Language Teaching Awareness

CAMBRIDGE LANGUAGE EDUCATION
Series Editor: Jack C. Richards

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Language Teaching Awareness: A guide to exploring beliefs and practices *by Jerry G. Gebhard and Robert Oprandy*

Language Teaching Awareness

A guide to exploring beliefs and practices

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To John Fanselow, our mentor and friend,
who has liberated so many of us from the
usual ways of looking.

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Series editor's preface

A current theme in teacher education is to view teacher development as a process that involves both the acquisition of practical knowledge and skills and the examination of beliefs, principles, and theories and how they influence the way teachers teach. Teaching involves both thought and action, and the interaction between the two forms the focus of recent approaches to teacher development. Teacher education also has to face the issue of linking the content of teacher education to the contexts in which teachers work. Much of what occurs in campus programs is soon forgotten or discarded when teachers enter or return to schools; hence teacher educators are constantly exploring ways of making their curriculum and the activities they make use of relevant to the immediate and long-term concerns of student teachers.

In *Language Teaching Awareness* two scholars at the forefront of second language teacher education and their collaborators describe the rationale and practice underlying what they term an *exploratory approach* to teacher development. This refers to activities that seek to develop deeper understanding of teachers' beliefs, theories, principles, and attitudes in order to better understand the nature of classroom second language teaching and learning. The authors' agenda is not to present a body of information that is intended to help change or improve teachers' practices. Rather, they make a strong and convincing case for exploring teachers' beliefs and practices and using the knowledge and awareness that result from this process to make informed decisions about one's own teaching.

Crucial to the process of exploratory teaching proposed in this book are the observation and description of teaching events and processes, investigation of teaching through action research, using journal writing to write about and explore teaching, and using conversation to examine teaching from different perspectives. These activities are intended to help teachers understand their own practices as well as those of other teachers, to explore alternative approaches to teaching, and to see teaching in different ways. The book presents accounts of how these and other activities can be used within an exploratory approach to teacher development. Procedures for using each

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activity are carefully illustrated, and ideas on how to use the information or
insights gained are given. At the same time, new and challenging insights
about each of these processes are presented. The set of first-hand accounts
and case studies in Part III describe how these processes have been suc-
cessfully used and how they helped teachers achieve new insights about
teaching and about themselves as teachers. *Language Teaching Awareness*
thus makes a valuable contribution to the field of second language teacher
education and will provide a valuable resource book for teachers and
teacher educators who seek to better understand and manage their own pro-
fessional development through the application of the principles of ex-
ploratory teaching.

Jack C. Richards

Preface

This book is about how teachers can explore their teaching in order to gain awareness of their beliefs and practices. There are several ways in which we consider our exploratory approach to be different from that in other language teacher education books. Some books with a teacher *training* emphasis focus on ways teachers can improve their teaching by mastering prescribed ways to teach. That is not the purpose of this book. Other books do not present *best* ways to teach but concentrate on how teachers can develop knowledge and skills about second language teaching. For example, Richards in *Beyond Training* (1998) discusses six content domains of second language education that teachers should develop. These include theories of teaching, teaching skills, communication skills and language proficiency, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning skills, and decision making and contextual knowledge.

Teacher educators who follow such a *developmental* approach provide a variety of activities for teachers to construct a knowledge base in the six domains. These include, according to Richards (ibid., 17), experiencing teaching (e.g., practice teaching, microteaching, internships), observing (e.g., peer observation, use of video protocols), reflecting on teaching and learning (e.g., journals and other written activities, language learning experience), investigating teaching and learning (e.g., analyzing classroom processes, establishing databases), focusing on critical events in teaching (e.g., by analysis of case studies, doing role plays), doing project work (e.g., action research, curriculum and materials development), information-oriented approaches (e.g., lectures and large-group teaching, discussions), communication activities (e.g., student oral presentations, skills training), and proficiency-focused activities (e.g., analysis of classroom language and discourse, practice of classroom functional language).

We see much value in this developmental approach to teaching and have made great use of such activities in our own teacher-preparation programs.[1]

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1 Although we see value in the developmental approach to teacher education, we also recognize that development is not always beneficial. Tanizaki (1967), for example,

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We also recognize that there has been much progress made in second language teacher development (see, for example: Edge 1992; Freeman 1989; Freeman & Cornwell 1993; Freeman & Richards 1996; Johnson 1999; Li, Mahoney, & Richards 1994; Richards & Nunan 1990). Through our experience, though, we feel compelled to forefront several ways to promote an *exploratory approach* to developing teacher awareness. Our emphasis on exploration overlaps with the developmental approach to (language) teacher education. Similar to those touting that approach, we agree that teachers need to take responsibility for their own teaching and that they can benefit from the cooperation of colleagues, students, and others. However, we set ourselves apart in certain ways from the usual approaches to teacher development.

