

What, when, how and why? Theory and foreign language teaching

Shirley Lawes

Institute of Education, University of London

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ABSTRACT

Recent academic writing on foreign languages (FL) teaching, specifically at the initial training stage, has revived the question of the need for theory. However, the understanding of ‘theory’ in this writing can be seen to draw, consciously or otherwise, on functionalist, postmodern and broadly relativistic perspectives. In particular it is relativism that affects the applied theory of language teaching. In order to understand FL subject theory an elementary understanding of the philosophy of education and other forms of educational knowledge may be useful. The revival of theory is made even more problematic by the new orthodoxy of ‘reflective practice’. The notion of ‘reflective practice’ has made possible a sleight of hand where ‘practice’ invisibly becomes redefined or labelled as ‘theory.’ ‘Theory’ now often means nothing more than ‘talking about practice’. To re-establish the real unity of theory and practice, it is argued here, it is necessary to reverse contemporary fashion and emphasise theory over practice. Educational theory must be central from the beginning of initial training if it is to be of value to teachers in their future careers. To ask ‘Why theory?’ is a theoretical and not a practical question.

INTRODUCTION

The main argument of this article is that sound theoretical knowledge is essential to the FL teacher and that the development of this knowledge must begin at the start of the initial training period. The article draws on the writer’s recent empirical research into the decline of theory in initial teacher training.

The desirability of educational theory and subject theory both in initial teacher training (ITT) and in continuing professional development (CPD) is supported by a number of educationists and commentators working in the field at the present time (Furlong *et al.*, 2000; Wilkin, 1999; Pring, 2000; Mitchell and Myles, 1998; Roberts, 1998; Pachler and Field, 2001). There is, however, some diversity of opinion about what ‘theory’ means and what sort of theory is ‘useful’ and ‘relevant’ to FL teachers. It will be necessary to explore these diverse approaches and to remove the confusions they may cause before we can answer more practical questions about when theoretical work is of most value and benefit.

ITT today is prescribed by a framework of mandatory competence-based standards, largely of

a practical orientation, which places theoretical knowledge on the margins of beginner teachers’ professional knowledge. The focus of much continuing professional development is equally of a functional nature. Questions of theory are easily ignored because the notion of ‘reflection’ is seen as key to effective professional development. Reflective practice (Schön, 1983) is *the* guiding principle in teacher professional development and this signals a shift in the way ‘theory’ is understood. It is reflective practice rather than theory that underpins both policy and practice in initial training and education of teachers.

The consequences of this shift is evident in McIntyre’s (1993) observation that theory is now seen as *process* and that reflection is seen as an alternative to propositional knowledge. The process of reflection as a psychological phenomenon is necessarily subjective, placing the responsibility to improve professional practice firmly on the individual and as such does little to encourage a broader critical understanding of issues. While it is sometimes argued that reflective practice does not preclude knowledge of theoretical perspectives, nevertheless, the underpinning ethos of reflective practice points to a re-definition of ‘theory’ in education – that *practice* has become theory (Lawes, 2002). Equally, much of the commentary on the idea of ‘teacher knowledge’ takes a relativistic view of knowledge, and an equally subjective perspective on theory. These points are familiar, but what is less obvious now that they have become commonplace, is that they mask a fundamental shift in the role and significance of theory in FL teaching and in the professional development of FL teachers.

WHAT THEORY IN FL TEACHING?

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of good subject knowledge for the beginner teacher. There has been a deliberate move away from what used to be called the

Address for correspondence:
Shirley Lawes
Institute of Education
20 Bedford Way
London
WC1H 0AL

'foundation disciplines' of the philosophy; psychology, sociology and history of education in favour of subject-specific pedagogy. The subject-specific theoretical base of FL teaching and learning draws on a vast field of enquiry that may sometimes seem incoherent.

