

Second language, literacy and teaching: teacher development to support the needs of low educated learners

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[Abstract](#)

This paper draws on a qualitative research project to discuss the situated development of novice language and literacy teachers' practices. Narratives of language and literacy teachers' early development suggest that the development of their professional skills reflect the conditions in which training takes place. We discuss this link initially with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's critique of learned ignorance, according to which conditions of early practice can be expected to fuse with occupational habitus to produce ad hoc coping strategies and a rationale which makes them seem effective. Interview data is presented and analysed in this light, as we examine the extent to which certain aspects of situated practice, while an indispensable part of novice literacy teachers' development, also create significant barriers to long-term effective development.

Keywords: teacher education, professional development, situated literacy, ignorance

[Introduction](#)

This paper examines situated learning practices in the context of language and literacy teacher education in the United Kingdom. Writing from the point of view of teacher educators, we focus critically on the links between place and practice for trainee language and literacy teachers. These accounts highlight negative effects of learning in contexts where, as we show, conditions for professional development are far from ideal. We analyse these contexts, first by reviewing some of the key recent changes in the language and literacy teaching landscape in the UK. We then examine the ways in which this context might promote certain views of language and literacy teaching, but also learners, through the Bourdieuan concept of "learned ignorance". To analyse these issues, we first draw on Pierre Bourdieu's critical account of the

way ignorance can arise in settings where practice is isolated from theoretical considerations. This raises the question of how far the contexts of language and literacy teacher education provide a long term basis for effective development. Do they leave trainee teachers, as Bourdieu implies, ill-equipped to manage contingency in the complex settings which frame our practice? Or do aspects of these environments foster forms of emergent knowledge and a very different relationship with ignorance which provides, in the right conditions, a sounder basis for long term professional development? These questions require an awareness of emergence and thus the need for a conceptual and practical division between the repetition of practice(s) and the creation of new ways of doing things which emerge *in situ*. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of learned ignorance as a way of distinguishing the former, we discuss teachers' emerging professional skills which reflect the features of the complex environments in question.

Third, we examine the questions raised in this analysis by turning to trainees' own accounts of their development. In relation to how trainees respond to their learning context, we identify issues such as labelling of learners and infantilisation which, we argue, result to a great extent from their training context. For our research, this context is further education in the UK. To situate our study we provide a broad overview of the significant recent changes in policy which provide the political backdrop to this analysis.

Language and literacy teacher education in the UK

The context of language and literacy teacher education in the UK raises a number of issues for those involved in its delivery. Many of these issues are explicit in our interviewees' accounts, below, but many are implicit and cannot be understood without recognizing the highly politicized nature of literacy as a socio-historical phenomenon.

It is essential to recognise, firstly, that terminology and naming is a central issue to our discussion and is no less important in the way policy has evolved in the UK this century. Policy makers have used the terms "ESOL" and "Literacy" in different ways but often with a deliberate intent to identify groups and their associated characteristics. It has been argued (e.g. Wenger (1998) that, to an extent, policy has sought to reify the conceptual view of groups of people, and, in the case of education, learners. In so doing, the terms used have conjured up specific linguistic needs, a belief in the functionality of language and certain assumptions about the ethnicity of the target groups of learners. As we will see, below, issues at the heart of the overarching policy narrative are mirrored in the narratives of the trainees who contribute to the study.

No review of this narrative would be complete without reference to the raft of policy which emerged from a 1999 investigation into the English and maths abilities of the population of the UK. The report: “A fresh start – improving literacy and numeracy” (DfES 1999) often called “The Moser Report”, claimed that up to 20% of the population had very poor literacy and numeracy skills. The recommendations around provision of literacy and numeracy education came with the aspiration that “the Government should commit itself to the virtual elimination of functional illiteracy and innumeracy” (DfES 1999:85). While the veracity of the claims in the report have been disputed, the impact of such headline grabbing statistics on practice in literacy teacher education and teaching more widely cannot be underestimated, and continues to echo in practice.

