

Learning to Teach Foreign Languages: A Case Study of Six Preservice Teachers



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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate six preservice teachers' understandings of how to teach a foreign language and how context affects language teaching. The ways in which participants' views of teaching were shaped by their methods courses and field experiences in a one-year teacher education program were considered as well.

Ethnographic techniques, including observations, interviews, and document analyses, were used. The participants credited methods courses with teaching them to provide a language-rich environment in which learners were guided to use the foreign language to express their own meanings and to gain information from others and from authentic texts. Field experiences provided an opportunity to observe and practice their understandings of how to teach. The participants described varying degrees of confidence, however, in implementing some of their ideas, given the age of learners, learners' expectations for the language class, and the participants' role as interns. The findings indicate that teacher educators have an opportunity to ground preservice teachers in the theory and practice of foreign language education in methods courses and concurrent field experiences. Nevertheless, preservice teachers may lack the experience and the authority needed to consistently implement their understandings. Continued support of beginning teachers and greater conceptual coherence in the teacher education program are needed to deepen and strengthen preservice teachers' understandings of how to teach foreign languages in a given classroom context.

Introduction

In the last fifteen years, teacher education reformers have called for stronger associations between university programs and schools in order to help preservice teachers achieve a deeper understanding of the theoretical bases of teaching and their practical applications. Many of these groups, including the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996), have advocated the extension of teacher preparation programs beyond the traditional four-year undergraduate degree. Preservice teachers would spend an additional year, either at the undergraduate or graduate level, focusing on their professional education and completing a year-long internship at a professional development school.

Despite the confidence of educational reformers and teacher educators in the power of one-year, intensive teacher education programs to enhance the understandings of preservice teachers, the research to support the rhetoric is thin. Although foreign language teacher educators have published descriptive accounts of reform efforts in their programs (e.g., Garfinkel and Sosa 1996; Robinson, Schmidt-Rinehart, and Knight 1997), there is limited research on the experiences of preservice teachers enrolled in those programs.

As the profession works to improve teacher development through such policy efforts as the New Visions reports of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), it is important that teacher educators know what preservice teachers are learning about foreign language education in these reformed teacher preparation programs (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2000). The present study was an effort to address the gap in the research by investigating the knowledge of six preservice teachers enrolled in a one-year, graduate-level teacher education program and how methods courses and field experiences contributed to their knowledge.

The theoretical construct that helped frame the preservice teachers' growing understandings of the theoretical bases and practical concerns in teaching languages was foreign language pedagogical content knowledge. Pedagogical content knowledge is "the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented in instruction" (Shulman, 1987, p. 8). In effect, one's pedagogical content knowledge is the knowledge of how to teach a subject to others. Grossman (1989) noted that it is through subject-specific methods courses that pedagogical content knowledge is transmitted.

In foreign language teacher education, Wing (1993) defined the concept of pedagogical content knowledge with reference to ACTFL's Provisional Program Guidelines

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for Foreign Language Teacher Education (1988). For her, foreign language pedagogical content knowledge includes five aspects. These aspects are understandings about

- what it means to know a foreign language,
- how learners learn a foreign language,
- what should be taught in a foreign language class,
- how the foreign language should be taught, and
- how classroom contexts affect language instruction.

The two aspects of foreign language pedagogical content knowledge to be considered in this article are preservice teachers' understandings of how to teach languages and how classroom contexts affect language teaching. The findings are part of a larger study of all five aspects of Wing's (1993) foreign language pedagogical content knowledge (Raymond, 2000). Understandings of how to teach and how context affects teaching were the two aspects, however, that dominated the preservice teachers' discussions of language teaching and learning in the study. Therefore, they were the aspects were chosen for consideration here.

The Study of Preservice Language Teachers

Freeman and Richards (1996) note that while researchers have studied the phenomenon of language learning, they have neglected to investigate how language teachers come to know what they know through formal teacher education and informal learning on the job. Several studies suggest, however, that interest in these questions is growing.

Methods Courses

Through foreign language methods courses, preservice teachers may acquire their most significant understandings of language teaching. Unfortunately, there have been few studies of these courses. Grosse (1993) offers an initial step in addressing this gap in the research by surveying the content of foreign language methods courses. Her analysis of 157 course syllabi suggests that methods instructors provide a balance of theoretical and practical information. Common themes across the syllabi were language learning theories, teaching techniques, instructional materials, curriculum development, assessment, professionalism, and reflective thinking

and decision-making. In their descriptive reports of specific methods courses, Garfinkel and Sosa (1996), Mitchell and Redmond (1991), and Wilburn (1990) echo these findings.

As Joiner (1993) notes, however, "While program design is important, a good design in and of itself, does not automatically guarantee the goals the designers wish to achieve" (p. 200). The understandings that preservice teachers gain from their teacher education experiences are the ultimate test of methods instruction.

Freeman (1991, 1993) provides one example of a study that investigated the understandings that foreign language teachers gained during methods coursework. He found that methods courses gave teachers a professional discourse that allowed them to think and act in different ways. He argued that the teachers did not simply rename their experiences by means of a newly-acquired professional discourse, but rather made explicit their tacit beliefs and reconstructed their experiences in the classroom.

Language teachers do not, however, only gain knowledge about teaching from methods courses. As Freeman's (1991, 1993) study suggests, teaching experiences provide teachers with the opportunity to reflect on the ideas they have learned in their coursework.

Field Experiences

The literature on the experiences of preservice foreign language teachers during field placements and student teaching reveals the complexity of demands on the beginning teacher. Antonek, McCormick, and Donato (1997) and Kwo (1996) found that beginning teachers have a concern for establishing positive, professional relationships with their students, while Weber and Mitchell (1996) and Johnson (1996) found that student teachers struggle to implement their own ideas about language teaching.

