing teacher education—the structures and processes through which individuals are prepared as teachers—to emphasizing teacher learning—the processes through which individuals learn and are socialized as teachers. Although these two approaches arguably serve the same purpose, they are not isomorphic. It is fair to say, to paraphrase Stevick's famous syllogism from *Teaching Language: A Way and Ways* (1980, p. 16), that there can be teacher learning without teacher education (as in teachers learning autonomously), but it would be difficult to claim that teachers were being educated unless teachers had learned something. Thus teacher learning—how teachers come to understand, analyze, and critique what they do—lies at the heart of this new focus. Referred to variously as *reflective teaching* (e.g., Richards & Lockhart, 1994) or *reflective practice* (e.g., Zeichner & Liston, 1996), this emphasis on teacher learning examines how individuals learn by engaging with their own teaching, their students, their context, and their professional roles as teachers.

Teacher learning can have internal and external dimensions that are closely linked. Reflective practice often refers to the internal dimension that calls for the individual teacher to engage in a close and disciplined examination of the processes and outcomes of his or her work (e.g., Ballenger, 1999; or in ESOL, Appel, 1995). *Critical reflection* refers to the external dimension that attends explicitly to how issues of class, gender, race, culture, and language affect teaching and learning in classrooms (e.g., Britzman, 1991; or in ESOL, Samuel, 1998). Often taken in tandem, these two approaches aim to foster in teachers a "self-reflexive and self-critical attitude" (Ramanathan, 2002, p. 146). While such self-study has not been common

among teacher educators, Zeichner (1999) notes that “this work can both inform the practices of the teacher educators who conduct it and contribute to knowledge and understanding of teacher education for the larger community of scholars and educators” (p. 11).

Time, Structure, and Community

Teachers generally work in isolation. They spend much of their time in individual pursuits without the chance to confer or collaborate professionally with others: teaching in their classrooms, planning lessons, and communicating with their students. Opportunities to exchange ideas or discuss with colleagues what they know or believe are rare and valued. Most professional development fails to counteract such isolation. The chance to think together, in disciplined ways, through collaborative exploration, reflection, and conversation is key. Three elements—time, professional space, and disciplined ways of thinking (Teacher Knowledge Project, 2003)—make such interactions productive.

These elements have been constituted in a number of ways in professional development interactions. The literature has documented teachers engaging in reflective practice, either as individuals or in one-on-one collaboration with a teacher educator (e.g., Souza Lima, 1998; Macgillivray, 1997). These projects have yielded useful insights and have been disseminated through the traditional professional means, often replayed at a distance through journal articles and conference presentations. Other initiatives, which entail spontaneous conversations triggered by current situations, are more immediate and evanescent. Predicated on the belief that understandings and interpretations are constructed continuously through interaction, these approaches follow the sharing, challenging, and negotiating of meanings that occur moment-by-moment as teachers interact with knowledgeable others (e.g., Bailey, 1996; Hawkins, 2000; Willett & Miller, 2004).

Regardless of the tenor and occasion of such interactions, the role of talk is key. At their heart lies the ebb and flow of language, expression, and representation. Hollingsworth (1994) describes this dynamism in a teacher collaborative she worked with:

Because of our ongoing relationship, the talk in our meetings did not usually take on the form of *dialog*—similar to the conversation in

a play or novel, which appears to have two or more voices, but which actually comes from one author's perspective. Nor was it simply a *discussion* of pre-arranged topics and readings through a formal discourse structure. Rather the collaborative and sustained *conversation* became the exchange and reformulation of ideas, intimate talk, and reconstructive questions. (p. 6)

For the talk to add up to something, the interaction needs a structure and a focus. There are numerous examples of such designs; we mention five here:

- *book talk* discussions in the Learning Community, a teacher education program in Hawaii in which student teachers met monthly for conversations, using books as catalysts to promote reflection on cultural issues (Florio-Ruane, 2001)
- *multicultural collaboratives* in four cities that brought together teams of teachers from different schools to explore critical education (Freedman, Simons, Kalnin, & Casareno, 1999)
- *teacher study groups* in which mainstream and ESL teachers examined English language learners' academic work as a way to improve their own performance (Clair, 1998)
- *cooperative groups* for faculty professional development (Edge, 2002)
- *exploratory teaching* in which teachers gather to examine "puzzles" in classroom practice (Allwright, 2003)

These efforts all have a predetermined structure (often rather loose) that allows the conversations to unfold and provides a focus to anchor them. For talk to be organized, time must be set aside, and people must come together. Thus these key elements of time and structure lead to and are reinforced by an emerging sense of professional community among participating teachers (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). Together these elements seem to provide an antidote to the chronic isolation and alienation that can encroach on practicing teachers.

