

The English Language Teacher Profile: from BACS TO BAKS

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Priority in teacher education in Algeria has recently been re-oriented towards in- service training. Even though it is not explicitly stated in official documents from the Ministry of National Education, the evidence for the trend shows in the assignment of new roles to the Teacher Training Colleges (I.T.E.S in the vernacular), which used to provide pre-service training. Apart from the change of name, from ITES to IFCES, the few training colleges which have managed to survive the restructuring into university colleges or *lycées* are geared to the collective and/or individual needs of teachers already on the job. Another adduced proof for the insistence on in-service training is the elaboration of annual programs for the “re-cycling” of teachers on service.

The reasons for the re-orientation from pre-service to in-service training are not difficult to understand. They should not be looked for in the present ratios between the teachers and the student population. To all evidence, the latter outnumber by far the teachers, who more often than not find themselves confronted to overcrowded and overtime classes. The choice of such an educational policy proceeds from the fact that the limited financial sources have become incommensurate to the ideal of a democratic system to which our country is still

committed. The only way out of the dilemma is to increase the level of the teachers on service to make it possible for them to carry on their task in the classroom.

The major issue in this paper is not the relevance of in-service training. It is granted that teachers need refresher courses because research in teaching methodology never ceases to produce new methods and newer professional techniques likely to lighten the burden of overworked teachers and to improve the learning of the students. The problem is in the way this in-service training is carried out. In my view, it is not trainee-centered because it does not aim at bringing a change in the views teachers have about how languages are learned and taught (Cf. Lightbrown M. Patsy and Nina Spada, 2000). So far the in-service training has been conducted with the spirit of what B. Bernstein calls a “collectionist culture”, i.e., a culture which looks at educational knowledge in terms of “didactic, content-based pedagogy, rigid time-tabling, and vertical work relations”. In other words, the in-service training has not been inspired from an “integrationist culture” which advantages a “skills-based, discovery-oriented, collaborative pedagogy, flexible time-tabling, and horizontal work relations”. (Quoted in Leather Sue, 2001:231-32) One of the effects of such a training is that it blocks the evolution of the English language teachers’ beliefs, assumptions and knowledge towards homogeneity, necessary for the harmonization of styles of teaching English. My opinion is that it is the lack of harmony in the styles of teaching that is in part responsible for the poor performance of our students in English at all levels.

The statements above are based on the analysis of the teachers' profiles at the level of the Middle School in the *Wilaya* of Tlemcen and their correlation with the profiles of their colleagues from the Lycée. The information about the teachers of English is provided to us by Mr Ameziane Hamid, who is an inspector of English for the Middle School in the same *Wilaya*. A first reading of the teachers' files shows that they have various professional entry levels when they have enrolled themselves as teacher-trainees. Some have only two years' schooling in the *lycée* when they have started their teacher education. Some others have a schooling period of three years in the *lycée*, or are holders of a Baccaralaureate. The period of their teacher-education is as different as their professional levels of entry. It varies from one year training in an institute of education and technology to a four-year course in a university. They have graduated either as holders of teaching certificates for the Middle and later Basic School or a License degree, a vernacular equivalent for a BA.

It follows from what has already been said that the profiles of the Basic School English language teachers are heterogeneous. In terms of the recent theory of teacher cognition, this heterogeneity translates itself into a diversity of BAKs (Beliefs, Assumptions and Knowledge). In Devon Woods' ethno linguistic model for teacher cognition, BAK is seen as a continuum of meaning wherein knowledge stands for things that are scientifically demonstrated or demonstrable, assumption for temporary acceptance of facts not yet but likely to be proved scientifically, and belief as the conscious or unconscious acceptance by individual or collective body

of teachers of propositions imbued with an emotive commitment but not sustained by scientific evidence. It is in accordance with their BAKs that teachers take their decisions in the classroom. A heterogeneity in BAKs, therefore, implies completely different types of decision making in the classroom and distinct styles of teaching. (Cf. Woods Devon, 1996)

The analysis of the inspector's reports on the teachers' performances either for confirmation or promotion in the job shows the strong relation between the teachers' BAKs and their classroom decision-making. For example, we have noticed that one of the most recurrent remarks made to teachers who hold a degree from the Institutes of Education and Technology relate to the slavish reliance on the textbook, *Spring One* and *Spring Two*. It comes out that the teachers do not teach from the textbook; they rather teach it as it stands. Behind such a reverent attitude to the "Book" can be a certain residual respect for the Written Word, characteristic of the Islamic culture to which the teachers belong. The Written Word is sanctimonious; it is not open to discussion among the profession, and any alteration to the text, therefore, is tabooed.