In their analysis of two student teachers' portfolios, Antonek et al. (1997) reported that despite the efforts of teacher educators to ground the preservice teachers in second language acquisition theory, the student teachers did not mention the theories, but "focused instead on interpersonal relationships and effectiveness of activities" (p. 24). Kwo (1996) also found that the beginning teacher in her study was concerned with establishing rapport with learners. The teachers in her study were required to complete an action research project as part of their program. The beginning teacher chose to focus on questioning and soliciting answers from her reticent learners. Kwo concluded that

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the teacher's choice of topic reflected a concern with developing positive relationships with all learners.

Weber and Mitchell (1996) reported that while student teachers tried to adapt to the expectations of others, they also tried to assert their own professional identity. At times, they were disillusioned because their mentors did not meet their expectations for model language teachers. Johnson's (1996) case study of a student teacher in a secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) placement echoes these findings. The student teacher found a gap between her vision of good teaching and the realities of the classroom. She was critical of her two mentors' instructional activities, which she considered either too meaningless or too challenging for the learners.

Summary

The existing research base, albeit limited, indicates that foreign language teacher education programs seek to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to connect theories of language learning with practices in the classroom. Freeman's work concludes that methods courses have an impact on teachers' understandings and their classroom practices by helping them to redefine and reconstruct their experiences. However, preservice teachers may struggle to implement their knowledge if they perceive that their mentors or students are not receptive to changes in routine or technique. In order to avoid conflict and develop positive relationships, the preservice teachers may adopt routines or techniques that have already been established in the classroom, even if these routines or techniques do not match their understandings of how to teach. The present study adds to the existing research base by exploring six preservice teachers' understandings of language teaching and the impact of one teacher education program on that knowledge.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was appropriate for this study because it allowed "an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved"

in the teacher education program (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Given the lack of research on foreign language pedagogical content knowledge and on graduate-level foreign language teacher education programs, this research sought not to confirm hypotheses but rather to explore the phenomenon of learning to teach foreign languages.

Participants

The preservice foreign language teachers who participated in this study were enrolled full-time in a four-quarter Master of Education (M.Ed.) program at a large land-grant university in the Midwest during the 1998-99 school year. They were members of the second cohort to complete the one-year, graduate-level teacher education program. The major changes in the program reflected the recommendations of the Holmes Group, a consortium of education deans, who had published three reports on needed reforms in the teaching profession and in teacher preparation (Holmes Group, 1986, 1990, 1995). The foreign language education faculty had moved its teacher preparation to the graduate level, modified existing courses, participated in the creation of new courses, and created a professional development network of mentors.¹ The preservice teachers completed two methods courses on the teaching of foreign languages in secondary and elementary schools. For their secondary school field experience, the participants were placed with mentor teachers from the professional development network. They worked with their secondary mentors all year. The participants spent five hours per week in the secondary placement for the first two quarters of the program. During the last quarter of the program, they taught full-time in the placement. During the winter quarter, they spent an additional six hours a week teaching and observing in elementary schools, including an immersion school.

The six participants in the study had majored or minored in French, German, or Spanish. None had previous experience teaching his or her language, other than tutoring. Two of the six participants had spent at least one academic year studying or working in the target culture; two others had spent at least one month studying or working in the target culture; the final two had limited experience in the target culture. Five of the participants were women and one was male, which reflected the gender make-up of the M.Ed. cohort. All participants were in their early to mid twenties. Three of the participants were placed in urban high schools and three of the participants were placed

in suburban high schools for their year-long field experiences. Pseudonyms have been used and references to language, placement locations, and unique characteristics have been removed in order to protect their anonymity. Maximum variation sampling was used in order to gain greater heterogeneity among the case participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to gain an insider or emic perspective on the teacher preparation program, the researcher became a participant observer in the preservice teachers' methods courses and field experiences. Ethnographic techniques including observations, interviews, and document analysis were used to understand the participants' experiences in the program and their knowledge of language learning and teaching. The participants were observed during every session of the methods courses at the university in order to discover patterns in their questions and concerns as revealed in class discussions. The participants were observed 11 times during field experiences in elementary schools and student teaching in secondary schools. Post-observation conferences were held following each of the observations. The transcripts of the post-observation conferences were analyzed to determine what knowledge the preservice teacher used in making decisions before, during, and after the lessons. Individual interviews with participants were held during the autumn, winter, and spring quarters; group interviews took place at the end of the winter and spring quarters. Written documents that were collected included 15 reaction papers from methods courses and a final portfolio project for the program for each participant. The project included reflections on videotaped lessons, a position paper on a topic in foreign language education, and a report on a small action research project.

Collection of data from a variety of sources that were intended for different audiences enabled data triangulation. Although an emic analysis necessitated reliance on self-reports from the participants, the researcher's prolonged engagement in the teacher education program and persistent observation of the participants contribute to the trustworthiness of the findings.

The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data, with the primary objective of finding patterns in the data (Merriam, 1998). This method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences, grouping data on similar dimensions, and eventually assigning them to categories. Wing's (1993) five-part defini-

tion of pedagogical content knowledge provided a conceptual framework for considering the participants' understandings of language learning and teaching, but the themes to define each aspect of their pedagogical content knowledge emerged from the data. Although the six preservice teachers did not have identical experiences or understandings, the goal of the data analysis was to determine the experiences and understandings that they shared.

Findings

Understandings about how to teach a foreign language and how to teach it to a particular group of learners were aspects of foreign language pedagogical content knowledge that the participants discussed frequently in their conversations in methods courses, in their post-observation conferences, and in their writings for the program. According to the participants, teaching a foreign language involved communicating in the target language as much as possible, using materials designed for native speakers, establishing meaningful contexts for language use, and providing both structured and open-ended activities for language practice. The participants credited the methods course with introducing them to these ideas and they acknowledged the importance of field experiences for giving them practical experience with the ideas. Nevertheless, the participants reported that implementing the knowledge they gained in methods courses with particular groups of learners could prove challenging, given the age of the learners, the expectations of the learners, and the participants' role as interns.

