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Give Me a Clue for Innovative Teaching!

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Abstract

In this article, I provide a snapshot of an action research project which I undertook in my university-level English teaching methods courses. The research was inspired by five premises for innovation in English language teaching (ELT) by John F. Fanselow (in press). One of his premises, for example, suggests that teachers should be aware of exactly what they are doing in class, via video recording and watching, in contrast to what they think they are doing. Another premise claims that teachers need to make small changes in their lessons in order to improve teaching effectiveness. Data were gathered from 34 university students, using classroom observation, essay writing and interviews, to find out their reaction to the courses. For brevity, in this paper, I deal with only two focal students chosen as a result of a convenience sampling strategy and a maximum variation strategy. Findings indicate that the two student participants experienced a vast variety of feelings and emotions, including doubts, confusions, enlightenments and revelations, toward the premises and teaching styles that I introduced and modelled during the course. The participants also articulated interesting points of view about innovative teaching. I conclude this paper with my own personal reflections on this research project and what I learned from it. Based on these, I recommend that similar research projects should be carried out in diverse school sectors and contexts.

keyword : innovative teaching; action research; teaching methods courses

1. Introduction

“If teacher educators are in agreement on anything, it is that teacher learning is complicated” (Spalding, Klecka, Lin, Wang, & Odell, 2011, p. 3). Within the field of education in general and English language teaching (ELT) in particular, the issues surrounding teacher development and teacher learning are hotly debated and acknowledged to be intricately complex. Of importance, in order to explore this complexity, is for us to ask ourselves and future teachers pointed questions about our practices such as: “What is the relation between what teachers know and believe, how they act, and how students are influenced by those actions?” (Tedick, 2005, p. 3). Against this backdrop, as a teacher of ELT teaching methods courses at a Japanese university, I was keen to discover (any!) clues for how I perceive and think about teaching, how I behave in class, and how students are affected by my actions. Becoming more familiar with these matters would likely lead to innovative teaching, the pursuit of which has been one of the common goals for a number of teacher educators and teachers for quite some time in this globalized world. The clues for innovative teaching, to me, seemed to rest on the five premises put forward by John F. Fanselow (in press), a scholar and a mentor known as a guru within the ELT community. I was immediately drawn to the premises when I encountered them, as they seemed to be a gateway through which unique and unconventional teaching methods and styles could be discerned. In other words, it appeared to me that these premises could ensure innovative teaching and tap into

students' natural curiosity and playful minds. It is, however, neither known precisely how the premises could be implemented in the lessons nor exactly what the reaction of the students might be to the premises. I therefore incorporated the premises into my own teaching methods courses—in the form of an action research project—in order to investigate the ways in which to employ the premises in actual classrooms and delve into the reaction of language learners to such classes.

2. Innovative Premises and Action Research

Thomas Henry Huxley wrote: “Sit down before fact like a little child, and be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abyss Nature leads or you shall learn nothing” (as cited in Fanselow, in press). Prior to embarking on the action research project, I already had substantial experience in teaching English classes—more than a decade both in Japanese and New Zealand contexts. I was, however, ready to make changes and prepared to break out of my comfort zone because that was what I needed (and wanted), instead of merely going through the motions, using routinized practices and feeling apathetic. When I stumbled upon the premises formulated by John F. Fanselow for the first time, I knew I had to incorporate the compelling ideas into my classes both for the success of my students as language learners and for my growth as a language teacher. The five premises that help teachers and learners create innovative lessons are as follows (adapted from Fanselow, in press) :

- A) *See what we are doing in contrast to what we think we are doing.* Some hospitals record what staff members do to better understand what they do. Companies often tape record their conversations with customers to help them improve their performance. Fanselow believes that this practice—recording and analyzing what we do through the use of video cameras and tape recorders—should be the norm in the field of education, particularly in ELT classes. In doing so, teachers could have much more accurate data available to them regarding what they actually do in their lessons for analysis and exploration, as opposed to their perceptions of what they do for evaluation or judgement.
- B) *Make small changes to try to improve our teaching effectiveness.* Fanselow encourages teachers to make small changes (not major ones) in their teaching, as they experiment with and cast doubt on the value of widely accepted theories/practices as well as their own overt/covert preconceived notions and assumptions about teaching. He also asks teachers to carefully compare and examine their lessons based on the changes they have made.
- C) *Use materials selected by students.* Materials used in the classroom are often, if not always, chosen by teachers or by officials outside the classroom. Fanselow observes that giving students the opportunity to select materials on their own may enable lessons to be tailored to their interests, needs and expectations, perhaps resulting in the increase of their engagement and facilitation of their learning.
- D) *Value students' questions and voices.* Fanselow insists that teachers should be willing to spend time and energy on dealing with spontaneous questions raised by students in the classroom, rather than questions posed by the teachers themselves or others outside the classroom made prior to the content being introduced. Teachers should also listen to and

give focus on their students' comments and suggestions in order to place the students at the center of classroom practices.