The *Spring Course* itself is reverential towards the local culture. It is inspired from a culturally separatist rather than comparative perspective. The ideological context of its writing, the 1980's, marked off in the history of Algeria as the times of authenticity, has shed off on its contents and form. In such an ideologically oriented approach to education, incompatibility between the goal for teaching English, which is supposed to be a "window opening onto the world" and that of the

textbook elevated into an ideological platform for the celebration of the homemade culture does not read as a contradiction neither for the foreign language policy makers nor for the teachers who are expected to toe the line dictated by their inspectors, who themselves are simply a loop in the chain of ideological command. Through a sleight of hand involving both a measure of coercion and hegemony, some teachers have come to understand authenticity in ideological rather than pedagogical terms.

It is pertinent to remind the reader here that an authentic text is one “created to fulfil some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced” (Little D. et al., 1988:27) The purpose behind the use of authentic texts is to help the student develop an interactive competence in the target language by bridging the gap between classroom knowledge and a “student’s capacity to participate in real world events”, the world which speaks English in the case under consideration in this paper (Wilkins D., 1976:79). The designers of the *Spring Course* have made it clear in the foreword that a shift in paradigms towards the communicative approach is a hallmark of the textbook. However, on reading it, I have noticed that no simulation of the real world of English is taken into account, which is likely to lead the teachers to motivate further their students through additional genuine texts and/ or to engage them in authentic tasks.

The communicative approach in the *Spring Course* seems to have reduced itself to some sort of pedagogical simulacrum, which I qualify further as a talk approach. The reason why an authentic purpose has fallen short is

probably due to the fact that the audio-lingual method has enshrined itself as dogma in teaching languages in our country. (Cf. Greffou Malika Boudalia, 1992?) If the *Spring Course* designers have not managed to go beyond the structural method it is because they were brought up on such structural staple food as *Martin and Jillian*, *Andy in Algeria* and *Majid in England* and educated in a culture that encourages imitative modeling in learning and teaching languages. Imitative modeling in the *Spring Course* shows in several ways. First, even if its designers affirm the contrary, its approach remains structural, and structural approaches to language learning, as Michael Long writes, “have been unable to accommodate literary texts”, i.e., literature and culture because their “emphasis on discrete-point teaching, ‘correctness’ in grammatical form, and repetition of a range of graded structures, restricted lexis, etc., represent a methodology unsuited to literature teaching” (Long N. Michael, 1986:43)

To imply that most Basic School teachers subordinate themselves to the prescribed role of “combination drill sergeant and orchestra conductor” inherent in the *Spring Course* does not mean they believe in it as holy writ. Indeed, most of them, as our informant has said, respond negatively to the book. But at the same time, most of them are resistant to ELT innovations such as new teaching materials or methods. As a veteran student of an Institute of Education and Technology myself, I relate my colleagues’ attitude of subservience to the textbook to the type of pre-service and in-service training they have received. In my view, the model of this training does not promote the teacher

learning dimension. The teachers are “inducted” once for all into the structural paradigm during the pre-service training course and later when they are assigned a job.

The established “culture” of the pre-service course has two aspects. One of them consists of a language course comprising subjects like Grammar, Phonetics, Reading Comprehension and Writing Expression and Didactics. The other aspect is practical since the teacher trainees are assigned to Basic Schools to follow a training under the tutorship of a confirmed basic school teacher of English. Their practice follows a rigid pattern. In the first stage, they observe the imitative model provided to them, and in the second stage, they act as stand-ins for their mentors. Richard C. Jack and Lockhart Charles (1997:81) have found a felicitous expression to qualify models of training like the one promoted in our I.T.Es. They call them the “apprenticeship by observation” because they assume that effective teacher training wholly depends on the imitation and reproduction of teaching models to which teacher trainees are exposed in their own schooling.

The in-service training of the Basic School English language teachers follow a more or less rigid pattern. It is organized in the form of regular seminars under the supervision of Basic School inspectors of English. The inspectors’ job is to convene the seminars and to coax the more ‘experienced’ teachers to do a demonstration class in front of his/her peers. Very often, the demonstration classes end with a list of “do’s” and “don’ts” in the management of a language classroom. When there is a “curriculum development” defined by Alan Waters and Ma. Luz C. Vilches as “any form of

innovation activity...aimed at bringing about change in the way learners experience the learning process, at the overall level of policies, goals, and so on, and/ or in terms of the syllabus, teaching materials, teaching methods and evaluation techniques” (2001: 135), the inspectors often proceed to the Xeroxing of the order for an ELT innovation into reams of handouts distributed to teachers ordered in their turn to read and implement what is in them.

