



**APPROPRIATING AND USING
CONCEPTUAL TOOLS OF LITERACY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TWO
NOVICE FOREIGN LANGUAGE
TEACHING ASSISTANTS**

Beatrice Dupuy, University of Arizona

**Heather Willis Allen, University of Wisconsin,
Madison**

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

- Given recent calls (e.g., MLA 2007 Report) to better integrate the study of language and culture in the undergraduate FL curriculum, the effectiveness of professional development for today's FL graduate students has become increasingly relevant.
- However, little empirical research has investigated the development of teaching expertise for foreign language teaching assistants (FL Tas) or the specific outcomes of their participation in professional development on their teaching cognitions and practices.



BACKGROUND

- FL TAs play an important role in undergraduate FL education, teaching more than one half of elementary-level language courses in Ph.D.-granting departments (MLA, 2007)
- The dominant model for FL TA preparation is flawed & is consistent with Freeman's (1993) notion of frontloading, i.e., attempting to equip teachers at the outset for all they need to know & be capable of doing throughout their career
- This model for FL TA preparation is also problematic given the historic language-literature divide in U.S. collegiate FL departments



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ 1: What were the FL TAs' conceptual learning outcomes of participation in a one-semester seminar on literacy-based pedagogy?
- RQ 2: In what ways were the FL TAs' language teaching/learning-related beliefs evidenced in their reaction to literacy-based pedagogy and their application in their local context?
- RQ 3: According to the FL TAs which activities and tools from the seminar contributed most to conceptual development in relation to literacy-based FL pedagogy?
- RQ 4: What difficulties did the FL TAs encounter when attempting to instantiate conceptual and pedagogical tools of literacy-based FL in teaching ?
- RQ 5: How were their efforts to carry out literacy-based FL teaching constrained or supported in their local context?



CONCEPTUALIZING TEACHER LEARNING FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

- Teachers are learners of L2 teaching rather than performers of teaching
- Learning to teach is a dynamic process of social interaction wherein teachers appropriate, reconstruct, & transform existing social practices of teaching based on individual & local needs
- Teacher learning is both internal & collective activity that shapes not only teachers' own actions & thoughts but also student engagement in learning & learning outcomes
- Professional development is a conceptual process, wherein L2 teachers' own everyday concepts of language, learning, & teaching encounter scientific concepts about these subjects embraced by their profession, creating the potential for reorganization of experiential knowledge & formation of new knowledge. The use of one overarching concept can unify curricula & provide teachers with coherent notions of FL teaching & learning

(Johnson, 2009; Lantolf & Johnson, 2007; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003)



RESEARCH DESIGN: THE COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Familiarity with theoretical foundations of second / foreign language acquisition and a range of practical applications and implications for communicative, literacy-oriented language teaching
- Conceptual understanding of principles of communicative, literacy-oriented language teaching
- Conceptual understanding of classroom techniques for communicative, literacy-oriented language teaching
- Ability to design materials, lessons, and assessment instruments consistent with conceptual and pedagogical tools of literacy-oriented language teaching introduced over the course of the semester
- Critical insights about teaching language through cultural texts of all types to develop literacy in the foreign language



RESEARCH DESIGN: THE COURSE— FRAMING CONCEPTS

- Literacy: “[T]he use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships . . . literacy is dynamic—not static—and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures .” (Kern, 2000, p. 16)
- Principles of literacy-based FL teaching: 7 principles of literacy, design (Available Designs, Designing and the Redesigned)
- Curricular components: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, transformed practice (New London Group, 1996)



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LEVELS OF APPROPRIATION OF CONCEPTUAL & PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS

- Lack of appropriation due to incomprehension, resistance, or rejection
- Appropriating the concept's label but none of its features
- Appropriating surface features of the concept but not understanding how various features contribute to a conceptual whole
- Appropriating conceptual underpinnings & being able to use the concept in new settings
- Achieving mastery in implementing the concept

Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia (1999)



RESEARCH DESIGN: THE PARTICIPANTS

- Cross-institutional: Two R1 universities, one public & one private
- 17 FL TAs
 - 4 males, 13 females; ages: 22-42
 - 9 Ph.D. students; 8 M.A. students
- Cross-language: Spanish (4), German (4), Russian (3), French (3), Japanese (2), Korean (1)
- Participants' previous FL teaching experience: No (11), Yes (6)



CASE STUDIES

Elena

- 39 year-old Cuban female
- MA in International Relations (US), Ph.D. candidate in Romance Literature, concentration in Spanish Literature
- One year in dept. before starting to teach Spanish 101
- No previous FL teaching experience
- Languages studied: English, French, Portuguese

Armando

- 23 year-old Peruvian male
- MA in LAS (US), Ph.D. candidate in Romance Literature, concentration in Spanish Literature
- One year in dept. before starting to teach Spanish 101
- No previous FL teaching experience
- Languages studied: English, Portuguese, Quecha