In order to attempt an answer to the question, 'What theory in FL teaching?', we should turn first to the literature of the specialist field, much of which derives from applied linguistics (AL) and second language acquisition (SLA). Patsy Lightbown (2000) notes that since 1985 these fields of enquiry have become orientated much more towards questions of language pedagogy. Mitchell (2000) suggests that some aspects of SLA research and theory have become so completely integrated into mainstream foreign and second language pedagogy that their sources are no longer referred to. Indeed, there has been an increasing interest taken by FL specialists in higher education in the contribution of AL and SLA (Harris, 1997; Pachler, 2000, 2003) and a growing body of research and theoretical work in AL appears to be having a more direct influence on the field of FL teaching and learning (Kramersch, 1998; Block, 2000; Mitchell, 2000). However, Lightbown (2003), along with others, counsels caution in applying SLA and AL research directly to teaching. Kramersch (1998), in her discussion of the relationship between language learning research and the teaching of FL (in United States universities), refers to a 'clash of cultures' and different 'disciplinary practices' between AL/SLA research and FL teaching, asserting that the latter is still firmly entrenched within an historical tradition of literary scholarship, and that it does not share the same discourse with the former. This may be true to some extent in the university, but it is clearly not the case in secondary education, where 'literary scholarship' is hardly in evidence any more. Indeed, as has already been suggested above, FL pedagogy has embraced, sometimes quite uncritically, SLA research and theory. This is perhaps most notable in Stephen Krashen's work on language acquisition and learning (Krashen, 1981, 1983, 1985).

We might add another note of caution here in raising the question of what is different and specific in the teaching of FL, inasmuch as the FL teacher (in the context of English secondary schools) is, or should be, fluent in English *and* the foreign language. FL teachers, generally speaking, have the English language in common with their learners and this provides an additional set of insights into the teaching of the foreign language and their approach to promoting learning. When we consider *what* applied theory might constitute a body of the FL teacher's professional knowledge, such distinctions need to be made.

Brumfit (1997) and Mitchell and Myles (1998) recommend a 'pluralistic' approach and a selection of theoretical positions and second language learning studies. Mitchell and Myles assert that 'there can be "no one best method", however much research evidence supports it, which applies at all times and in all situations, with every type of learner' (1998: 194). For them, theory is needed to understand second language learning better – because it is an interesting

field in its own right and contributes to other fields of human learning. 'Good' theory provides knowledge that will be useful, better explains the learning process, and teachers and students can therefore benefit. They believe that, 'We can only pursue a better understanding of second language learning in an organised and productive way if our efforts are guided by some form of theory' (1998: 2). They go on to elucidate what constitutes good theory and survey the whole field of language learning theories that might be seen as a minimum body of knowledge of language learning theory for teachers. But as Mitchell and Myles suggest, language learning theories should also relate to broader philosophical positions. Elsewhere, Mitchell's work reflects a concern to link AL and SLA research to pedagogy, and she shows (2000) how AL has influenced the development of FL educational practice through elaborating FL learning theory and the promotion of experimental methodology in grammar teaching and learning. Nevertheless, she has reservations about the present capacity of AL research to make firm prescriptions for grammar teaching, although she outlines a number of areas where 'authoritative suggestions' can be made, and concludes that

(generalised) learning theories and research findings on effective foreign language pedagogy can, therefore, in principle never prescribe the precise actions teachers should take in a particular lesson with a particular group of pupils. However, they can influence teachers' underlying theories of learning, and also influence and widen the repertoire of possible actions and choices which lie open to the teacher. (2000: 298)

This suggests that theory does not have to be directly relevant to teachers' practice for it to be of value and that research findings do not have to be directly applicable to their work to inform it.

However, in common with general educational theory at the present time, theory and research in the language field are also influenced by relativist and postmodern thinking, although the extent to which these ideas are influential is contestable. Mitchell and Myles argue that '...the fundamental assumptions of second language learning research by and large have remained those of rationalist "modern" science' (1998: 191). They point to two prevailing discussions of theory in second language learning at the present time: a call for more 'socially engaged second language acquisition research' (Block, 1996, 2000) on the one hand, and postmodern interpretations offering a relativist critique which highlights problems of 'textuality' and the relationship between language and any possibility of external meaning on the other. Mitchell and Myles conclude that

(so) far, however, the critical and postmodern commentary on SLA has not dislodged its central modernist assumptions. It will be for the future to tell how much impact it eventually makes in programmes of L2 empirical enquiry; this evolution will evidently be linked to wider on-going debates in the social sciences. (1998: 194).

