It works in theory, but not in practice. (?? . . . !!!)[1]

By Gerardo Ochoa [2]

How many times have you heard the expression "It works in theory, but not in practice"? This statement implies a generalised view of theory and practice as being "divorced". Teachers often argue that theoretical principles are not always useful in the classroom because they do not seem to match what happens there; on the other hand, theoreticians claim that such principles should work in the classroom and, if they do not, it is because teachers fail to apply them correctly. Therefore, theoreticians and teachers may sometimes find ourselves involved in an "intellectual confrontation", the former claiming that the application of their principles is essential for successful teaching and learning to take place, and the latter believing that we can perfectly teach without the help of theory.

Such assumptions, besides being extremely harmful for the teaching and learning processes, are unfounded. Theory is implicit in any teaching activity; i.e., everything teachers do in the classroom is influenced by a number of assumptions about teaching and learning. In other words, the procedures we follow in our classrooms conform to our own beliefs about the learning process; we do what we believe will work, either because we have done it successfully before or because we have read, heard or seen how it works. In any case, such beliefs constitute the teachers' own theories of language teaching, as defined by different academics such as Richards (1990), who regards theory as 'general principles that account for effective teaching' or Widdowson (1990) who defines it as 'a set of research findings which provide insights and principles of procedure'.

And those assumptions may have resulted either from formal research findings, from previous teaching experiences, or from both. Theoretical principles do not necessarily have to be drawn from formal research (i.e., from experiments done under controlled circumstances). They can also derive from the teachers' previous experiences in our own classrooms; that is, from practice. In short, what we do in the classroom is based on our own beliefs about teaching and learning (i.e., our theories) and, in a similar way, such beliefs are influenced and modified by our teaching practice.

The relationship between practice and theory is, then, a cyclical one. They are interdependent, one informing and shaping the other all the time. What works in theory can work in practice, just not in everybody's practice. What happens is that the applicability of a certain principle in different classrooms depends on contextual variables and on the extent to which those variables can be controlled, as well as on the degree to which the principle can be adapted to specific constraints. And it is the teachers who are best placed to decide whether a certain principle is valid in our teaching context or not.

That is why our job goes far beyond the limits of the simple application of

[1] This is a refereed paper.
[2] Gerardo Ochoa: M.A. in TESOL, by the University of London Institute of Education. Full-time teacher at the Autonomous University of Aguascalientes. He can be reached by fax at (8) 333-5996 or e-mail at qtla@n11.telmex.net.mx

methods and techniques taken form textbooks or learned by imitation. The close relationship between theory and practice puts us in a privileged position, we have the opportunity to test the validity of theoretical principles empirically in our own classrooms. And in order to carry out this validation process, we need to develop a critical attitude towards the different methods, activities and techniques we put into use. We should be capable of finding the relationship between such procedures and the principles behind them (drawn either from formal research or from the syllabus designer's, the textbook writer's or the teacher's experience) so as to evaluate their effectiveness in our classrooms. As Widdowson (op. cit.) suggests, research from outside cannot provide solutions to particular situations. It can only serve as a source of ideas with potential relevance for the formulation of principles, which may or may not be applicable to different classrooms depending on specific variables. Within his view, principles are abstractions and techniques are the procedures through which those abstractions are, borrowing Widdowson's (ibid.) term, "actualised". Consistently, Schön (1987) maintains that practical situations are usually problematic because they are uncertain and unpredictable. If this is true, it does not seem sensible to think of theoretical principles as recipes which can be directly applied to address specific classroom situations and behaviours, simply because there are no such things as specific classroom situations or behaviours. Teachers work with people, and people are, by nature, unpredictable. We can never be sure that a learner will react in a certain way to a determined task or activity. We have to wait and see what happens, try to find out why it happened and make decisions accordingly. That is why teachers should mediate between theory and practice. We need to get engaged in a process of critical enquiry that allows us to decide on which principles are more relevant to our teaching contexts, on how we will apply those principles, and how and when we will have to modify them or to replace them completely.

In short, we should be researchers in our own classrooms. In this way we will not only know whether something works or not, but also why it works or not. And this will enable us to gain insights into our own teaching, which, in turn, will allow us to develop expertise and professional competence.

Now, how can we carry out the mediation process proposed above? In the following paragraphs I will suggest two powerful activities that can contribute significantly to achieve this aim: *Classroom Observation* and *Journal Writing*.