The irony is that teacher educators usually do not address professional isolation any better than teachers do. They too lack time (often because they do not take it), an organized structure, and a group of colleagues with whom they can examine their work. As teacher educators, many of us promote such approaches for teachers and incorporate them into our teacher

education practices. However, we often do not engage in such endeavors ourselves. Yet we, also, often live our daily professional lives in isolation, relying on a larger (and more geographically scattered) professional community to share information about the issues and practices that make up our work. And this information is often conveyed in print through professional papers or in formulaic conference presentations, which do not permit deep probing or lasting exchanges. Thus we deny ourselves rich opportunities to arrive at new or redefined understandings through sustained discursive interactions.

This book departs from that norm. It documents the efforts of one group of language teacher educators to create a local professional community within which we could critically reflect together on our work. We offer it not as a model or a formula but as a guided excursion into how we have thought about, questioned, and reformulated what we do as language teacher educators.

LTEC: Language Teachers Educational Collaborative

The Language Teachers Educational Collaborative (LTEC) was first convened by Maggie Hawkins and Jerri Willett at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in June 1992. That first meeting sought to bring together a geographically proximate group of colleagues in ESOL teacher education from diverse institutions of higher education to explore common issues in our work. We did not know then where things might lead, whether we could find common ground among our various views and affiliations, or whether the conversations would gain enough momentum and interest to persevere in our time-choked work lives.

As the chapters of this book attest, the group not only survived but indeed flourished over the next 5 years. We met quarterly at first and then seasonally, in the fall, winter, and spring. Though a few members came and went, the core group that contributed to this book remained the same throughout. The venue rotated; the agenda and its processes evolved; but the contacts went on. How did such a loose, free-form professional group survive? What provided the basis for engagement? In an institutionally stratified work world where parochial concerns are often paramount and time is so pressured, how did this group of ESOL teacher educators continue to meet to digest and critique what they were doing? Why do it?

In a sense, this book tries to answer that question. The LTEC group's sporadic encounters offered participants the place and the discipline to examine and reexamine core issues in their work as ESOL teacher educators. LTEC meetings allowed us to step out of the day-to-day work of teaching and supervision, to stand back from the rhythm and assumptions of what we were doing, and to think about it. The actual process involved thoughtful, prepared conversation. These were not spontaneous sessions; we were not griping or brainstorming. Instead, the step-by-step agenda that evolved—reading a text prepared by one person, then spending time discussing that text and ultimately relating ideas from the discussion back to our individual work—gave our conversations form and discipline. Thus, following the framework described above, we provided a time, a professional space, and a structure within which disciplined ways of thinking could occur and be articulated and negotiated.

As members of the group became more familiar with one another, professional postures softened. People began to seek out contradictions and question each other's assumptions and boundaries. Why do you think this or that? How do you know? What is your evidence? Sometimes people shifted their ideas; sometimes they agreed to disagree. Generally, we resolved very little during these meetings. In fact, the meetings usually left a lot of unsettling loose ends. As informal as these interactions were in a professional sense, the meetings were neither confessional nor self-indulgent. Rather, they often served to push each individual's thinking, to identify and analyze intractable issues in courses we were teaching or with teacher learners with whom we were working as supervisors or advisers. To talk in this way, to be able to think deeply with colleagues about both specific and crosscutting issues in our work as teacher educators created a critical form of professional development that is rarely available to those who teach teachers.

Those of us who participated found the experience immensely valuable. The conversations, albeit sometimes messy and challenging, provided new insights and perspectives on our practices and our beliefs. They challenged and pushed us—not always a comfortable process. We found, at times, broad areas of mutual interest and concern, where the diversity of perspectives expanded our thinking. At other times, issues were raised that some of us had not considered and that forced us to squirm a bit as we

critiqued our practices. We also had an ongoing debate about the group's membership: whether to keep a stable and familiar membership or to invite newcomers. Some felt that new participants would refresh the conversation by offering different views; others felt that part of the group's efficacy lay in our shared history, known relationships, and established foundational thinking.

At one point, after meeting for roughly 2 years, we felt a need to redefine the group's purpose and goals. That engendered a frank conversation about what we valued about participating and likewise what we found constraining. That led us to focus on a product—something that would help us to reflect on the value and process of our work together. We felt that the conversations were of definite value to us and wondered if they might also be of value to others. And if so, how might we capture and elaborate their interactive nature in print? So we decided to work toward publishing the conversations. In writing about what we did, we have sought to capture both the process of discussion—as set out in the structure of each chapter—and the outcomes of those discussions—as represented in these text versions.