However, the 1999 report made no specific mention to differing needs for those whose first language was not English. A second report, “Breaking the Language Barriers” (DfES 2000) reinforced Moser’s recommendations for high quality and accessible education in what was now termed “Skills for Life” (ESOL, literacy and numeracy). This time, there was specific recognition of the needs for adults with English as a second or other language. The resulting “Skills for Life Initiative” (2004) put in place funding for increased provision of learning opportunities, increased training for teachers in these subjects and introduced new standards of achievement, including three new “core curricula” for ESOL, literacy and numeracy.

Under the Skills for Life Initiative (SfLI), ESOL and literacy were accorded equal importance and, perhaps more importantly, allocated equal funding, a defining factor in provision. The standards and core curricula of the SfLI fully recognised the additional needs of ESOL learners for the development of speaking and listening skills and there was some recognition of the differing linguistic needs of learners who had English as a first or a second language. Teachers of ESOL and literacy were offered different training programmes, also generously funded.

Despite this, critics argued that much of the initiative was simply an exercise in target-meeting and demonstrating action in the face of a damning report. While Government reported successful completion of targets of learners achieving a certain level of qualification, others disputed their claims for success and maintained that little had been done to change the “cycles of intergenerational difficulties with literacy” (NIACE, 2001:16). It was suggested for example that the initiative did little to change the persistent view that ESOL was seen as “a compensatory education programme” whose aim was to “aid the assimilation of immigrant communities into what is perceived as a traditionally monocultural, monolingual heritage” (Hamilton and Hillier, 2009:8).

At the same time, the focus on ESOL and literacy as discrete areas of educational priority began to recede as a series of government reports placed literacy, and by default ESOL, within

the overarching challenge of making adults more employable and thereby contributing to the UK economy more effectively.¹ As a consequence, funding for learners on ESOL and literacy programmes became more constrained as programmes linked to vocational training received more financial incentives. Year on year changes saw funding cut from a 1.5 weighting to a 1.0 tariff and then further for ESOL, further weakening provision and setting the scene for the mixed, even confused, provision which challenges today's practitioners.

On the ground, one impact on practice throughout the era of Skills for Life has resulted from the differentiation between ESOL and literacy linked to the different knowledges and skills each require. This was considered vital to ensuring that learners were in the right learning group and that teachers were appropriately trained, not least in order to guarantee the high success rates favoured by funding and inspection regimes. New qualifications, "Functional Skills" in English and maths (proposed in 2008 and fully implemented in 2012) did not include ESOL, in keeping with the linguistic integrity of the syllabus, designed for those whose first language was English. However, with the link of Functional Skills to vocational programmes, suddenly ESOL "sat outside" a framework which was core to the government's vision for improving vocational education. From 2013, the increased importance placed on GCSE English, an exam designed as part of the secondary curriculum and aimed at English first language speakers, further isolated ESOL and its core curriculum. Both functional skills English and GCSE were now fully funded, whereas ESOL was fee paying. A pragmatic solution on the part of both colleges and learners, echoed by our interviewees, was to simply enrol on a Functional Skills or GCSE programme and hope that the teacher had the language awareness and time to adapt their teaching to the needs of an ESOL learner.

Most colleges in the UK now have a curriculum area with the title of "English". This naming reinforces the notion embedded in the Wolf review (2011) of a more academic, less functional subject, leaving behind the distinction of literacy and ESOL. With a focus on English as a core of vocational training and employability, pedagogic approaches and the teacher's ability to cater for the needs of someone whose first language is not English take a back seat. The current link of ESOL to citizenship through prescribed qualification achievement further distances ESOL from a mainstream curriculum designed to enhance workplace success. A learner coming to a college and asking for "English classes" is now reliant on two factors to access appropriate learning opportunities: the nimbleness of the college organisation to design and fund a curriculum for both ESOL and non-ESOL groups and the skills of an

¹ Notably the Leitch Review of Skills (2004); The Foster Review of the purpose of FE (2005), and the Wolf review on vocational education (2011),

individual teacher who may be teaching a programme called “literacy” or “English” but whose learners are mostly ESOL.

Education and ignorance

The changing conditions of language and literacy teacher education, then, increasingly invite the question of how educators are expected to develop their “nimbleness” demanded by these changes. One of the challenges of a situated approach to such forms of professional development is that it provides a rationale for undermining the trainer’s role as agent, teacher or guide. A situated approach necessarily highlights the complexity of the workplace and its objects (Beighton, 2016a). It is in this environment that the trainee is encouraged to develop their own approaches to practice in their individual context.