- E) *Integrate speaking, listening, writing and reading activities.* The importance of the integrated-skills approach (ISA), which incorporates the four language skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking and listening), has been recognized and to some extent promoted in Japan (e.g., Nishino, 2011). Fanselow has long been an advocate for the integration of speaking, listening, writing and reading activities, via the use of a read-and-look up technique and pair/group work, in order for learners to be able to become skilled in all four skills.

These five premises provide guidelines for language teachers around the world to make small changes and generate big results. To try to understand how to successfully base my lessons upon five premises in my English teaching methods courses at a Japanese university, I decided to employ an action research approach, as it seemed to be in alignment with the five premises and the overall educational philosophy and principles that John F. Fanselow supports. The term *action research* is often conceptualized in the ELT field as practitioner-initiated inquiry into teaching practice in the teacher's professional context (Borg, 2013; Burns, 2005). Action research offers opportunities for teachers to participate in research as both practitioners and researchers and allows them to learn and develop by scrutinizing their own teaching and their students' learning. It achieves this by gathering classroom data and engaging in reflective practices (Borg, 2013; Burns, 2005; Farrell, 2015). In other words, teachers who engage in action research aim to solve pressing *problems*, or *puzzles* (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), which have emerged from their classrooms via a spiral of actions, that is, they attempt to construct a research plan, act according to the plan, observe the effects of the action, and reflect on outcomes for further cycles in the future (Burns, 2005). My study was thus designed to tackle the following two research questions:

- How can we, as language teachers, incorporate the five premises put forth by John F. Fanselow into our actual classroom contexts through an action research project?
- What reaction do language learners have to the action research project that champions the five premises put forth by John F. Fanselow?

3. Methodology

In my two English teaching methods courses at a national university in southern Japan, there were 34 students in total. In this article, due to space limitations, I report on the experiences of only two focal students I chose by using both a convenience sampling strategy, which is a way to choose participants on the basis of the level of their accessibility for the researcher, and a maximum variation strategy, which is a method that allows the researcher to zoom in on two very different cases among all the participants in the study (Patton, 2002). As a consequence, Tomo (a 22-year-old male university student who wants to become an English teacher in the future) and Rika (a 21-year-old female university student who has not yet decided her future) were selected (both names are pseudonyms). Each focal student wrote an essay, participated in an individual interview and had extensive casual conversations with me over a semester.

(1) Classroom observation

I videotaped three non-consecutive lessons from each teaching methods course over a semester and thoroughly watched the videotaped lessons by forwarding, stopping and rewinding the video clips several times. I did so in order to be able to think about and examine my lessons based on reality, not from memory or imagination. During class, I took classroom field notes when I was not communicating with my students in the classroom. I wrote brief descriptions of the physical environment and the students, as well as jotted down details of any kind of event or incident I noticed, especially those that took place where the camera may not have been able to record successfully.

(2) Essay writing

Writing activities enable us to closely focus on our attention and further facilitate our thinking; they can become a powerful reflective means through which to convey personal experiences and express ideas. I therefore asked all the students in the English teaching methods courses to write a reflective essay in English on the course they were taking and on anything about English teaching and learning, that is to say, basically whatever came to their minds, just as in a diary. Their written essays ranged from two to six pages (and germane to this study Tomo wrote four pages and Rika two pages). With the research questions and purpose in mind, I analyzed the data by annotating, coding, and then categorizing them thematically.

(3) Interview

To understand the details of the two students' thinking with respect to my teaching methods courses, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each student, Tomo and Rika (for interview procedures and rationale, see Seidman, 2013). Each interview continued for about two hours in English. In addition, I jotted down any kind of conversation I had with the focal participants outside of the lessons or formal interviews to better make sense of their experience. After I transcribed the audiotaped interviews and carefully read the notes, I analyzed the data qualitatively, with special attention paid to the meaning of the participants' comments so as to identify salient and repeated themes.

4. Illustrative Findings and Discussion

I identified several categories from the data analysis based on relevant comments made by Tomo and Rika. Some of their comments showed that they reacted to my action research project, guided by Fanselow's five premises, in two very different ways: Tomo with doubt and confusion and Rika with enlightenment and revelation.