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Brumfit (1997) also observes that there is a body of opinion in the field that has seen the positivist tradition as inhibitive and that this has led to an embrace of postmodern critiques and a rejection of previous practices. While he sees a certain liberating aspect in postmodernism, he is cautious about the wholesale rejection of previous practice. He goes on to critique postmodern ideas suggesting that they represent a general tendency in thinking rather than a coherent system of thought. He points out that it is indeed a rejection of the single, coherent system of thought represented by the enlightenment tradition. Postmodernism sees it as impossible to reconcile 'the interests of the universal subject, a human being sharing attributes with all other human beings', with 'the interests of an individual uniquely grounded within a particular culture' (1997: 23). Brumfit poses the question of how AL should react to the postmodern project and suggests that it should adopt a plurality, although not a 'randomness' of approaches, and underlines the need to retain a dialogue between the approaches, so that criticism is possible. This view suggests that it is possible to reconcile postmodern and rationalist positions which, as I argue elsewhere (Lawes, 2003b), is difficult to justify or support, since the contradictory nature of the opposing positions cannot simply be ignored. There is more than a hint of relativistic tolerance or indifference here.

Evidence of the influence of postmodern and perhaps more prominently, relativist ideas, within AL, SLA theory, language learning pedagogy and, indeed, FL pedagogy is evident in the shift towards observational studies (Breen, 1991) characterised by talk of teachers' 'implicit' or 'personal' theories; by classroom research presenting teaching as a personal, subjective activity with no apparent reference to anything except experience and reflection in their work (Phillipson *et al.*, 1991).

The question 'What theory in FL?' is far from straightforward and it is essential for beginner teachers, experienced teachers and teacher educators alike to be aware of the distinctive intellectual positions that underpin approaches to theory in FL and the implications of favouring one theoretical perspective over another or adopting an eclectic approach. The knowledge required to recognise and critically appraise these distinctive approaches is external to the applied theory of FL and resides in the broad field of educational thought upon which subject-specific theory is predicated. For without substantial knowledge of wider social, political and philosophical issues in education, it is likely that the FL teacher will develop a narrow, functional perception of professional knowledge. I propose no 'blueprint' of essential theoretical knowledge for the FL teacher, but it is nevertheless important to identify areas of FL theory moving away from the narrowly 'relevant' and 'applicable' towards a view of teaching as an academic pursuit as well as a practical one, which regards independent critical thought as a guiding principle.

To make the case for teachers to have greater theoretical knowledge right from the start of their preparation does not necessarily mean a separation

of theory and practice, but the development of a balanced approach to the two that requires a re-examination of the unity of theory and practice. To work towards this it is necessary to emphasise theory above all else. Obtaining a minimum of independent critical thought implies a philosophical understanding of education (Tibble, 1966; Dearden, 1984) as a first step, together with a historical knowledge of the development of educational thinking and education systems along with psychology and some sociology of education.

WHEN? IT'S NEVER TOO SOON

According to one view, teaching is essentially a practical activity and this is confirmed by the emphasis both in initial training and CPD on classroom skills and pedagogical issues. The view held by many is that once practical skills, which are implicitly based on theory, are mastered, the teacher is more able to benefit from a more explicit knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings of their work. Hence the range of higher degree and diploma opportunities offered by higher education institutions and the array of government initiatives in the CPD strategy. This is all well and good, but unless future teachers, right from the beginning of their training, see their chosen profession as having a substantial body of academic knowledge which it is essential that they be acquainted with, as well as a corpus of practical skills, the majority will consider themselves to be, as Widdowson (1979) described them, 'humble practitioners... impatient of theory'. It is at the initial training stage that expectations should be set and aspirations raised. It is a commonly held view at all levels of the profession, including beginner teachers themselves (Block, 2002; Lawes, 2002), that practical classroom skills are what matter most. Hence the virtual absence of serious opposition to the introduction of practice-led and competence-based initial training in the last decade. That is not to say that there is not concern amongst teacher educators, beginner teachers and school-based mentors that the initial training period has become too focussed on technical skills (Lawes, 2003a). Broadly speaking, ITT programmes claim to retain theoretical perspectives in their subject studies programmes, but examination of the time allowed for each topic is such that only a superficial knowledge can be possible (Lawes, 2002).