Understanding How to Teach a Foreign Language

During the M.Ed. program, the preservice teachers completed methods courses on teaching foreign languages in secondary and elementary schools. While the preservice teachers were enrolled in the methods courses, they were also responsible for observing their mentor teachers

and leading short lessons in their field placements. In the spring, they taught full-time in their secondary schools. Although the participants did not have identical perspectives or experiences, they shared some understandings about how to teach languages. Four of the common themes in their discussions and writings were the importance of target language use, authentic materials, contextualization, and sequencing of activities in the foreign language lesson. The participants described how the methods courses and the concomitant field experiences helped them to develop these understandings.

Providing preservice teachers with exposure to current theories and practices in teaching foreign languages was a primary focus of the methods instructors in the M.Ed. program. In addition to discussing and reading about techniques and ideas in the methods courses, the preservice teachers created and presented lesson and unit plans, observed demonstration lessons by the methods instructors and mentor teachers, and visited model teachers in the field as a class. Although the participants certainly expected to receive instruction on lesson planning and ideas for activities in the methods courses, they indicated their initial surprise at the complexity of the teaching task.

Last fall's methods class was a huge contribution [to my understanding of how to teach languages]. That was the first time I got information about what teaching is and got ideas and just really thought about it. It just really amazes me. Like I said once, last fall, when I was writing my letter of intent to get into the education school and we had to explain [...] "why I want to be a teacher" or something. [...] I think I probably wrote something to the effect that I was competent in the language. I don't know. "I can explain it well to others." So I thought I would make a good teacher. But of course, that's important, but that's not what it's about. — Laura

I'm really not sure if I knew what to expect [from the fall methods course]. I really feel like without this class I would have been lost in student teaching. Even the mini-lessons and observing that we did this quarter. I think [the methods class] was very helpful for that reason. [...] I don't think I knew that it would be so... I don't know what the word is... so professional maybe or so many different techniques, I guess. Just looking at it from the student point of view, I didn't realize that there would be so much to it. — Susan

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“Whatever I wrote, I had no clue. I explained why I wanted to be a teacher, but I didn’t know what it meant.”

I’ve been *taught* to do contextualized activities; I’ve been *taught* to get kids up and involved and I’ve been *taught* to do a lot of partner work and I’ve been *taught* to do all these different things. [...] All of the stuff, I had no idea any of this stuff I’d be learning. Like everything was totally brand new and not a shock, but everything was just new information that was just being fed to me and fed to me and fed to me. I would never have thought of any of that stuff. I initially thought [language teaching] was just being in a classroom and, “Here’s what you have to teach.” — Rachael

Laura, Susan, and Rachael described the participants’ lack of awareness of what was involved in teaching foreign languages until they took the methods courses. Despite their years as successful language learners, they did not “realize that there would be so much to it,” as Susan said. They credited the methods courses with introducing them to the field of foreign language education and, as Rachael outlined, with teaching them explicitly how to teach.

Observing and teaching in their field placements gave the preservice teachers experience in implementing and evaluating the ideas they had gained in methods courses.

A lot of times, we learn these things in the methods class and I’m like, “Does that really work? Are they going to do this?” During my teaching that I did these past two weeks, the listening [activity that one of the guest speakers modeled], I thought, “They are not going to fall for standing up and sitting down when they hear the word [they have on their card].” I had some complainers, of course. “What the heck does this have to do with anything?” But it worked. — Heather

No matter how much you read, no matter what, doing it is the only way. Not the only way, but the main way, what all your decisions are going to be based on. And just learning from those experiences themselves. Not just learning from books, but learning what worked and what didn’t. — Rachael

I spent most of my time being a teacher aide in [the elementary school placement]. So when I would read the

books and the articles [for methods class], I would think, “How would this be if I were a foreign language... like a FLES teacher moving from class to class, there every day?” I tried thinking of it as that. And I would see, “Yes, I can make connections there.” That’s what’s really helpful about the whole program is being in a setting, reading about it, learning about it, and just being able to make the comparisons, connections. It’s intense, but it all fits together. It really does. — Margy

The participants described the field experiences as an opportunity to connect the explicit learning from the methods course with what would “work” in actual classrooms. Readings and discussions were not sufficient to convince the preservice teachers of the value of particular theories or techniques. Observing and experimenting in their placement settings contributed to their understandings of how to teach by validating some of the ideas they learned in methods courses.

Use of the target language. Using the foreign language as the language of instruction was identified in the methods courses as a crucial component in teaching languages. Demonstration lessons by the methods instructors were conducted exclusively in a target language and the preservice teachers presented their own lesson plans in their target languages. Throughout the program, the participants maintained their commitment to target language use.

When teaching a foreign language, I feel that it is essential to use the language as much as possible. Students will then be able to recognize that it is important to speak the language as well as to do other assigned activities. When a teacher follows these rules, the students are more likely to respond positively to staying in the target language. — Heather

The goal of the foreign language classroom should be to prepare students to communicate with other [target language] speakers in real-life situations. [The target language] should be the primary language of the classroom whenever possible to expose students to as many hours of input in the language as possible. — Susan

Another thing that I learned during this [first] quarter is the importance of teaching in the target language. I am a big believer in using the target language as much as possible. Too often, I believe that we do not teach in the target language because we are afraid that students need to understand everything that is said and that they will

subsequently become frustrated and “tune out.” Although this is a valid concern, it seems that teachers could bring the students on board by better explaining the need to get comprehensible input in the target language. — Frank

According to Heather, Susan, and Frank, consistently using the target language provided learners with sufficient input and emphasized the value of oral communication skills. It is worth noting that Frank and Heather suggested that learners may need some convincing of the importance of using the target language. They emphasized the importance of establishing expectations for target language use in order to ensure participation.

The preservice teachers’ commitment to using the target language was reinforced by observations and experiences in the field.