(1) The case of Tomo: Full of doubts and confusions

What Tomo felt during the course consisted primarily of doubts and confusions. In reacting to the course, Tomo wrote in his essay, for example: "some activities [in the lessons] are far from a real interactive English class that the Japanese government requests ... and some English

words or expressions might not be useful in real life”. As a result of reading his comments and watching the video clips of the lessons, I realized that there were a number of occasions in which I explained difficult and possibly unrelated concepts and ideas to the students at some length, inconsistent with premises three and four (i.e., cherish students’ questions and voices). Such communication occurred predominantly one way only: from me to the students. Moreover, I used activities that I, not my students, brought. Perhaps as a consequence, these activities seemed to be interesting just to me, and not to my students. Ironically, I wanted to so desperately follow what Fanselow advocates that I introduced his grammar activities, which integrate speaking, listening, writing and reading skills, without considering my students’ wishes or demands. Tomo responded negatively to those phases of my lessons, considering them to be useless and boring. He clearly had reservations regarding the content and organization of my lessons as well as the disconnect between the class activities and what he believes to be useful and practical English skills. On a related topic, at one point in the conversation he mentioned:

You [me] have such rigid and strong beliefs about teaching. For example, you say that our lessons need to be filled with new and unique techniques ... but I think this way of thinking is dangerous. Some people might sometimes think of your ideas as useless or ridiculous, and the ideas might limit and control students’ possibilities too. And I suppose that the Ministry of Education would not agree with your ideas or teaching.

He recognized the different methods and styles I adopted in the courses as being significantly different to those in other classes he had taken before. He stated that they could be “dangerous” because they are not ‘normal’ and do not conform to what English teachers are supposed to do as recommended by the Ministry of Education in Japan. In particular, he wondered if what I do is conducive to the English teaching contexts in Japan and confessed in his essay that “there is a doubt whether what you introduced would work in Japanese English classes”. He apparently showed his resistance for change from conventional teaching and to some extent voiced his preference to adhere to the ‘usual’ language teaching that the Ministry of Education asks teachers to conduct. Afterward, he eventually came to hold a realization and wrote it in the final paragraph of his essay:

All classes have good and bad points... Teachers have to have a lot of ideas and methods and they have to be able to use them appropriately. In the future, I’d like to find a way for teachers and students to be equal because teachers are not the authorities in a classroom.

His attitudes towards the course and the feelings he had were an eye-opener for me. He seemed to have thought long and hard about English teaching and learning within his context, with an eventual concern for equality and professionalism in the classroom (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Freire, 1993; Hiratsuka & Malcolm, 2011). Tomo’s comments made me realize that: (a) I could explore the students’ genuine perceptions about my lessons without taking a judgmental stance (related to premises three and four) and (b) I could know what I was

really doing as opposed to what I thought I was doing (connected to premise one). These made me become willing to make small changes for my students, such as asking my students to send their questions to me via email instead of asking them to address their questions on the spot in the classroom (associated with premise two).

(2) The case of Rika: Filled with enlightenments and revelations

Rika conveyed a myriad of enlightening and liberating realizations. For instance, she demonstrated in her reflective essay that she understood that teaching a foreign language entails much more than simply passing on knowledge, or explaining the structure or the mechanism of the language to the students (see Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Fanselow, in press; Hiratsuka, 2016). She wrote the following in the first paragraph of her essay:

Through this course, I learned that teaching a foreign language is not only about giving some knowledge for students but also it is about finding ways to get students to be excited. When they are excited, they can enjoy learning, notice or find something by themselves and overcome difficult things when they are learning. Here, I mean that teachers should know what his or her students want to do and what they are interested in and make flexible teaching plans and don't forget the students' perspectives that teachers had once had before.

Basing my lessons on Fanselow's five premises may have aligned my lessons to Rika's ideals—the lessons were relevant to her interests and learning experiences as well as applicable to her backgrounds and learning contexts. Her comments proved that I, as a teacher of the teaching methods course, might have been successful in bringing about effective changes in my teaching, choosing suitable materials, valuing students' quality of life and properly including students' questions and voices in our lessons. It might have well been the case that I could do so because I saw exactly what I was doing in class by watching my lessons in video clips, figuring out how and why I did what I did in the lessons and thus identifying how and what I could do better for my future classes. In her interview, Rika presented another reason why she was in favor of my lessons: "You [me] gave us limited instructions for activities and made us think and wonder and had us ask you some questions. When we thought and guessed about things with other classmates, we got excited". In her essay on the topic of what is required to be a good teacher, she wrote: "Teachers need patience. For instance, maybe sometimes teachers concentrate on finishing the textbook smoothly for the day, but if teachers have patience, they can wait for students and prepare what happens next or teachers can guess what action students might make next". Coincidentally, this topic was one of the things that I noticed needed to be changed when I watched the video clips of my lessons for the first time. That is, I realized how little time I gave to my students after I had asked them a question. I thought that I had given them more time to respond to my question, but I clearly had not, and it prompted me to give more time in the future lessons (Rowe, 1986). In my view, this illustrates the advantage of participating in an action research project and utilizing the five premises—being able to recognize the weaknesses of language lessons and later revise and improve upon