Equally, it is assumed that teachers are somewhat hostile to theory. Michael Grenfell (1998) questions what research, theory and academic literature can offer teachers in training, but at the same time he points to the dangers of "abandoning this side of the equation and adopting a common-sense, atheoretical, view of teachers' developing professional competence" (1998: 177). He notes too that trainees have often criticised their training courses for being 'too theoretical':

It is perhaps easy to see how courses in the academic fields of sociology, psychology and philosophy were unlikely to appeal to trainees preoccupied with how to survive and appear effective with large groups of children often in less than ideal conditions. (1998: 177)

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Colin Wringe (1996) contends that survival and reassurance are the main preoccupations of classroom practitioners who acquire no deeper understanding of the language learning process. This is largely true, particularly amongst beginner teachers (Lawes, 2003a). Wringe takes a sceptical view of the impact of research in his consideration of some of the contemporary issues and problems in FL research. He points to the fact that communicative language teaching (CLT) is now the dominant paradigm in FL and suggests that this focus on communicative competence has led to previously established principles of FL teaching and learning being discarded or ignored. Wringe laments the fact that most theoretical work into the nature of language, language learning and acquisition is carried out in AL departments, mostly in the United States, and that

(it) must be acknowledged that the findings, indeed the very existence, of such work are largely unknown and widely regarded as being of little relevance to the great majority of those concerned with the teaching of foreign languages in Britain. This has become particularly marked in the wake of government imposed changes to initial teacher training – requiring that such training should be more or less exclusively practical and competence-based and the accreditation and inspection of procedures ensuring that this requirement is complied with. For classroom teachers, and to an increasing extent for those who train them, the nature and goals of language teaching are no longer thought to be a matter of speculation and enquiry but are quite tightly determined not only by National Curriculum Level Descriptors and implied assessment procedures, but by actual programmes of study, which specify a number of teaching procedures which not only receive little support from research but may be regarded as inappropriate by many classroom practitioners. (1996: 234)

However, theory should be at the heart of practice. Theoretical knowledge, both of a subject-specific and general nature, should be what beginner teachers expect of their initiation into teaching and what they are exposed to. Elevating their expectations of what it means to be a teacher beyond classroom competence engenders a set of aspirations and a sense of professional identity which provides a firmer foundation for future development. The CPD of teachers must also be conceived of as being more than becoming a better classroom practitioner. The current opportunities for CPD offer little hope of being more intellectually and academically orientated when their aims are, for example, to ‘build on excellent practice’ and ‘learning from each other and learning what works’ (TeacherNet/DfEE, 2001). This is a view of CPD that reflects a technicist view of teaching. Teachers who start their careers with a strong sense of professional identity founded on a critical intellectual engagement with FL teaching and learning and education in general will not only wish

to improve their practical teaching skills collaboratively with their colleagues, but more importantly will also want to continue to develop their theoretical knowledge and this will ultimately do more to enhance their capabilities as classroom practitioners.

HOW? THE LIMITS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The elevation of practice-dominated initial training confirms the view held by policy-makers from the 1980s to the present day that the theme of relevance has become one of *the* guiding principles of educational policy-makers, teachers, teacher educators and writers of texts aimed at supporting PGCE and other initial training courses. On the surface, this may seem no bad thing. However, the extent to which ‘relevant’, ‘applicable’ and ‘classroom competence’ have become watchwords in initial training during recent years, and what beginner teachers, as clients, perceive as their training needs has an increasingly important influence. This reorientation necessarily affects the attitudes and expectations of both beginner teachers and their tutors.