Why Share These Conversations?

Capturing in printed form the ebb and flow of ideas that constituted the work of LTEC has been a major challenge. The first question we asked ourselves was, what is the possible value of these conversations to others in the field? Why share them? We would argue that there are three basic reasons: process, content, and professionalism.

First, making these conversations public may encourage others to similar undertakings. Putting the process in print opens it up to replication. The chapters in this book provide a series of maps showing how one group of ESOL teacher educators integrated a process of collaborative inquiry into their day-to-day jobs. Readers may decide to undertake a similar process of finding or writing a provocative text and inviting colleagues to have a collaborative conversation about it. Or readers may adopt only part of the process, perhaps the issues-based conversation. We feel that whatever encouragement the book may offer, those who engage in collaborative inquiry will find it beneficial.

Second, whether similar conversations are undertaken or not, the content as it is argued here seems to us so central to rigorous examination of

ESOL teacher education that it should not be overlooked. Putting the content in print gets these core issues on the table for discussion. In a sense, this content introduces the element of vulnerability that comes with inquiry. Readers may disagree that these issues are central, or they may question what individuals in these conversations say about the issues. But raising these major themes seems to us essential to opening up the work of ESOL teacher education to close, public examination.

Which leads to the third reason: professionalism. We believe that closely and reflectively examining how we educate ESOL teachers plays a critical part in professionalizing ESOL as a field. As in any field, ESOL teacher educators have areas of consensus and difference in what we think and do. Usually, however, we rehearse these issues in the third person of professional writing and scholarly journals. In a real sense, we are prisoners of that genre, which is one that leaves little—if any—room to write and talk together about how we do what we do and the tensions that are part of that work. These conversations depart from that norm. They raise messy issues, expose individual practitioners' thinking, and leave the issues unresolved, all of which is quite atypical of our professional genre. But we believe it can be quite useful. Unless and until we can speak rigorously about the core contradictions in what we ask ESOL teachers to know and do and how we ask them to learn it, our work will not rest on a firm foundation.

Book Format

The format of the LTEC meetings gradually became more stable and fixed. One member would generate a text (usually two to three pages in length) to distribute prior to the meeting, thus providing a set of focal issues. We rotated this responsibility to allow each group member to introduce issues he or she found compelling. Although in the early meetings a written response was the admission ticket, eventually the only requirement for attendance was having read and reflected on the text.

Each chapter of the book represents one LTEC meeting (in chronological order, although we have not included all the meetings). Each is divided into three parts. We begin with the preliminary text that was circulated prior to our meeting. We then provide an edited transcription of the discussion that the text engendered. This opens up not only the product—the issues discussed and points made by participants—but also the process. As will be

apparent, discussions such as these are often messy, sometimes circular, and not always comfortable. Because we feel that these conditions were often the catalysts to our learning, we have attempted to capture and portray their essence.

One recurrent concern among us as teacher educators was that we were discussing teachers and teaching issues but not including the voices of classroom practitioners. The format of the book has allowed us to address that shortcoming. For each chapter, we have solicited a teacher respondent, someone who is knowledgeable and invested in the chapter's issues, and we have invited him or her to respond to the issues and viewpoints represented in the conversation. These responses constitute the third section of each chapter. At the end of each chapter, along with references, we have included a list of suggested further readings. The list combines works that LTEC members feel have provided a foundation for our thinking and our viewpoints on topics addressed in the chapter, and more recent pieces that may serve to push and extend the conversation. We hope you find them useful.

The chapters and topics addressed are as follows:

Collaborative Groups in Teacher Education

The text describes the experiences of a student who criticized the extensive use of collaborative groups in an ESOL methods course. In the conversation, LTEC members explore the sources of student resistance to group work; ways of helping students better understand the purposes and advantages of working in collaborative groups; the inevitable but necessary tensions that exist in such learning; and the impact of collaborative group work on the teacher educator's engagement, authority, and sense of control. The conversation takes stock of our different perspectives on the nature of knowledge, how it is learned, and the formats that can accommodate these perspectives. It ends with an appreciation for the complexity of what is often presented simply as a technique. The response is by a teacher who was a class member and whose experiences stimulated the original topic.

Can In-Service Professional Development Be Authentic?

The text reports on a survey study designed to discover which models of staff development in-service teachers prefer. The conversation focuses on differences between teacher education in a graduate classroom, where