them, together with students, based on what is really going on in the classroom and, if deemed necessary, repeat the same learning cycle again over time. Toward the end of her interview, intriguingly Rika decided to ask me a question about the questions I get from my students in class. She asked: “What do you [me] think about the quality of the questions students ask you in your lessons?” According to her, a lot of teachers encourage students to ask a question to them anytime they have one. However, when the time comes, students either do not ask any questions or when they do, the teacher gets upset and does not provide any satisfactory answer because the teacher thinks that the question is inappropriate or because the teacher needs to follow his or her teaching plan strictly and has no time for reply. I argue that the very fact that she asked this question directly to me is an indication that she trusted me and regarded me as someone who could value students’ voices and appreciate their questions. This encouraged me to believe that, again, my lessons and I, as a teacher of the course, were at least to some extent in line with the premises three and four (i.e., cherish students’ questions and voices).

5. Conclusion

I launched the action research project in my English teaching methods courses in order to look into the outcomes arising from the inclusion of the five innovative premises contrived by John F. Fanselow. To achieve the research purpose, I made use of an array of qualitative research methods (i.e., classroom observation, essay writing and individual interviews) to collect data from Japanese university students. In this article, I described the primary findings based on the data from two focal participants. The data suggested that the focal participants had almost the opposite reaction to the teacher (me) and to my lessons. That is, Tomo held, on the whole, negative feelings and emotions, in association with doubts and confusions, in relation to the course; whereas, the experience of Rika in the course were by and large characterized by enlightenments and revelations. Interestingly, however, both of the participants seemed to have heightened their awareness about what it means to be a good teacher and what it pertains to conduct a good English lesson. They both saw the possibilities for innovating teaching, sought alternative points of view and asked original questions. I would like to view their experience as characteristic examples of the embodiment of Fanselow’s maximum: “Believe nothing I say and question everything others do”.

I would like to summarize my personal experience with the action research project and offer two chief implications for those who, like myself, are in pursuit of innovative teaching. First and foremost, I contend that Fanselow’s five premises facilitated my own and my students’ learning. It helped me to become a better critical thinker and to continue to innovate my teaching whether my students react to the lessons positively or negatively. In other words, the premises ‘worked’ for me. The outcome might come in different shapes; sometimes it could be tangible and all flowery, and other times it might be invisible and quite daunting. I recognized that it took me a long time before I discovered any clues as to innovative teaching. From time to time, it felt as if I was going nowhere—or worse, I felt I was going into darker places. Despite the adversity, I

learned that I could not bail out. I think, as teachers, we should embrace the uncertainty of an exploration for innovative teaching in our English classes. As Tomo aptly said, “all classes and experience have good and bad points”, but, as Rika adequately put it, “we need to be patient”. I believe that the most important implication from the study is that Fanselow’s five premises, in combination with the action research approach by practitioners, can yield a tremendous amount of trust from both the teacher and student sides. We can win, build up and maintain trust in each other by advocating for the five premises and putting them into practice in our daily lessons. The premises open up the window for communication between teacher and students, cultivating a classroom culture of an honest exchange of ideas and questions. If the trust that one places in others exists, it would be easy for everyone to play the believing game where all the people involved have faith in others and high expectations for their abilities and competence (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999). I argue that this is a prerequisite for innovating ELT classes and the foundation from which to develop as teachers and learners.

I recommend that this kind of project should be mirrored in diverse school sectors (e.g., elementary schools, secondary schools and cram schools) and in a wide variety of contexts (e.g., metropolitan cities, China and England) . In future studies, different types of participants in terms of, for example, age, English proficiency level, and purpose of learning English should be researched in order to shed further light on the issue of the innovation and transformation of English language teaching. I would like to conclude my article with words from another student in my course:

Firstly, I learned that personal or interesting things for students are the best ingredients of learning English. It is a common sense, but I did not realize the fact. Secondly, I noticed that what other teachers did in their English classes might not be always good classes. We do not need to always follow them. However, we need to think why we do this or that in class and what could be good or bad. The most important is to think outside the box.

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