RESEARCH DESIGN: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

- 4 Data sources:
 - Questionnaires (**Pre- and post-semester surveys**),
 - Written narratives (weekly reading blog postings, **bi-weekly reflective teaching journal**, concept maps, **professional development plan**)
 - Interview (**post-semester interview**)
 - Teaching artifacts (lesson study documents (3 cycles), instructional unit materials)
- Analysis of narrative data: **Double coding** for mentions of concepts related to literacy-based teaching & the level of appropriation evidenced in each mention; focus on how concepts are being understood, transformed, and instantiated



CASE 1: ELENA

- **Developing conceptual knowledge of literacy during and after the methods seminar.**
 - Pre-semester notions of FL teaching (08/19/2010)
 - Important elements of FL teaching: Consistency, organization & choosing a right method
 - Priorities of FL teaching: Consistency, organization & choosing a right method, which would “support a more interactive and captivating way of teaching [a] foreign language”.
 - Biggest anticipated challenges: Meeting the school’s & students’ expectations



CASE 1: ELENA

- **Developing conceptual knowledge of literacy during and after methods seminar**
 - Pre-course notions of literacy/being literate
 - Notions of literacy: pre-seminar questionnaire (08/26/2010)
 - RTJ #2 (9/12/2010)
 - Mid-term notions of literacy/being literate
 - Notions of literacy: Midterm (10/6/2010)
 - RTJ #4 (10/14/2010)
 - End of term notions of literacy/being literate
 - RTJ #7 (11/30/2010)
 - Notions of literacy: End of term interview (12/8/2010)



CASE 2: ELENA

- **Applying conceptual and pedagogical tools of literacy in instructional design**
 - RTJ #2 (9/12/2010)
 - RTJ #6 Teaching lesson reflection (11/10/2010)
 - RTJ #7 Final Reflection (11/30/2010)
 - End of term interview (12/7/2010)



CASE 2: ELENA

- **Constraints to instantiating literacy-based teaching**
 - RTJ #6 Teaching lesson reflection (11/10/2010)
 - End of the term interview (12/7/2010)



CASE 1: ARMANDO

- Pre-semester notions of FL teaching
 - Important elements of FL teaching: Make a connection between language and culture; Good conversation
 - Priorities of FL teaching: Being able to express my ideas in a clear and friendly way
 - Biggest anticipated challenges: To use the language as a tool to make my students get into new cultures and new lifestyles



CASE 2: ARMANDO

- Developing conceptual knowledge of literacy during and after methods seminar
 - Pre-course notions of literacy/being literate
 - Notions of literacy: pre-seminar questionnaire (8/26/2010)
 - RTJ #2 (9/12/2010)
 - Mid-term notions of literacy/being literate
 - Notions of literacy: Midterm (10/6/2010)
 - RTJ #4 (10/14/2010)
 - End of term notions of literacy/being literate
 - Notions of literacy: End of term interview (12/7/2010)
 - RTJ #7 (11/30/2010)



CASE 2: ARMANDO

- Applying conceptual and pedagogical tools of literacy in instructional design
 - RTJ #4 (10/14/2010) Midterm reflection
 - RTJ #6 (11/10/2010) Teaching lesson reflection
 - End of term interview (12/7/2010)



CASE 2: ARMANDO

- Constraints to instantiating literacy-based teaching
 - End of term interview (12/7/2010)
 - Professional development plan (1/15/2011)



EMERGING THEMES

- Research Question 1: Conceptual development
 - Structuring teaching practices through concepts of literacy proved overall difficult for these novice teachers. Levels of appropriation evidenced by each participant were the following:
 - Elena –Appropriating a label -> surface features of conceptual and pedagogical tools (level 3)
 - Armando–Appropriating a label -> not the surface features of conceptual and pedagogical tools (level 2)
- Research Question 2: Alignment between conceptual/ pedagogical tools and teaching practice.
 - No alignment. Teaching practices were filtered until the end by everyday concepts of language learning, beliefs about language teaching and learning and previous experiences as language learners
- Research Questions 4 & 5: Constraints to literacy-based FL teaching:
 - Time (Elena, Armando), lack of ready-made materials (Elena, Armando), textbook (Elena, Armando), syllabus (Elena, Armando)



CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Instantiating literacy-based FL pedagogy is tremendously challenging for FL TAs and the ability to “think through” literacy-based concepts in constructing teaching practices is a gradual, often difficult process
- The traditional model of a one-semester methods seminar as the primary means of facilitating theory-practice connections for novice FL TAs is insufficient
- “[T]he changes required in TA education are so pervasive as to be beyond one’s professional reach ... it will not suffice to leave untouched the marginal position of TA education within the intellectual-academic work of graduate programs. It is unsatisfactory to retain the structures that have institutionalized that marginalization and even trivialization of language instruction” (Byrnes, 2005, p. 136)



CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Future research should continue to explore:
 - the longitudinal emergence of conceptual development by FL TAs
 - which in-service professional development activities are most effective for supporting this developmental trajectory over the teaching career of FL TAs



FOR MORE INFORMATION

This presentation and handout can be downloaded:

<http://percolate.arizona.edu/doku.php/conferences/workshops>

Further information on the PERCOLATE project:

<http://cercll.arizona.edu/doku.php/projects/materials>

Further information on FL TA professional development taking a conceptual and literacy-based approach:

<http://cercll.arizona.edu/doku.php/development/workshops>