I can really see how [staying in the target language is] important, especially when I was observing different teachers here at this school. I’m kind of thinking about that as I’m teaching. Just the difference it makes when a teacher uses more target language. I know that’s really beneficial. I mean I’ve seen it. Just that two different level I classes could be so different and I’m sure it’s because of the target language use. — Susan

I think it’s important to keep talking in the target language, so that they become used to it. Once you switch [to English and] keep switching, then there’s no reason to stay in it. They’re just going to assume that you’re going to switch back. I observed a teacher and she spoke all in French. This is at the high school level and then she asked permission to speak in English [to clarify]. Then of course, [the students] said, “Yes.” But they had to have been paying attention to really understand what she was saying. — Margy

The big learning [from my elementary field experiences] would be [...] as far as me using the target language. I noticed when I use [the target language], they tend to use [the language] or try to. Or if they don’t know how to say it, they ask and they repeat it. — Heather

The participants were critical of teachers if they code-switched frequently from the target language to the native language. Susan and Margy noted that code-switching encouraged learners to rely on their native language and negatively affected learners’ proficiency. On the other hand, if the target language were used more consistently, the learners would have greater

proficiency, would be more attentive, and would participate more, according to Susan, Margy, and Heather, respectively.

Use of authentic materials. In the methods courses, the participants were encouraged to use authentic materials, which had been created by and for native speakers of the language. Although they were encouraged to use authentic materials in all of their lesson plans, they were required to include at least one example of authentic material in their model unit plans. The preservice teachers indicated their commitment to finding and using authentic materials in their teaching.

Authentic materials can and should play an important role in providing students with “real” input. This input provides the cultural and linguistic information that assists students in learning the target language. These materials can also motivate students by providing situations and topics that the students might encounter in real language use. — Susan

In order to create meaning and excitement about a language, it is necessary for a teacher to supplement the textbooks with additional materials. While there may be pictures and stories in a text, it is rare that they create a large amount of meaning for the students. Teachers need to bring in authentic material with which they can play games, have skits, and basically just get the students familiar with realia from the culture. By doing this, students will realize that the class is more than just a period in their schedule. — Margy

I would think for foreign language teachers especially, technology will be so important to us even in simple forms like TV, videos, tape recorders, etc. Because unless we have foreign exchange students speaking our target language to rely on, those will be our only sources of authentic materials for listening comprehension and visual culture. — Laura

Authentic materials, which included everything from websites to realia, were valued by the participants for their educational and motivational characteristics. Susan and Laura described authentic materials as providing learners with an opportunity to see language used in context and to observe daily life in the target countries. Susan and Margy noted that authentic materials have the potential to

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make language use more meaningful and exciting, by showing how language is used in particular situations. Without visual and/or auditory resources, the participants implied that language learners would not fully understand cultural and linguistic practices.

The participants’ experiences in their field placements supported their commitment to using authentic materials.

This week we learned weather for [the level I class], so I pulled off some weather reports from the Internet from [a target country]. We learned Celsius and Fahrenheit. They thought it was really cool. They hear, “Oh yeah, in Europe they use Celsius,” but when they see it, they’re like, “Ooh! They really do!” Those are the things they remember, too, you know? — Laura

The children’s eyes light up when they are given some sort of authentic materials. They were learning the days of the week and the months of the year and they were given sections out of calendar from [the target culture]. They all wanted to know which days were their saint days and noticed the differences in that calendar from the one they use in their own school. — Heather

I used an authentic song to teach a grammatical point. The students were excited to hear the music, and consequently, they were willing to learn the grammar. — Margy

Positive experiences in the field with using authentic materials convinced Laura, Heather, and Margy of the educational importance and motivational possibilities of authentic materials. Authentic materials enabled the participants to make their learners’ “eyes light up,” to make their learners “willing to learn grammar,” and to help their learners “remember.” The participants credited the authentic materials with helping them to catch learners’ attention and to show learners cultural practices and language use.

Contextualization of language use. In their lesson and unit plans, the preservice teachers were evaluated by the methods instructors and their peers on the provision of a context for every activity. The participants described explicit instruction on contextualization as an important lesson in the autumn methods course.

Although we have only been meeting as a class for a week, I have learned a great deal of information. My thoughts on foreign language teaching have remained the same, but now I have evidence and support of them. I truly believe in putting the information in a context. If students can understand

the whole picture, or put meaning into the lesson, they are more likely to learn it. — Margy

[One of the] things I discovered about the field of foreign language education [during the first quarter of the program is] the importance of presenting language in context. The presentation, practice, and production elements of language teaching should all be placed in a context from which students can gain an overall understanding of meaning. Likewise, this should facilitate them making connections with other ideas and language items likely to be encountered in the target culture. — Frank

I don’t think that before I started this [methods] class I knew about contextualizing things. Just the idea of contextualizing things will really affect the way I would present information. Without this class, I hope I wouldn’t have just gone to the book, but a lot of my teachers did. — Susan

Margy’s comment suggests that contextualization was a concept that she understood implicitly from her experiences as a language learner. The methods course helped to make her understanding explicit. Frank and Susan, on the other hand, described contextualization as an important concept that they had learned in the autumn methods course. Their comments imply that their lesson planning was affected by their understanding of the importance of contextualization. All three participants, therefore, acknowledged the methods course as the source of their understanding that teachers must create contexts for language use in order to make language meaningful for learners.

Field experiences provided the preservice teachers with additional practice in creating contextualized activities and more evidence of the importance of doing so.

[In deciding how to introduce a dialogue,] I thought, “How am I going to put this into context?” So I had them raise their hands: “Who likes to go to a dance?” “Who’s a good dancer?” [...] That gets them thinking. They don’t know why they’re thinking this, but that gets them thinking. Then they paid attention. I’m not any rocket scientist of a teacher but I have it so drilled into my head to put things in context, I have to do it. — Margy

In this particular lesson I was reintroducing my third year [students] to the different uses of [two past tenses] through the use of a modern fairy tale. I chose [a book that offered a modern re-telling of a fairy tale] as an interest-

“...sequencing activities was a skill that the participants ... had to develop.”

ing way of both reexamining and illustrating the two tenses we were going to work with. [...] I thought that it would be a good primer for the students, as they would later be coming up with their own versions of a fairy tale. — Frank

As Margy and Frank suggested, the preservice teachers viewed the contextualization of grammatical structures or vocabulary as a means of creating learner interest in the material and of activating learners' knowledge of a given situation or text type. Although Margy was introducing new material and Frank was reviewing previously learned material, both described their lessons as successful.

