

A BRICOLEUR'S APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A LOOK INTO THE ENGLISH TEACHERS' WORKSHOP

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Introduction

A bricoleur, according to Lévi-Strauss (1974: 16-17) is, "someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman" (Hatton, 1989). The word "bricoleur" is difficult to find in an English dictionary. The best approximation that we might look for would be in the term "handyman." A handyman performs odd jobs, fixes everything within his realm of expertise, and usually moves onto another locale where he may apply such skills again. Handymen are not without their important roles in the fixing and maintenance of existing structures. The idea of a handyman can be contrasted with that of an engineer. Engineers, working from principles, design and oversee the manufacture of distinctive new products. The engineer works perhaps within a field of specialization, such as chemistry, electricity, or hydraulics, and certainly must work within the constraints of laws of nature and environmental limitations, but the work of an engineer is not bound by day to day maintenance or repair of physical objects.

According to Hatton (1989), bricoleurs have four distinctive characteristics which they employ in their attempt to fix or solve problems. First, they use the materials they have on hand. Second, their means, or tools, are limited. They attempt to fix a problem based upon what tool they have, and not upon what tool may be best. Third, the employment of materials and means is limited to past experience. Fourth, the bricoleur's response to a task is limited to an ad hoc rearrangement of the existing environment. A new shelf or new parts may be fitted, but essentially the room remains the same size and function.

Hatton (1989) continues by drawing parallels between teachers work and that of a bricoleur. Giving examples of conservatism, limited creativity, repertoire confinement, underdeveloped use of theory, and a reliance on ad hocism, she points out that teacher training, following as it does some 15 years of prior socialization, is essentially confirmatory in nature. Extensive use of practicums and student teaching more often force even the potentially reflective teacher to adopt strategies formed on the job. The most serious implication of viewing teaching as bricolage, is to acknowledge that many, it not most, teachers lack any skills that may be thought of as reconstructive (Dewey, 1916).

In order to discern if English teachers' work can be described as that of a bricoleur, secondary English Teachers in New York and Puerto Rico were surveyed about their methods for teaching Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. English teachers in both states were chosen because of their professional language instruction orientation and because all students must participate and demonstrate competence in English in order to graduate, though the contexts and requirements are very different. In New York a LEP student must master the fundamentals of English in order to master course content sufficient to pass classes required for high school graduation. Mastery of English is usually necessary for success in the college environment as well. In Puerto Rico, the state requires twelve years of "English as a Second Language" and twelve years of Spanish language and culture by each student in its public schools. Private schools match this requirement and often take it a step further with many classes in the sciences being taught using English language textbooks. The documented high dropout rates in both states (NCLR, 1990) of individuals of Puerto Rican descent, a figure approximating 50%, give rise to the concern that factors of cultural discontinuity (Trueba, 1990) may be at the center of this problem. This preliminary study investigates the perspectives of the cultural brokers most directly involved, teachers. This preliminary study was designed to sample classroom teachers' views concerning student success in school, classroom teaching methods, and opinions on the use of English in the classroom when teaching non-native English speakers.

Background

The mere invoking in the public of the term Bilingual Education today is tantamount to declaring oneself a participant in a grand scheme to dismantle the American way of life (Secada and Lightfoot, 1993). A recent Time/CNN poll shows that in a two year span from September 1993 to September 1995 demonstrates a significant shift in public opinion towards an English only instructional mode. Whereas three years ago 40% of the general population thought that public school should teach all children in English, the percent today stands at 50%. Furthermore, the same poll shows that 65% of those surveyed think that there should be a law enacted that makes English the official language of this country (*Time*, 1995). The historical and constitutional precedents that would be violated by such an act (Crawford, 1989) do not seem to diminish the momentum which policy directions are moving in this regard. State and Federal budgets are being cut for both ESL and Bilingual instruction, and politicians sensing some way to champion the mood of discontent, and trim a budget, are proposing eliminating programs altogether while introducing legislation to make English the official language. It is no small coincidence that three states critical to all presidential elections, California, Florida, and Illinois, all have passed some form of English Only resolution (Casanova and Arias, 1993). One might think that such a sentiment would be more appropriate to a monolingual monocultural political entity, yet it is taking place at a time when our educational institutions are facing on a daily basis one of the largest nationwide changes in the language composition of public education students since the 1800s (Casanova and Arias, 1993)

Estimates suggest that almost 20% of the population of the United States is considered to have a language minority background. 1990 figures show that in New York State fully 23% of the population over 5 years of age is considered to have difficulty speaking English. That represents about 1,766,000 people. According to the same sources, the foreign born population in New York is approximately 2,852,000, an increase in a ten year span of over 40%

(Casanova and Arias, 1993). Within New York City, 15% of school age children have limited English proficiency, the majority of which go to public schools whose classes contain the largest ethnic minority populations. However, we need not look at a much maligned metropolis such as New York City to see such figures.