The analysis of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) is helpful here because, rather than dwell on the implicit determinism of such Orwellian aspects of practice, it draws our attention to the emergent nature of practice which one would expect from these complex situations. For Bourdieu, because learning occurs through social practice, it also includes the notion of learned ignorance when these practices themselves propagate it. Bourdieu argues that knowledge, when gained in seemingly natural practice situations, could become naturalised as a *native theory* (théorie indigène). In this way, we adopt practices which seem self-evidently useful, but ignore their source. Learned ignorance is thus “a mode of practical knowledge not comprising knowledge of its own principles” (Bourdieu 1977:19).

As this suggests, moreover, learned ignorance, does not just happen. It is created when the master or expert attempts to explain unconscious or tacit practices by constructing a series of “moves” described as “artificially isolated elements of behaviour” (Bourdieu 1977:19). Bourdieu stresses the artificial nature of this isolation because, for Bourdieu, practice cannot itself be abstracted from the principles, theories or structures which engender it. But by carrying out this simplification, the expert’s way of drawing attention to key moves in context occludes the principles from which these moves are derived. More important still, from the point of view of teacher education, Bourdieu argues that this abstraction of the theoretical base masks its generative potential: moves can only be made from this base, and moves which are made in isolation from it cannot themselves engender further practice or indeed other possibilities.

If we accept the way in which Bourdieu criticises the ignorance of these underlying processes, learning to teach ESOL or literacy without acquiring the generative grammar of its practices

seems like learning to teach languages without acquiring the generative grammar of language. In Bourdieu's case, this mechanics is called *habitus*, a set of predispositions which highlights the fundamental role of *relations* in his own thinking about the non-static nature of practice. Thus Bourdieu judged native theories as potentially dangerous, since they can create social practices or norms which detract from understanding rather than adding to it. They ignore "the generative, unifying principle" of a system defined by the struggles and contradictions it engenders (Bourdieu, 1993:34). Practically speaking, native theories condemn practice to the profound problem of repetition, as isolated forms and essentially narcissistic or anthropomorphic reductionism become our rationale for action (Bourdieu, 2000). Bourdieu, so often criticised for an apparent determinism, clearly asserts that we cannot afford to ignore the immanent capacity of habitus to produce, differentiate and appreciate the practices and products of which the social world as a life-style space is composed² (Bourdieu, 1979:190).

For Bourdieu, the infinite range of possible practices cannot be derived from the finite range of actual events, and thus some sort of generative mechanics – a structure - must underpin what we do. An important implication for educators is that teacher education practice runs a serious risk if it fails to provide rich forms of practice in which trainees can engage. If they cannot either derive or exercise their capacity to make new "moves", teacher education is in danger of failing to provide teachers with the tools they need to engage in complex teaching situations. In our view, this is particularly the case when these situations involve trying to meet the changing needs of very diverse cohorts of language or literacy learners. How far does "learned ignorance" underpin development in this context, and what might this mean for delivery of language and literacy teacher education and indeed teacher education programmes more widely?

Methodology

We chose a cohort of 15 trainee teachers studying on a university teacher education programme taught at a further education college in central London. These trainees were attending a specialist programme with ESOL and literacy pedagogy modules. In many teacher education settings these groups would be attending separate programmes. For two reasons, related to the policy discussion in the previous section, the programme runs as a joint group.

² C'est dans la relation entre les deux capacités qui définissent l'habitus, capacité de produire des pratiques et des œuvres classables, capacité de différencier et d'apprécier ces pratiques et ces produits (goût) que se constitue le monde social représenté, c'est à dire l'espace des styles de vie

Firstly, provision for ESOL and literacy learners takes place within this confused setting determined by funding. Therefore, it is good practice to attempt to equip teachers with the skills to deal with both groups. Secondly, funding also places constraints on teacher education programmes and the relatively low numbers of trainees means that separate groups would not be viable.

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews. We approached the interviews with key questions related to their training experience and, in particular, trainees' preparedness to cope with the complexity of the learners. We analysed the transcripts of the interviews for emerging themes. In this article we highly contributions from Marta and Sally (names changed) who provide us with "instrumental case studies" (Denzin & Lincoln 2008:123) exemplifying some of the themes which emerged in a more general sense.