Sequencing of activities. In the lesson and unit plans that the participants wrote for the methods course, they were required to sequence activities from structured practice of thematic vocabulary or grammatical constructions to more creative and integrated use of the vocabulary or grammar. The methods instructors used the terms skill-getting and skill-using to distinguish these two types of activities. Whereas skill-getting activities involved the practice of vocabulary and grammar in a controlled, highly structured way, skill-using activities required learners to use the vocabulary and/or grammar in a more open-ended way, which was more challenging and more personally meaningful.

By the end of the first quarter of the program, the preservice teachers had created and presented a few lesson plans in the methods course and in their field placements.

Before I entered the program I had no clue how you write a lesson plan. Just knowing what order to put the 45 minutes in. That's become very meaningful to me because now I know what I'm trying to do. Not that I'm that good at it, but I know how to do it. — Laura

It was definitely helpful to have the samples of the lesson plans that we did [in the fall methods course]. When I went to do the mini-lesson plans at the school, even though I didn't have to use those, I found myself sticking with those a lot because it was familiar. [The methods instructor] gave us a lot of points to check, like “Is this going from skill-getting to skill-using?” That type of thing is helpful because after it's drilled into your head so many times, you check automatically.” — Susan

As the quotations above suggest, sequencing activities was a skill that the participants, including Laura and Susan, had to develop. By the end of the quarter, Laura noted that she understood what she was supposed to do, even though she was unsure of her ability. Likewise, Susan relied on her approved lesson plans in her first teaching experiences in her field placement because they were “familiar” and they had been checked by the methods instructor. Although Susan relied on these approved lessons in her first teaching experiences, she suggested that sequencing activities was becoming more automatic for her.

The preservice teachers gained more experience and confidence in their lesson planning as they taught in their field placements. By the end of their student teaching, they were better able to evaluate their sequencing of instruction.

When we introduced the conditional and the future and then when we did the vocabulary, what I did was I started out doing them separately. Just two totally different things. Then throughout the class time, I started to intertwine them. Through speech, using the conditional and future plus the vocabulary. Then we do activities with vocabulary, then with the conditional, whatever. Then one day, I assign, “You have to do this assignment. It's a writing assignment. I want you to use all the vocabulary you can. What will life be like in the year 2020?” And to use the future. And they incorporated — we're learning stores and dressing rooms and how you ask for help. And some of those kids wrote great stuff: “In the year 2020, there will be no cash registers. Everything will be by computers. The store attendants will come to your house and sell you stuff.” It was really good. — Heather

I think that I need to break down activities a little more and provide some stages where students can see more examples and have more opportunities to work on the parts of a project before putting it all together. I have a tendency to model something and then to say, “Okay, now it's your turn.” Creativity involves time. In my excitement to get to the final product I think that I skip necessary steps. — Frank

The quotations above offer two examples of the participants' experiences with sequencing instruction. Heather described a positive experience in sequencing activities from those that had a narrow focus on shopping expressions or future and conditional formation to those that required the integration of the vocabulary and grammar into more com-

plex speaking and writing tasks. Frank reflected on an activity with which he was not completely satisfied. He noted that he needed to “break down activities a little more” before expecting a “final product.” Although Heather and Frank described varying levels of success, their comments suggested that the preservice teachers had gained confidence in sequencing activities and in evaluating that sequencing during their field placements.

Summary. During the teacher education program, the participants identified key aspects of how to teach a foreign language. Target language use, authentic materials use, provision of context, and skill-getting and skill-using activities were four aspects that the participants considered important in teaching languages. In their methods courses, the participants were exposed to these ideas in readings, demonstrations, and discussions. They practiced the incorporation of these ideas in creating lesson and unit plans. In their field experiences, they continued to reflect on the importance of these ideas and to refine their abilities to use them.

Understanding How Classroom Contexts Affect Language Teaching

During the yearlong M.Ed. program, the participants taught in three different field placements, two elementary, and one secondary. Although their experiences were shaped by different groups of learners and at least three mentor teachers, they shared some insights on the impact of classroom contexts on foreign language teaching. Common themes emerged in their discussions of their experiences, despite varying degrees of success and frustration in working with particular mentors or learners. Three of these themes were the impact of learners' age on receptivity to language learning, the impact of learners' expectations for the language class on receptivity to language learning, and the impact of their own position as interns on their teaching decisions. The receptivity of the learners in their classes and their role as interns affected their decisions as language teachers.

Age of learners. As noted previously, the participants spent three quarters in their secondary school field placements and one quarter in two different elementary

“The receptivity of the learners in their classes and their role as interns affected their decisions as language teachers.”

school field placements. During the autumn and winter quarters, the primary role of the participants in their secondary school placements was that of an observer. They taught only a limited number of short lessons at the end of the fall quarter. For five weeks of the winter quarter, they observed and taught short lessons in an established elementary immersion school. For the other five weeks of the quarter, they worked with an established exploratory language program or they created one for an elementary school class. During the spring quarter, they were full-time student teachers in their secondary placements.

In reflecting on their experiences in their field placements, the participants contrasted the receptivity of the different age groups.