In the New York "Capital District," an area comprising the Counties of Albany, Rensselaer, Schenectady, and Montgomery, schools are experiencing steadily increasing numbers of non-English speaking students. Data taken from the New York State 1993-1994 BEDS information show increases in LEP student numbers ranging from 40% to several hundred percent depending upon the school. The increases are not uniform, nor are the immigrants from one language group. Albany reports needing tutors for their students in Spanish, Chinese, Polish, Russian, Japanese, Korean, and Farsi. Schenectady county adds to this list the languages of Polish, Italian, Greek, and Pushtu. While there are certainly a great variety of language needs the primary second language concern is Spanish. Of the approximately 330 identified LEP students in Schenectady schools, a full 80% are Spanish speaking; the majority of whom trace their heritage to Puerto Rico. In spite of this obvious gap between services needed and trained personnel, none of the areas five major institutions of higher education offer a bilingual teacher training program. SUNY Albany does offer a TESOL program, but most graduates of that program find employment outside the immediate area, often overseas. Within this context, it interested the researcher to survey those directly involved with the activities of cultural transmission, the teachers.

Methodology

Thirteen English teachers in New York were selected from a variety of schools in the "Capital District." English teachers were sought because of their professional training in language development. In San Juan, Puerto Rico thirteen English teachers were also surveyed, though in that context they described themselves as "ESL" instructors. A working assumption was that expertise with the lan-

guage learning process in an “immigrant providing environment” would provide an interesting contrast with those teachers in as “immigrant receiving environment.” An eleven question Likert scale survey was used for the gathering of data (appendix 1). The survey instrument was adapted from a design used by Rothenberg et al. (1993). The scale ranged from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating strong agreement, and 7 indicating strong disagreement. In addition to the Likert scale questions, five short answer questions were asked about teaching resource material. Questions 1 to 5 focus on teacher beliefs about factors relating to school success. Questions 6 to 9 focus on classroom responses to LEP students. Questions 10 and 11 ask questions about the use of using English exclusively in the classroom. Fill-in questions 12 to 16 provide for more detail regarding materials and methods use during class.

Results

The responses of the respective groups were analyzed on a question by question basis. The Likert responses were then averaged. Based on the scale of 1 to 7, the mean scores were then categorized into three basic groups: disagree, unsure, and agree. An average score range of 1 to 3.5 was considered to represent disagreement with the question. An average score of 3.5 to 4.5 was considered as unsure. Averages above 4.5 indicated agreement with the question. Table 1 provides the means data presentation.

Table 1
 Questionnaire Responses as Means
 N = 13 in each sample group

	Student Outcomes				Methods				ESL		
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11
Puerto Rico	2.31	4.69	4.62	4.54	5.08	5.38	5.23	3.08	3.62	4.08	4.54
New York	3.46	5.85	4.38	4.77	3.69	3.77	3.15	5.08	3.00	5.08	5.38

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Graph 1 displays the relative strength of the paired responses. Bars below the 0 line indicate strength of agreement with the questionnaire, while bars above the 0 line indicate relative disagreement with the questionnaire.

An analysis reveals many interesting facets about the responses. First there is accord between the two populations on four questions, Q1, Q2, Q4, and Q11. There is similarly strong disaccord between the two populations on Q7 and Q8. For the Puerto Rican responses one sees unsure responses to questions Q9, and Q10. The New York teachers show unsure responses to questions Q3, Q5, and Q6.

Concerning student outcomes, both groups of teachers strongly disagree that teachers should teach all their students the same way regardless of ethnic, family or language backgrounds. However, there is more uncertainty concerning what elements most impact students' success in school. The Puerto Rican teachers indicated basic agreement to questions 2 through 5. They think that family, culture, and dialect differences do impact students' success in school. They indicated that they believe schools do allow equal opportunity for academic success in spite of the differences noted above. New York teach-

ers felt very strongly that students' family backgrounds have the greatest impact on students' success in school, but were less certain about the linguistic component of family background. They were also unsure with the questionnaire statement, Q5, that "schools allow all students equal opportunity for academic success."

The "Methods" section of the questionnaire reveals no accord between the two teacher populations. The Puerto Rican teachers strongly support the ideas of changing reading materials and management strategies depending upon the students' cultural backgrounds (Q6, Q7, Q8). In addition they appear to believe that academic goals (Q9) for students from minority family backgrounds should be the same for all students. New York teachers, on the other hand, generally feel that the same reading materials should be used (Q7) regardless of cultural backgrounds, and they support the idea that classroom management strategies should remain the same regardless of the students' backgrounds. They tend to agree with the statement (Q9) that "academic goals and objectives" change when teaching students from minority family backgrounds.

Questions Q10 and Q11 focused on English use in the classroom. Puerto Rican teachers were unsure whether learning English should take precedence over subject matter. New York teachers were strongly in support of the idea that learning English should take precedence over subject matter. Question Q 11, regarding using *only* English in the classroom shows agreement by both groups, however this was qualified in the short answer responses. The Puerto Rican teachers wanted only English in their English classroom, while most of the New York teachers viewed it strongly as a school wide statement. Could one not promote a "bilingualism only" proposal?