The description of in-service and pre-service training received by the Basic School English language teachers contain several drawbacks. First of all, we notice that it makes an abusive separation of theory and practice, a separation that short-circuits the teachers’ integration of any ELT innovation for the rest of their careers. As they grow class-wise through practice, English language teaching literature is first underrated and then totally dismissed as mere ratiocination, hence the absence of teacher learning needs boastfully advertised by some of our Basic School teachers; their previous knowledge is enshrined into dogma and their beliefs into an orthodoxy. The second drawback in the Basic School teacher in-service training relates to the assumption that information given either in the form of reams of handouts and demonstration classes is likely to make better teachers regardless of the mechanistic nature in which it is done. The constitution of a generation hierarchy among the staff which consists of previous Basic School teachers of English welcoming their former students as their own colleagues most often in the same school coupled with the power distance characteristic of our own society stands strongly against any qualitative

transformation of imitation from a mechanistic to a relational activity involving the social construction of knowledge through cooperative teaching and learning. (Cf.Vygotsky, L. 1978)

It is very easy to evidence the entrenchment of the mechanistic model of behavior of our Basic School teachers, which unfortunately is percolating through to some university teachers today. One of the most dominant characteristics of this behavior consists of the 'experienced' teachers handing down their teaching cards to their novice colleagues often at the request of the latter. An unhealthy scholastic tradition is thus established, hindering any shift in the perception of knowledge and the profession. The latter becomes hierarchically directed, and the former is received as a hallowed legacy, admitting no processing and evaluation and, therefore, no possible creation of 'new knowledge' and of alternative ways of teaching.

This review of the Basic School teachers' BAKs and the decision-making they imply have long-term influence on the students' schooling in the *lycée*, a vernacular term for Secondary School. When the students access to the first year of the *lycée*, they find themselves confronted to a new style of teaching, itself the result of different BAKs acquired by the secondary school teachers during their pre-service and in-service training. This difference in beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge is due among other factors to the type of syllabus from which they are taught. The Basic School teacher, it is said above, has followed a language-centered program. The case is different for his colleague in the *lycée*, who in addition to a language syllabus in the

first years of his course, is educated in the literature and civilization of the target language. The extensive reading this cultural syllabus implies, translates in terms of classroom practice into an emphasis given to reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar mastery, and written expression, aspects of language given only little heed in the Basic school.

Moreover, contrary to the overrating of the craft-model in the pre-service training of the Basic School teacher, it is the theoretical model which holds the upper-hand in the teacher education of the secondary school teacher. Hence, once thrown into the ‘uncharted waters’ of the job, the secondary school teacher trainees start holding the impression that the teacher education they have received obeys to the strategy of ‘sink or swim’. Out of a strong sense of survival, the teacher trainees on probation fall back on the lecture format and the transmission model on which they were themselves taught at the university. After all the important thing is not to blaze new trails in the teaching profession but to save one’s skin during the confirmation visit of the inspector. The confirmation criteria fall into two categories. One of them is the degree of respect shown to the red tape: the preparation of the teaching cards, the correction of the students’ exercise-books, and the keeping of the school work-log and the teacher’s diary. The other category of confirmation criteria relates to the rules of thumb concerning class management that the teacher on the probation is supposed to have acquired through attendance of model classes in his own school and of demonstration classes in the regular seminars held by the inspector.

All in all, the BAKs of the secondary school teachers and those of the Basic School are so different that the students experience “cultural bumps” when they move from one cycle of their schooling to another. Lortie D. (1975) has distinguished two characteristics for the teaching profession: restricted entry and a homogeneous knowledge base. The short look that I have attempted to throw at the knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs of my colleagues from the Basic and Secondary Schools shows that none of Lortie’s criteria of professionalism is observed. The two categories of teachers are worlds apart; to use the recent terms of the ethnography of the classroom characteristic of one of the recent trends in English Language Teaching literature, they belong to closed tribal systems.

A recent attempt has been made to bridge the two worlds by homogenizing the BAKS of the teachers of English in matters like evaluation, the use of the textbooks, and the elaboration of language programs. (The reference is made here to the Plan de Formation of August launched by the top management of our National Ministry of Education , 1998). One of the critiques that can be leveled against this plan is that it obeys the crooked logic of communiqués issued at the top management level of our Ministry of Education and passing through a chain of command before reaching its “end users”, the teachers themselves. Apart from the top-down approach, this educational plan suffers from its bulkiness and its high cost. More than 143000 teachers are virtually enlisted to follow the training course in the winter and spring recesses without taking care

beforehand to arrange for the logistics and the supervising of the seminars.

In this modest paper, I have argued about the necessity of homogenizing the teachers' BAK s. Algeria is at the juncture or rather disjuncture in its educational system since a large scale curriculum reform is in the offing. ELT innovations like the competence approach and the designing of new textbooks are among the options retained for the improvement of the teaching of English. However, unless the technique of issuing communiqués is abandoned and unless the educational authorities respect the recognized stages of curriculum development, which are the familiarization and socialization of the teachers with the ELT innovations, and the progressive application and integration of the same innovations into their BAK s, there is a strong likelihood that my appeal to the constitution of a homogeneous body of beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge in our teachers in order to make them professionals will remain just a pious wish.(Cf. Waters Alan and Vilches C. Luz,2001)

Notes and References

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