I spoke [the target language] for most of the discussion, with motions as cues. The [elementary] students responded to this well and tried to guess what I was saying. After a few guesses, one student usually figured out the meaning. This process showed me that younger children are not as quick to put up an affective filter because of their lack of comprehension. Instead of getting frustrated and giving up, these students were trying to discover the meaning on their own. — Margy

[High school students will] say, “This took too long. We should have...” High school students will say that. [...] “We don’t speak [the target language]. Could you please speak English?” Kids tell me that. Anyway, [high school is] a different story, a different world. — Heather

We’ve talked about how [when you are a younger child] that’s your language-learning age. You’re still learning English. It just comes more natural because you don’t worry about the rules or the endings. The agreements and things like that. You just learn it, by learning to communicate. And then you go back and that’s when you break it down. “Oh, that’s why I say this,” or whatever. I think there’s so much less stress when you’re younger. They don’t care. They think it’s cool. They’re so much more excited about it. When you’re in high school, there’s more fear of that being wrong and not doing it correctly and those types of things. — Rachael

I guess I have learned a lot about this age group [high school students] as far as how self-conscious they really are and how that does basically keep them very quiet, in many cases. It’s hard to kind of put them on the spot and say, “Okay. Time to perform. Tell me what you know,” in an individual

“The problem I seem to have with communicative activities is that only a few of the students will participate...”

way. Obviously, it changes group to group. Just how age, their self-perception, and their whole way of looking at the world just affects the way they learn. — Frank

As Margy and Rachael noted, the participants reported that their elementary school students, even those who had no background in the foreign language, were more open to language learning than older learners. Younger learners were perceived as having an advantage because of their natural readiness and willingness to learn languages. High school students, on the other hand, were described as being more critical and self-conscious. Heather and Frank found their high school students less open to target language use by the teacher and more reticent to produce it themselves. Thus, teaching older learners presented a greater challenge for the preservice teachers. The participants perceived older learners as less receptive to taking risks with the language and less likely to give positive feedback to their teachers.

Learners’ expectations of the foreign language class. When the preservice teachers took over the teaching responsibilities in their secondary field placements during the spring quarter, their mentor teachers had been the primary language teachers for the two preceding quarters. Although the preservice teachers had observed weekly in the classrooms and had taught a few short lessons, the mentors had established the expectations and routines for the language class. The participants entered their field placements with their own ideas about how to teach, but they described different levels of success in implementing those ideas.

Margy and Susan encountered resistance when they tried to use the target language more than their mentors did.

[My high school students] really don’t understand [the target language] very well. In fact, I started off in [the language]. I didn’t feel confident to continue in [it], nor did I think they would comprehend me, so I switched right back to English, which I’m not proud of, but I really didn’t have much of a choice. — Margy

The first lesson that I did when I spoke in [the target language], [my mentor] said, “Oh, it’s not going to work. You have to use more English.” And I said,

“I can’t.” And she said, “Well, you have to.” — Susan

On the other hand, Rachael and Heather described greater success in classrooms where different expectations for language use had been established.

With the group of [level IV] students we have at [my high school placement], they are at a level where, much to my surprise, they often times *do* use the language communicatively on their own. As soon as they walk in the room they are trained, and at the same time excited, to be using, speaking, and listening in the target language...successfully! — Rachael

Not once did I ever use a word of English [at the immersion school]. Not once. But then my high school, yeah. Because you knew that you couldn’t speak English at the immersion school. But I think if I would have gone into my high school and my teacher was speaking Spanish the whole time then I would have tried. — Heather

In reflecting on the use of the target language in their field placements, the participants described the importance of the expectations that had already been set in the classroom. Although Margy and Susan noted their efforts to use the target language in their secondary placements, they experienced difficulty because of the learners’ expectations for language use. Like Heather and Rachael, the participants reported more consistent language use when learners were accustomed to greater target language use.

The impact of expectations was not limited, however, to target language use. For example, Laura noted that the students who were taught by one of her mentors responded differently to certain types of activities. In discussing the results of a test she had given to these students, she noted that the class did well on the part of the test that focused on discrete-point grammar.

[My] students have been trained to know the article and the plural endings, which sometimes you might have like five or six different endings in one set of vocabulary words. They do really well on that because [the one mentor teacher has] always stressed that as being really important. — Laura

In reflecting on a videotaped activity with the same mentor’s class, she noted less success when she asked the students to use vocabulary in an oral exchange.

The problem I seem to have with communicative activities is that only a few of the students will participate, once given the chance to sit next to their

friends and speak! Most of the students do the activity in English, as you can see from this video segment, if they are performing the exercise at all. I often wonder if it isn't better to have them write sentences instead of trying to communicate with each other. On the other hand, perhaps many of them did not do the activity correctly, because my directions were not clear enough. This group is not used to communicative activities, so they may need more explicit instructions. — Laura

In the first quote, Laura noted that the students did well on test items that matched their expectations for language tests. In the second quote, however, she described the challenge of creating a classroom exercise with a more communicative focus. While attributing part of her difficulties to her lack of modeling and the students' social nature, she also cited their lack of experience with more open-ended activities. She wondered if she should avoid doing oral communicative work with these students because of their lack of receptivity. In effect, Laura described her students' success or lack of success as somewhat dependent on what they were "used to" doing in the language class.

Like Laura, Heather and Frank expressed concern that learners would be less receptive to activities or routines that differed from those established by their mentor teachers.

When I read about [fantasy experiences], I began to ask myself if the students I have would actually participate in this sort of activity (simulation of the trips). I could not give myself an answer! I think that it is a good idea, but how do you get the students to participate if they do not want to? I guess that the classes that I have now are already established and have been because of the teacher. When I get my own class and room, if I begin with these sorts of activities and follow through with them throughout the year, maybe they will begin to see the relevance of it. Now, the students in the schools that I am in are so set in to a certain routine that I think it would be hard for me to do something like this; especially only in the ten weeks that I will be student teaching. I can try, but what do I do if it is a flop? — Heather

I have been discouraged at the lack of apparent progress I see the students making. There are a few who are doing quite well and are moving beyond the material presented, but the majority of students do not seem to be getting it. This might be due to a number of factors, but I keep wondering about the role a teacher's expectations plays in

learning. I must preface this by saying that my expectations might be unrealistic, but I am not quite sure that my mentor teacher's expectations of students are high enough. [My mentor] has said this to me on a few occasions herself. I find her lessons and exercises to be very good. The problem is that many of the students are not always cooperative when it comes to volunteering answers or completing written and oral activities. This I believe is due, in part, to the fact that she gives students an extra chance they may not deserve. Likewise, when she asks students to answer questions, some tend not to participate because they know they can get away with it. This leads me to wonder what teaching will be like in the spring and what sort of expectations I should have for the class. — Frank

Heather and Frank described the challenge of implementing activities and routines to which the learners were unaccustomed. Heather noted her lack of confidence in introducing a new activity whereas Frank described his concern about the level of participation he might encounter in his classes. Both seemed hesitant to challenge the existing expectations in their field placements, even if they were dissatisfied with those expectations. The learners' expectations in a given foreign language class were perceived by the participants as potentially limiting them from teaching according to their theoretical and practical understandings.