Written responses to questions 12, 13 and 14 are very revealing. The Puerto Rican teachers reported having available to them teaching supplies (Q 12) such as "big books, videos, Sesame Street, records, movies, dictionaries, thesauruses, and books on synonyms and antonyms." The New York teachers often indicated "none" or

bilingual dictionaries. Similarly school resources available (Q 13), show New York teachers relying on the ESL teacher in the school or the foreign language teachers. The Puerto Rican teachers indicate the availability of computer programs, entire sections in the library, and the availability of good English teachers. Effective strategies for teaching limited English speakers (Q 14) reflects a similar split. The Puerto Rican teachers indicate the use of whole language strategies, role playing, story telling, immersion, cooperative work, guided reading, tutoring, songs, and visuals. The New York teachers indicated only "one on one" help, and small group instruction.

Discussion

The results of this preliminary study appear to show a wide difference of opinion regarding teachers' methods for the successful teaching of LEP students in both New York and Puerto Rico. Rothenberg et al. (1993) found that student teachers were uncertain about specific methods to be used when teaching students of different language backgrounds. The current study reveals that Secondary teachers in New York hold some of the same uncertainties. While they generally agree that teachers should not teach students in the same manner, when asked about specific methods and language use there is either uncertainty or a lack of flexibility. Some school programs appear to lack even the rudiments of second language support elements. As previously noted, such support must encompass both an awareness of cultural frameworks as well as a program of transitional or bilingual language development. Lucas (1993) states that secondary students who enter U. S. schools face serious challenges in their attempt to complete their education. Language, as a cultural symbol, conveys meaning beyond mere word definition. Ogbu (1987) and Fordem and Ogbu (1986) have thoroughly discussed the phenomenon of resistance cultures and the penalty some students feel when they must "act white." Secondary programs with even a few limited English proficient students must give some consideration to the (re)training of its "language arts" teachers.

The responses from Puerto Rico present a different picture of

language learning. There the state endorses a long period of language training, twelve years. While this does not guarantee literacy, there are many who acquire such skills. Certainly there is an economic motivation that says that dual language learning will be useful in future careers. Though the island's educational history with the U. S. mainland has been uneven (Crawford, 1989), today a serious effort is underway to produce fluent bilinguals. Puerto Rico, a multicultural island culture, while much poorer in terms of per capita income than New York, can envision a dynamic language fluency program for its citizens.

Our present educational dilemmas are many, but a failure on the part of educational planners to provide all students with an equal opportunity to learn was, at least until very recently, considered a challenge to overcome. The New York teachers in this study seem to acknowledge that schools do not allow equal opportunity for academic success, yet current political leaders continue to treat language arts learning (domestic and foreign) in general, and teaching limited English proficient speakers in particular, as relatively unimportant, unless it is a matter of speaking an "official" English.

It would appear that politicians expect educators to comply with proposals which promote teachers' ad hocism. English teachers, inadequately trained in second language learning, and cultured by a rigid system of conformity, are unable to respond effectively to the conflicting orders. Perhaps the most revealing evidence of the current condition is demonstrated by a written comment by one of the sampled teachers. When asked, "What seems to be the most effective strategy/technique you use to achieve your lesson goals when working with LEP students?" he replied, "That's a new one on me."

The link between school success, and the strength of literacy programs needs to be further investigated. Language fluency, the central element of intelligence (Vygotsky, 1978) may provide a means by which we can still create a less divisive and more democratic society (Dewey, 1916). The opening discussion on bricolage may help us view the dilemmas in which teachers are placed. Without a theo-

retical vision of possibilities, teachers will be unable to successfully respond to the complexities of their classroom. Further, without a vision and knowledge of the means, teachers will be least able to participate in the formulating of viable new models of education. They will remain bricoleurs.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Secondary English Teacher Questionnaire
concerning
Limited English Proficient Students

Please rate the following items on this questionnaire on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing strong disagreement and 7 indicating that you strongly agree. Written comments are welcomed in addition to the scale.

1 = strongly disagree 4 = unsure 7 = strongly agree

1. Teachers should teach their students the same way, regardless of the students' ethnicity, family, or language backgrounds.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. Students' family backgrounds have the greatest impact, among all factors, in their success in school.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. Language and dialect differences greatly impact students' success in school.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Students' cultural backgrounds greatly impact their success in school.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. Schools allow all students equal opportunity for academic success, regardless of the students' home background, ethnicity, or language.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. I change reading materials according to students' language and dialect backgrounds.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. I change reading materials according to students' cultural backgrounds.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. I use the same classroom management strategies regardless of students' family, language, or ethnic backgrounds.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9. I change academic goals and objectives when teaching students who come from minority family backgrounds.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

10. Learning English should take precedence over learning the subject matter for students with limited proficiency in English.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

11. Students with limited proficiency in English should be encouraged to use only English when in the classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Please briefly describe the following.

12. What teaching supplies are available to the Limited English Proficient (LEP) speaker in your classroom? (bilingual dictionary)
-

13. What school resources are available to the LEP student in your school?
-

14. What seems to be the most effective strategy/technique you use to achieve your lesson goals when working with LEP students?
-

15. In an "average" day, how many students attend your classes who are either classified LEP or are close to that classification?
-

16. Other comments or observations that you may have.
-

Thank you very much for your cooperation and ideas.

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