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Research in Progress

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Language Teachers' Target Language project: Language for specific purposes of language teaching

The Language Teachers' Target Language project (LTTL) aims to describe language teachers' target language use domain[1] (Bachman & Palmer 2010) and to develop a language test for future teachers of English. The team comprises four researchers from Moscow State University (MSU) and Southampton Solent University.

Introduction

While issues of foreign language teaching methodology have received considerable attention in publications on methodological aspects of teacher training (Burns & Richards 2009; Scrivener 2014), much less attention has been given to the actual language teachers use. Research on the language used by teachers mainly focuses on classroom language use (Elder 2001; Walsh 2011). The latest research in language teacher education may lead to the assumption that teachers only use the target language while teaching in the classroom. Other uses of the language for specific professional purposes (commenting on students' work, writing progress reports, designing syllabi, etc.) are often left with little or no attention.

While this study is mainly based on the Russian context, our investigation of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher training courses in other countries (China, Hong Kong, Turkey, Argentina) suggests that this project may be of general interest to teacher trainers in other EFL contexts.

Objectives

This project is divided into two parts:

1. to analyse the language functions that teachers need to use inside the classroom and to develop an assessment tool to measure the extent to which teachers are capable of performing these functions
2. to do the same but for language tasks performed outside of the classroom.

[1] This is how the language is used in real life tasks, in this case, how the teacher uses language in the classroom.

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Research

Two main data collection methods were used as the basis of the analysis: classroom observation and questionnaires. The former was used to complement the existing models of teachers' in-class speaking tasks, develop a list of specific listening tasks and then to suggest a scale that can be used to assess teachers' interactive classroom speaking and listening skills. The classroom observation was carried out using video-recorded lessons. These were not specifically recorded for the project, but permission from the English Language Office of the US Embassy in Moscow was granted for the use of the set of videos entitled 'Shaping the way we teach English in Russia'. This is a DVD set of 18 video-recorded 45-minute lessons distributed among teacher trainers in Russia to be used with trainee teachers of English. Lesson observation allowed us to develop a pilot version of an assessment tool that is being trialed with trainee teachers at Moscow University and English First (EF). It assesses the classroom language skills of interactive fluency and classroom listening, grammatical and lexical range and appropriateness, pronunciation and sentence stress, presentation techniques, and the linguistic expertise to provide appropriate feedback.

It is important to see classroom discourse language, which most teachers have to use on a daily basis, not as a number of phrases that one has to memorize but as an interactive communicative competence that includes elements of spoken interaction, listening, reading and writing. As yet, in-class reading and writing have not been analysed; nonetheless, we believe that there are specific skills here as well, for instance, speedreading students' responses during process writing, or writing on the whiteboard, i.e. mapping ideas.

In addition to in-class language, the language used outside of the classroom should be considered an important part of teachers' English for Specific Purposes use. In order to start on the second part of the research, we devised a questionnaire for English language teachers in Russia to investigate which professional tasks must be performed outside of the classroom and which of these should be introduced into the teacher training curriculum. We piloted the questionnaire using 20 teachers from MSU and 10 teachers from Briansk State University before sending it digitally to teachers through the National Association of Teachers of English. The overall number of respondents was 670. In addition, 46 English as a Second Language teachers responded to the same questionnaire. We deliberately did not divide EFL teachers into native speakers and non-native speakers because we assume that a non-native speaker has to be able to perform similar professional tasks to those of a native speaking teacher. According to the results of our survey, more than 70% of Russian teachers have performed the following: reading books and research on language teaching (98%), assessing and commenting on students' written work (83% and 76% respectively), developing their own language learning tasks and tests (91%), reading instructions, manuals and administrative documents (79%), advising students and providing feedback before/after the lesson (74%), participating in conferences (73%) and writing emails to students (72%). Other tasks on the list included writing letters of reference for students (62%), reflecting on their teaching (61%), developing or translating into English curricula, syllabi and course descriptions (54%), communication with administration (49%), peer induction for new teachers (32%), and communication with parents (12%). Since this is very much a work-in-progress, the list of professional tasks given should not be considered an exhaustive description of language use

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outside of the classroom for all EFL teachers. Further studies of particular genres that underlie the tasks mentioned as well as environment-, level- and culture-specific variations should also be elicited through further studies in other contexts.

Conclusion

English language course materials for trainee teachers should help develop interactive communicative competence while research should provide more descriptors of what it includes in order to develop further training materials and assessment scales based on it. An assessment tool should then provide evidence to demonstrate that teachers have reached the required level of competence. The future challenges for the LTTL team are, therefore, to further analyse the target language use domain of language teachers and develop appropriate training and assessment materials.

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