Role of intern. Despite their stated commitments to certain aspects of language teaching, the participants had little experience in teaching languages and limited contact with their placement students when they first taught in their field placements. The participants described how their inexperience in teaching foreign languages and their desire for success in their field experiences sometimes overwhelmed their understandings of how to teach.

At first, the first couple of things I did, [contextualization of language use] never even crossed my mind. Just so nervous, just wanted the sentences to be correct. I just did not think about it and then it just clicked in my head: "Oh, it would be really neat if I made these six sentences into a story about the same person." It's not that I'd forgotten it. It's just that in the beginning of things, you're just not worried about all that stuff. You're worried about hav-

"I was terrified. I was like, 'Oh my gosh. I have to teach these people.'"

ing to get up in front of the kids and say all the right things and do all the right things. — Rachael

In preparing for [my first teaching experiences in my secondary placement], I have been trying to come up with interesting activities to present to my class. Some of the activities in the book seem so dry that I don't even want to attempt them because I am sure that they won't be received well. I would rather start out my teaching at [the school] with interesting activities that will make the students look forward to the times when I teach. — Susan

My students, I don't know, I was afraid at first because it was so different and where I'm from, it was a whole different ballgame. [...] I was terrified. I was like, "Oh my gosh. I have to teach these people." I think it was the greatest thing to be there from the beginning [of the school year] because you got to know them. I had such a good rapport with my students. — Heather

Wanting to make a good first impression with students seemed to be a major concern for the participants. Rachael noted that she was too anxious in the first days of student teaching to think about contextualizing the teaching of specific grammar points. Susan described her primary focus on providing exciting lessons in her initial contact with the students in her field placement so that they would accept and appreciate her teaching. Like Rachael and Susan, Heather was concerned with establishing rapport with her students, even though they intimidated her initially. She described the yearlong placement an important feature of the program because it allowed her time to develop rapport.

Summary. The participants entered their field placements with ideas about how foreign languages should be taught. They experienced varying degrees of success in implementing those ideas, however. According to the participants, the teaching context either limited or enabled their teaching decisions. They perceived differences in learners' receptivity to their teaching depending on learners' ages and learners' expectations for the language class. Younger learners were perceived as being more developmentally ready and more willing to learn than older learners. The self-consciousness and critical nature of older learners made teaching them more challenging. A lack of congruence between the preservice teachers' ideals for the language class and learners' expectations for the language class also contributed to the challenge of teaching in certain field placements. The participants described learners' expectations for the class as being based on the routines that mentor teachers had

established. Furthermore, the participants' role as interns in the placement affected their teaching because they were concerned to have positive experiences in their field placements.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest implications for the preparation and continued professional development of beginning foreign language teachers. Because this study focused on six preservice teachers in one teacher preparation program, the findings and resulting implications represent tentative conclusions. Nevertheless, the findings corroborate and flesh out some of the previous research on foreign and second language teacher education.

Teacher Education Programs

Educational reform groups, such as the Holmes Group, Holmes Partnership, and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, have advocated yearlong internships to provide extended practice teaching that is tightly connected to coursework. As a member of the Holmes Partnership, the university in the present study had called on its faculty to redesign their teacher preparation programs to encourage greater coherence between methods course work and field experiences. Thus, the preservice foreign language teachers in the M.Ed. cohort were assigned to observe and student teach in their secondary placements for the entire school year. They spent additional hours in two elementary school placements during the winter quarter when they were taking a methods course that focused on early language learning.

The data on the participants' understandings of how to teach suggest that the participants gained knowledge about how to teach in the methods course and implemented that knowledge in their field experiences, either during observations of other teachers or during their own teaching. The participants credited the methods course with giving them ideas for teaching languages and providing practice in implementing those ideas. Despite their years as language learners, the participants indicated a lack of awareness, prior to entering the program, of the complexity of

“Despite their years as language learners, the participants indicated a lack of awareness, prior to entering the program, of the complexity of language teaching.”

language teaching. In the methods courses, they wrote and presented lesson plans that required them to demonstrate the consistent use of the target language, the use of authentic materials, the contextualization of language use, and the provision of skill-getting and skill-using activities. In their field experiences, they strengthened their commitment to these aspects of language teaching through their observations and their teaching experiences.

Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon (1998) note that conceptually coherent programs could have positive effects on preservice teachers' beliefs. The findings on the preservice teachers' understandings of how to teach support this notion. The preservice teachers reflected on the validity of the theories and practices they had discussed and practiced in methods courses while observing and teaching in their field experiences.

It is important to note, however, that the methods courses were not devoted only to discussions of current theories and best practices in language teaching. The methods instructors modeled lesson plans and the preservice teachers wrote lesson and unit plans to meet certain requirements. Through these demonstrations and assignments, the participants gained practical experience in implementing theory. Although this study considers only one example of a foreign language teacher education program, it suggests the importance of methods course work in the development of preservice teachers' understandings of the theory and practice of foreign language education. Rather than assuming that preservice teachers gain sufficient practical knowledge through field experiences, university faculty need to be prepared to serve not only as transmitters of theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning but also as models of current best practices in teaching and learning.