[Marta: the power of labelling](#)

The issue of how learners and courses were labelled (ESOL or literacy) discussed above was, for most of our interviewees, an important factor in practice. It was particularly visible in accounts such as Marta's, who provided a strikingly confused way of describing her role and her learners. Although her main teaching group is a literacy class preparing for their "functional skills" exams, all of its participants are non-native speakers of English and the class would thus, in principle, be labelled as ESOL rather than literacy. The college where Marta was completing her placement offered ESOL classes, but according to Marta these classes "stopped" and the learners from this group "have been guided onto this [literacy] course". For Marta, this is a progression for the learners, since for her ESOL provision is designed to provide a specialist language programme as a "progression route" from which the learners subsequently move on.

This linear description of provision is important as we will see, but initially it is important to note that for Marta, this categorisation situates language-focussed instruction as something provided at low levels. Learners might need it the start of their learning, but then are expected to move on to courses labelled "literacy", particularly when courses are, for various reasons "stopped". It is also clear from Marta's account that ESOL provision is somewhat conflated with specific learning needs:

Because they have language issues, they have second language issues. Some have got general learning, I don't want to say disabilities, but they've got issues with their learning which are slower. They probably need [more] dedicated support than I can give them.

As a result, within the current group there are two or three students which she admits she is “struggling to help”. Language is recognised as an issue at the core of these learners’ difficulties, but when these learners are not making the expected progress, an answer is sought in other, deficit-type issues. Indeed, Marta’s account highlights the real risk that learners’ language needs are recorded as a learning difficulty on the many registers, lesson plans and group profiles which frame, to a great extent, classroom practice and thus professional development.

Marta was typical in describing her experience of placement as being “a bit of a baptism of fire” with little if any choice but to follow things as they are. If the situation presents “lots of surprises” and demands a trial and error approach, then “you just have to get in line with it very quickly”. Indeed, despite having an English degree, she did not feel prepared for parts of her future role in terms of the level of the demands that she is likely to experience. The recent demand for GCSE English, for example, was seen as a challenge: while she felt able to respond to students’ language and broader questions, this was not enough to cope with teaching at GCSE level.

As a theory of learned ignorance would predict, however, problems arise when a teacher is faced with teaching a class “with their mouths open and you realise that you’ve pitched something at the wrong level.” For Marta, rather than asking what principles might underpin planning and practice for such groups, such misjudgements are best solved by ad hoc practice moves. One gets used to erroneous expectations and, with “sound guidance with my mentor” she realised that the answer to such problems lies in a certain reactivity and “build[ing] up that instinct for a group”:

Really it’s just about having that relationship with your students, taking the time to listen to them and pay attention to them and get a sense and take your lead from then on what they need and what they don’t need.

It also takes time to develop a teaching identity and a more comfortable persona: being told what a teacher is like, she felt, is not a substitute for “finding your inner teacher”. Moreover, while being on a teacher education programme with both literacy and ESOL teachers was clearly beneficial, she describes how knowledge is best developed in an ad hoc way, since “it’s the anecdotal stuff that goes a really long way sometimes”. Letting such anecdotal stuff sink in for later, noticing various “moves” and depending on points brought up by chance or by learners seems to form the bedrock of an emergent practice, and a sense of identity.

Sally

Echoing Marta's views, above, Sally also identified learners who "should really be in a basic literacy group" rather than a lower level ESOL group. Thus while the label "literacy" is used synonymously with ESOL (it is more often used to refer to the more basic language skills of a non-native speaker) in this context, in other descriptions of the FS class, it refers to lower level skills for native speakers. In this context, teaching focused just on ESOL, where a group of 18-19 was "very varied" in nationality and ethnic origin, with an average age of 40-45. Attending this class was largely a matter of chance, since reasons for attending centred around the availability of information and facilities such as childcare rather than quality of provision, pedagogical need or informed preference. A close community and relatively low mobility meant that information and guidance on different options was not always available, and so the proximity of local provision was a key deciding factor. Similarly, the availability of free childcare explained why many of the learners chose this programme rather than another.