Reflective practice has become the guiding principle of the majority of PGCE courses (Furlong, 1996), but has been criticised by some teacher educators (see for example Wilkin, 1999; Grenfell, 1998). Nevertheless, the notion of reflection as key to effective professional development now underpins both policy and practice in education and particularly initial training. At a policy level, the ‘reflective practitioner’ is the exemplification of individuation of thought and an individualistic response to problems. Breen (1991) and Roberts (1998), following Kolb (1984) and Wallace (1991), stress the capacity of reflective practice to enable teachers to develop their ‘personal theories’ of practice. This redefines and reduces ‘theory’ to the particular and might be seen as a contradiction in terms. Are ‘personal theories’ any more than opinions based on experience? Twenty years ago it seemed obvious to ask: ‘Why should every teacher have to ‘reinvent the wheel’ for themselves?’ (Dearden, 1984), but today that reinvention is the established orthodoxy.

The process of reflection as a psychological phenomenon is necessarily subjective and necessarily inward looking. Far from encouraging a critical perspective, reflective practice is more likely to encourage conformity and compliance, particularly within a competence-based training setting, and under a view of continuing development that is guided entirely by the notion of spreading good practice in a functional sense. As such, it is an inadequate basis on which to base the profession of teaching:

Reflection and the reflective practitioner are powerful metaphors; certainly ones which ring true to many involved in professional training. But do they exist in reality? Is reflection anything more than a romantic notion? We all reflect in a manner. We do not walk down the street without setting in place a whole set of explicit and implicit

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know-how and knowledge bases. We learn from experience, we anticipate, we act with intent and adjust accordingly as we go along. In other words, human beings are by nature reflective creatures. Is the 'reflective practitioner' therefore anything more than a truism, the product of previously simplistic models to link instruction and practice? Does it have sufficient weight to base an entire system of teacher training on it, as appears to be the case in England? (Grenfell, 1998: 177-8)

He further points out that 'Reflection on a practical issue such as methodology may not be formative at all, but simply lead to a rejection or unquestioning acceptance of current pedagogic approaches'. He notes too that reflection is dependent upon individuals, that some beginner teachers are better than others, and that some can be overly self-critical, which emphasises the subjective nature of reflection.

Wilkin (1999), like Grenfell, is critical of reflective practice, suggesting that it is little more than 'thinking about' and that beginner teachers have always done this in their evaluations of their classroom experience. Wilkin notes, with McIntyre (1991), that beginner teachers have little experience on which to draw and reflect:

The weakness of the reflective practitioner as a basis for theory highlights the predicament institutions are in when they are bereft of the four disciplines. The lack of a sound theoretical base confirms the lowly status of the education department within the university. It is an inadequacy which sets education apart from other academic subjects, and which gives carte blanche to the government to keep the contribution of the HEI to teacher training at a minimum level. (1991: 12)

McIntyre does not deny the value of reflection *per se*; his concern is that reflection should not be the central focus of the initial training period. Indeed, he supports the idea that an understanding of historical, social and organisational contexts in which teachers work is important, but suggests that the problem is to decide what are immediate needs and what are long-term aspirations. He goes on to make a valid distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge: theoretical knowledge 'is knowledge formulated in such a way as to imply claims to some sort of generalisability', while practical knowledge is 'knowledge which is used to guide practice... but does not go beyond the particular'.

It might be argued that caricatures of reflective practice are being presented here, and that even beginner teachers do draw on 'theoretical insights' in their reflections. The assumption is that, if nothing else, beginner teachers' own previous pedagogical experiences have enabled them to assimilate theoretical models. However, without systematic study of the foundation disciplines of education, all they may have is a confused, unstructured understanding. These so-called 'theoretical insights' may often be misunderstandings, faulty interpretations and simply false beliefs about

theories. Some proponents of reflective practice seem to accept that 'insights' and personal beliefs constitute all the 'theory' that is needed. However, this represents an under-valuing of theory in teacher training and shows how its necessarily systematic nature is misunderstood.