Role of Field Experiences

A major change in the preparation of preservice teachers is the movement toward yearlong internships with mentors who have entered into a special partnership with the teacher preparation program. The six preservice teachers in this study discussed how their contexts of teaching affected how they taught. The receptivity of learners, based on their age and their expectations for the foreign language class, and the preservice teachers' own status as interns had an impact on the participants' confidence to implement their understandings of how to teach.

The focus of the preservice teachers in this study on issues in their field placements implies that teacher educators need to consider to a greater extent the impact

“Case studies of particular adolescents could also merit consideration in methods courses devoted to teaching foreign languages in secondary schools as the participants in this study seemed to find teaching secondary learners a particular challenge.”

of internship placements on preservice teacher learning. As Putnam and Borko (2000) note in their discussion of situated cognition, the interactions of preservice teachers with students and mentors affect what and how they learn. The preservice teachers' concern for establishing rapport coupled with their concerns for learner receptivity raises questions about how consistently preservice teachers will apply ideas gained in methods courses if those ideas do not receive positive reactions from learners and mentors. The present study did not investigate how the preservice teachers taught in their field placements. The findings suggest, however, that the participants had difficulty implementing their understandings about how to teach in field experiences that did not support current theories or best practices in language teaching.

Teacher educators may address some of the challenges of specific classroom contexts by incorporating greater case study in methods courses. Preservice teachers may introduce the problems they are experiencing either in written form or by means of videotaped lessons. Ways of responding to a given situation may be brainstormed and role-played by the preservice teachers, under the guidance of the methods instructor or an experienced language teacher. Case studies of particular adolescents could also merit consideration in methods courses devoted to teaching foreign languages in secondary schools as the participants in this study seemed to find teaching secondary learners a particular challenge. The gap between the idealized goals for the language classroom and the contextual constraints perceived by preservice teachers could be addressed in specific, realistic ways that will empower interns to make minor, but important, changes in their contexts.

Although this study did not explore the collaboration among mentor teachers, university faculty, and preservice teachers in the teacher education program, the participants' focus on learners' expectations for the language classroom and the

participants' status as interns suggests the crucial role of mentor teachers in supporting preservice teachers' understandings of how to teach. Presumably, learners' expectations for the foreign language class are based on experiences with mentor teachers and these same expectations are communicated explicitly or implicitly to preservice teachers. If the learners in a given foreign language class have different expectations for the class than the preservice teacher, these differences could reflect differences in the understandings of how to teach between mentors and methods instructors.

It is important to note, however, that the participants in this study did not describe consistent problems with learner expectations across all field experiences and with all mentors. The mismatch between how the participants were taught to teach and what they experienced in the field, then, was not systemic. Nevertheless, the participants' concerns for implementing their understandings in certain field placements do suggest the need for greater communication between mentor teachers and university faculty about current theories and best practices in foreign language education.

Ideally, in the creation of professional development schools or networks, school and university faculty work collaboratively to construct and communicate shared understandings of how to teach foreign languages. This aspect of the professional development school or network is crucial to the coherence of the teacher education program. Without mentors who can provide field experience settings that allow preservice teachers to explore their learnings from the methods courses, the benefits of internship in professional development schools or networks disappear (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Development of Pedagogical Content Knowledge

The research participants' knowledge of how to teach was somewhat congruent with current thought in the field. The participants outlined the need for teachers to provide a language-rich environment in which learners are guided to use the foreign language to express their own meanings and to gain information from others and from authentic texts. On the other hand, the findings also revealed their position as novice teachers. A lack of learner receptivity to their lessons, whether attributed to learners' age or learners' expectations for the foreign language class, coupled with the preservice teachers' status as interns, seemed to challenge at times the preservice teachers' confidence in their understandings of how to teach.

The preservice teachers' focus on issues in their immediate teaching context is probably not surprising to teacher educators. Nevertheless, one of the purposes of a graduate-level teacher preparation program is to provide a base in both the theoretical and practical considerations of teaching. The tendency of novice teachers to focus on the immediate demands of the classroom raises questions about how foreign language teacher educators could encourage them to examine the larger questions of the profession.

It could be unrealistic to expect a one-year program to provide more than a base of understanding of the theory and practice of teaching and learning foreign languages. The development of preservice teachers' pedagogical content knowledge is limited by time, experience, and context. These limits suggest a need for continued support for the professional development of beginning teachers during their first years as full-time teachers. Although their participation will be less intensive than in the preservice years, colleges of education could support professional development projects that focus on the continued development of the specialized knowledge of language teaching and learning and its implementation in a variety of contexts of learning. A coherent series of professional dialogues could take the form of guided on-line discussions, additional course work, or periodic workshops.

Conclusion

The task of preparing teachers for foreign language classrooms is a complex responsibility. Through methods courses and concurrent field experiences, teacher educators have an opportunity to ground preservice teachers in the theory and practice of foreign language education. They must recognize, however, that while preservice teachers need authentic classroom experiences, field placements seldom represent idealized language learning situations. Learners and mentors have expectations for the foreign language class that novice teachers cannot completely change. Preservice teachers are focused not only on gaining expertise in their field experiences, but also on developing positive relationships with the students in their classes. In order to function successfully in their internships, therefore, preservice foreign language teachers could choose to compromise some of their theoretical and practical understandings of language teaching. Although they may leave the university teacher preparation program with a base of foreign language pedagogical content knowledge, preservice foreign language teachers need continued support in order

to deepen their understandings of how to teach specific groups of learners.

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¹ The Holmes Group (1986, 1990) recommended the creation of professional development schools (PDSs) to improve preservice teacher preparation and inservice teacher development. A PDS was a school that had entered a partnership with a university for the purpose of educating preservice teachers, providing professional development for experienced teachers, and conducting research on teaching and learning. Unlike laboratory schools, PDSs were existing schools. Because there were more preservice foreign language teachers in the average cohort than there were foreign language mentors at a given school site, the M.Ed. adviser created a network of experienced foreign language teachers from schools in the metropolitan area. These teachers served as the mentors for the cohort members and some participated in methods courses as guest speakers.