Like Marta, Sally saw teaching these low levels as a self-evident, ad hoc activity: practice was a case of "the usual talk and chalk" and "whatever you can do to teach them with". Pedagogical content was also derived from the level, since at the "very beginning stage" of learning English basic work on the formation of letters and phonemes is needed, she felt:

[many students] can't read in their own language [and] reading and writing and formal education is just very new to them, so you sort of back to basics, giving them all the very basics things that maybe you would have taught a toddler.

Even in areas where ESOL was linked to vocational skills, as in the IT course above, level remained low because "they don't have to write a lot, a lot, you know". So as a teacher, one can take advantage of the learners' existing oral skills to pursue a vocational programme. Similarly, Sally strongly favoured embedded, vocationally-oriented provision. Partly, this was because of her own past success in providing this type of course in her previous role as project manager. But she also felt that informal, almost homely setting was beneficial because they were so obviously useful to the learners:

these women, we taught them English in situ and these were mainly Somali women and we had a childcare crèche, and they had to learn things there, we had a café, we had things about housekeeping, and other things that they would learn so they learnt their English in that way,

Again, Sally made the case for pedagogies based in the moves defined by the learners' existing skills and the material circumstances of provision. Situated teaching was effective, she felt, because it built on skills that the women already brought to the sessions. She insisted on the importance teaching which recognised the pivotal role of knowledge and skills defined and provided only at the moment of need as a "pull":

so they learnt a lot because they brought with them all these skills...
they are learning English in a context that they find useful and it's the usefulness of it at the time present, that they think "yes" there is a pull to I need to learn because I need to cook I have to put baking powder and not baking soda, and know the difference,

Like Marta, Sally's account also hinted at a deficit view of language learning. Her experience in teaching children meant she could access materials and approaches that she felt she could "transfer" to these low level second language learners. But, like Marta, she also turned to a personal approach to developing a better relationship by literally sitting with the learners and responding to needs as they come up. While some of the content was "generated" by the class teacher, who split the class into distinct groups by level, Sally worked with "the slowest". This meant that she too would "generate lots of the stuff, I would generate most of the stuff there".

Sally's relational approach meant that the content in question was not in the form of teaching materials, but rather oral content and pronunciation work on the spot. She gave a striking example of teaching the alphabet and the sense of discovery she felt when she realised how learning was taking place:

for example one lady, we were doing handwriting, letters, A,B,C and she said, (...) it doesn't make sense, A, what is that? What is A? And then it suddenly struck me that I need to do a little bit more than just tell her to pronounce it and then see what it looks like, but do some applications in terms of a word.

Sally's response was to "generate words" and she then "allowed her to generate words," (sic). Going through the alphabet, and with the help of the teacher's drawing, Sally highlighted the letter U in the words "unicorn" and "unique". While not of obvious relevance to a learner who may well be unfamiliar with them, Sally felt that these words struck the learner, who had never understood before but who now felt that she knew what the letters were actually for and thus had a new desire to learn English next year. The role of meaning and relevance here was something new for Sally, who clearly fully saw its importance for

the first time, echoing Marta's comments above about the need to find ones "inner teacher" rather than learn how to do it upstream.

Conclusion: generative potential

Our analysis has highlighted a number of ways in which developments in the delivery of Literacy and ESOL as a result of national shifts in policy are reflected in individual practices. What brings these practices together is the Bourdieuan idea that what is adopted is moves rather than principles and is thus a form of learned ignorance. On this analysis, learned ignorance neglects the generative principles of practice, and represents instead a confusion as to the actual needs of the learner through a discourse which labels them according to deficits of lack of ability and lack of maturity. This results in some inappropriate classroom practice which limits the teacher's response to the actual language or literacy learning need.

The limits of the situated learning context to move from a learned ignorance model is evidenced, in conclusion, by a narrative from a third trainee, Mattie. When asked about the needs of her group, she espouses the needs defined by the experienced tutor, her mentor:

They are not there for ESOL purposes, they're there for Literacy, (the tutor) is a literacy tutor.

When questioned further, she realises that in fact most of the group are learners with language needs.

they're really half and half English and language. I think the ones who have English as a second language would benefit from ESOL support.

Her situated learning context has led her to label her learners and thus develop her practice in response to the definition provided by another tutor. In so doing, she has acquired learned ignorance promulgated by her experienced colleague.

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