If reflective practice provides an insufficient basis for the development of theoretical knowledge in FL teaching, then the question arises: what does? One answer is another question: what is wrong with theory for its own sake? As Mitchell and Myles (1998) suggest, to the language teacher, language learning theories are interesting in their own right. The historical, social, political and philosophical underpinnings of the National Curriculum could be as important to teachers as how to 'deliver' it. How do we account for the barely contested demise of theory in education at the present time?

WHY DO WE NEED THEORY?

This question requires an answer that is theoretical rather than practical, the irony for 'reflective practitioners' and others who emphasise practice and skills being that the defence of their view is a theoretical project. One aspect of the transformation of 'theory' into 'practice' over the last twenty years is that to appreciate what has happened it is necessary to return to the writers of the '60s and '70s, whose analysis of the relationship of theory and practice is still unsurpassed. Here is one example from Henry Widdowson:

Language teachers are often represented by themselves and others as humble practitioners, essentially practical people concerned with basic classroom tactics and impatient of theory. Such a representation is unnecessarily demeaning. Of course the teacher is concerned with practical results, but this practice is based on theoretical notions, no matter how implicit they may be. (1978: 163)

Widdowson wrote this twenty-five years ago, but he painted a picture of language teachers that still has a ring of truth about it today. He emphasised that '...it is important to recognise that language teaching is a theoretical as well as a practical occupation'. Widdowson also reflected on the suspicion he claimed many teachers and others have about theory and 'the practical business of language teaching' – that they either see it as 'an academic indulgence of no real relevance, or as an insidiously disruptive influence on sound practice based on experience'. He sought to make the case for 'the significance of theory in even the most practical of language teaching activities' and to show how it might be possible to bring the school classroom and the university into a 'complementary relationship'. For Widdowson, the role of teacher education is to provide a theoretical orientation to practical work and to enable teachers to develop an intellectual independence:

We need to encourage enquiring minds which do not submit to the drudgery of humdrum routine

“theoretical knowledge ‘is knowledge formulated in such a way as to imply claims to some sort of generalisability’”

without question and which are not easily persuaded to join the mindless march behind the latest banner. (1984: 33).

Widdowson's comments came at a time when theory in education was under attack from various quarters, not least policy-makers and 'radical' educationists (Elliott, 1987).

CONCLUSION

Looking at current government policy on both the initial and on-going training of teachers, one might be forgiven for thinking that the 'battle for theory' has been lost. However, there is evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of both teachers and teacher educators, while asserting the importance of the development of classroom competence, do not, in principle, reject the importance of theory in FL education (Lawes, 2003b). The reasons given are varied, but there appears to be an underlying perception that the present level of emphasis on 'skills' is having an unintended negative impact. The drive to recruit new entrants to the profession by offering financial incentives and ever shorter periods of initial training is problematic, and though people may be recruited, the absence of theory undermines motivation, commitment, professional status and individual professional identity (Lawes, 2003b).

If language teachers do not even begin to have some understanding of educational and applied subject theory, they will be mere technicians and feel themselves to be such. The consistent failure to introduce theory, and its absence from initial training programmes are primary features of the de-professionalisation of the FL teacher. Educational theory, both general and the applied theory of FL, are what enable the teacher to become a truly autonomous professional.

To suggest that most teachers are not interested in theory is ultimately offensive and demeaning (as are arguments that most young people are not really interested in learning FL because they are irrelevant or difficult). Research shows this is not true of teachers (Lawes, 2003b) and it is unlikely to be true of young people. Teachers may say they are not interested in theory, but largely because policy-makers consistently attack the value of theory and teacher educators are sometimes guilty of undermining it by accepting the prevailing idea that classroom competence is all that matters. In so doing, they undermine their own profession. However, on an optimistic note, research referred to in this article (Lawes, 2003b) shows that FL beginner teachers *do* value theory and regret that they are unable to engage with it during their initial training period. Perhaps what is really needed is a complete reappraisal of how teachers are trained and how their continuing professional development is supported.

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