Unlike one of the goals of development, that of improving teaching, the aim of exploration is, in our view, simply gaining awareness of teaching beliefs and practices. Improvement implies that some ways are better than others in teaching. Searching for such ways can limit teachers from looking beyond the concept of effective teaching, possibly blocking them from becoming more aware of teaching possibilities outside of what is considered *improved teaching.* In contrast, the goal of exploration is simply to gain awareness of teaching. As Fanselow points out, the aim of exploration is "seeing . . . teaching differently" (1988: 114). Being open and attempting to see and understand what is going on between the teacher and students and among the students themselves liberates teachers from the pressure of finding a better way. Trying alternatives just to see what happens, exploring to gain awareness, is energizing. The more elements of the teaching-learning dynamic that reveal themselves to us, the more we want to explore. Thus, a cycle is created; increasing awareness makes teachers curious to explore further, leading again to fresh insights and new questions to explore.

points out how modern lighting has eroded the aesthetic quality of traditional beauty in Japan. As Tanizaki puts it, "This was the genius of our ancestors, that by cutting off the light from this empty space they imparted to the world of shadows that informed there a quality of mystery and depth superior to that of any wall painting or ornament" (p. 20). Examples of the risks of development are everywhere. For example, an article in the Science and Environment section of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Glausiusz, June 22, 1998), reads: "Growing disaster? Genetic engineering can improve crop yield, and may create aggressive plants that are super-resistant to disease and insects" (p. A-6). The article is about how genetically engineered crops can increase food production in the developing world. But, there is the risk that "ecological and evolutionary forces could turn these crops into disasters" (ibid.). Perhaps the plants will prove to be so robust that they will grow aggressively, like weeds, to overrun other surroundings, including other farmlands. Antibiotic-resistant genes might escape into soil bacteria and end up infecting humans. Crops engineered to carry Bt-toxin genes might trigger the evolution of Bt-resistant bugs, and so on.

An appreciation for the intricacies of teaching takes over, and the search for *better ways* or *the best way* to teach something is less pressing than discovering new choices.

Quite similar to this point is the second distinguishing feature of our approach – seeing nonjudgmental description as preferable to prescriptions of how teaching *should* be done. Detailed descriptions of teaching can provide explorers with a wealth of knowledge that can result in a great deal of awareness of what is. We do, however, recognize some value in prescription within an exploratory framework. For example, while working with a pre-service teacher who spoke about 85% of the time during class and who expressed interest in cutting down the amount of his teacher talk, his supervising teacher said, "I wonder what would happen if you were to feign laryngitis the next class you teach. Try it and tell me what happens." The realization that came from being silent and noticing how much the students were able to communicate without him transformed the teacher's view of classroom interactional possibilities. In this case, the teacher was seeking some direction from his supervisor, and the prescription was given in the spirit of exploring what might happen if the teacher were to "lose his voice."

A third feature of our exploratory approach is the need to pay attention to language and behavior. In regard to language, usual conversations about teaching are filled with high-inference words and ambiguities. To counteract such tendencies, we promote the use of metalanguages, discussions among teachers of the ambiguities of the usual words used to talk about teaching, and awareness of the ways that teachers use judgmental as well as descriptive language during such discussions. We also explore how crucial listening is in opening up channels of communication and creating understanding among educators.

A fourth characteristic of our approach is our emphasis on going beyond usual ways of understanding teaching, especially that of problem solving (i.e., identifying and overcoming a problem area in one's teaching). Although problem solving can provide much awareness, as Chapters 4 and 10 demonstrate, there are a number of other avenues that teachers can travel. These include seeing what happens by trying the opposite of what we normally do (e.g., asking open-ended questions instead of ones we already know the answers to), by seeing *what is* by contrasting what we do with what we think we do, by considering what we believe in light of what we do, and by exploring other avenues discussed in Chapter 1.

We also see value in exploring connections between our personal and our professional lives. This is often neglected in the literature on teacher development. Therefore, a fifth highlight of our approach is our interest in having teachers consider *connecting questions,* that is, questions connecting who

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they are as people with who they are as teachers. Examples of such ques-
tions, discussed in Chapter 7, are: "How does language teaching fit into my
vision of who I am (becoming) and how I'd like the world to be?" and "Am
I REAL in and out of school?"

Sixth, we recognize that a number of teachers and teacher educators un-
derstand the importance of process as it relates to teacher development. Bai-
ley (1990), for example, discusses the process of keeping a teaching journal.
Wallace (1998) elaborates on the process of doing action research. Gaies
and Bowers (1990) present a process of clinical supervision. Lange (1990)
offers a blueprint for teacher development programs. We choose to high-
light the importance of involving teachers in processes through which they
can make more informed decisions. As Jarvis pointed out in 1972, we need
to shift "the responsibility for decision making to the classroom teacher. . . .
It is perhaps time to train the teacher to analyze his situation and make his
own decisions for his situation" (p. 201). By knowing and experiencing
ways to process their own teaching, the goal of Part II of this book, teachers
can more easily "construct, reconstruct and revise their own teaching"
(Fanselow 1988: 115). This frees teachers from others' recipes and pre-
scriptions, which can not only limit their awareness of how they (can) teach,
but also block them from constructing their own set of beliefs,

Paradoxically, for teachers to make more informed decisions, we feel it
is important for them to start with "a beginner's mind" (Suzuki 1970), the
final distinguishing feature of our exploratory approach. This means we en-
ter conversations, observations, and other teacher education activities with
an open mind, unclouded as much as possible by preconceived notions
about what we think *should* take place in classrooms and other teaching set-
tings.

We invite you to try our exploratory approach to teacher awareness if
you are a student or a teacher educator in a teacher-preparation program, a
teacher in a language-teaching program who wants to further your aware-
ness of teaching or of how to do classroom research, or a supervisor or ad-
ministrator working with language teachers in the field.

If you are willing to suspend judgment, not be overly concerned with im-
proving your teaching, explore avenues to awareness that are off the beaten
path, pay attention to your use of language and behavior, make connections
between your personal and teaching lives, try out processes of exploration
that may be new to you, and start with a beginner's mind, then we invite you
to explore your teaching beliefs and practices through the readings and tasks
in the pages that follow.

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