Classroom Observation

As Gebhard et al (1990) have suggested, classroom observation enables teachers to see how things happen in a context which, despite particular differences, is relatively similar to ours. It allows us to see how other people address situations and problems that may have some resemblance with the ones we have found or are likely to find in our own classrooms. This provides us with opportunities to discover patterns and to associate them with specific behaviours, thereby gaining awareness about what we do and why we do it.

To do this activity, arrangements can be made to observe other teachers and be observed by them. Of course, the frequency of the observations will depend on several factors such as timetables, syllabuses and other variables that may be found in different teaching contexts. What matters is that observations should be scheduled on a regular

basis (once a week, once a fortnight, etc.) and followed by feedback sessions where the observer and the teacher who was observed have the opportunity to exchange opinions about what happened in the lesson.

Now, an essential aspect to take care of is the attitude of those involved in the process. It is of great importance to keep in mind that the objective of this activity is learning. The aim is by no means to attack, to patronise, to show off or anything like that; thus, it is of great importance to make sure that the members of the observation team have the right attitude towards the process. Also, it is very convenient to get as much information as possible about observation instruments and different approaches to counselling. The former will enable the observer to narrow or widen the scope of observations as required, and the latter will allow for meaningful and enriching feedback sessions.

Journal Writing

A teaching journal is a written document containing entries describing classroom events, analysed and interpreted by the writers (i.e., the teachers) and colleagues in order to find patterns that allow us to gain insights into our own teaching, to expand our experiential knowledge and, therefore, to get more control over our actions. In other words, as Bailey (1990) and Holly and Mcloughlin (1989) argue, journal writing enables teachers to discover patterns which allow us to understand why we teach in one way or another, thereby 'turning unconscious behaviours into conscious ones' (Holly and Mcloughlin, op. cit.) and this gives us a higher degree of 'control over (our) actions' (ibid.) which, in turn, builds up self-confidence.

Within this framework, journal writing implies more than the simple recording of entries. It involves such issues as organising and classifying information, interpreting and evaluating findings, formulating hypotheses and even devising plans for future actions. It follows that journal writing implies a systematic process that needs to be based upon a series of principles which ensure the successful achievement of the writing purpose. Drawing on Porter et al's (1990) work, such principles can be summarised as follows:

1. a journal should be written with the specific purpose of stimulating learning through self-evaluation and collegial discussion;

2. entries should be analysed from a critical and reflective perspective;

3. more attention should be paid to the content of the entries than to the language being used;

4. it is important to keep the writing pace in order to ensure the continuity of the process, for example, by setting submission dates according to the needs and constraints of particular contexts.

These principles are by no means exhaustive, but they may be useful to build up a framework within which it is possible to set a number of procedures that should be determined according to specific circumstances and objectives. Nevertheless, despite contextual variables, it is possible to devise a general plan upon which the process can

be carried out; for example, Bailey (op. cit.), drawing on observations of the way most people write journals, provides a set of guidelines to journal writing in second language teacher preparation. She suggests a five step model which is consistent with the principles outlined above. The model includes the following steps:

1. Writing an account of personal language teaching history.
2. Recording of events and feelings of current experience, which should be systematic and candid.
3. Revision and rewriting of entries; i.e., a preparation of a 'public version'.
4. Analysis of entries, by the writer and colleagues.
5. Interpretative analysis, which includes discussion and reflection in the light of experience and principles behind language teaching.

As was mentioned before, this model reflects the process by which most people write journals. It is not a prescription; however, it seems to follow a logical sequence that can provide the writer with a solid framework. Yet, it is subject to modifications aimed at increasing its probability of success. For example, candid entries could be analysed and interpreted (steps 4 and 5) privately before the public version is prepared (step 3). Then, when the writer has his own interpretation, the public document could be written and discussed with other teachers. By doing it this way, the validity and reliability of the writer's evaluation would be increased, since he would be looking at a more comprehensive account including aspects that could be important but might be left out of the public version for being embarrassing; as a matter of fact, such aspects may not be embarrassing any more after the writer has analysed the situation and has found the origin of the problem. Be that as it may, what is important for learning and professional development is, as was stated before, to carry out a systematic process which stimulates analysis, reflection and self-evaluation.

It is important to point out that although *journal writing* is best done with the participation of a group of teachers; it can also be done individually if there are contextual constraints that make group work difficult. Perhaps some teachers will not find individual work as interesting, motivating and enriching as group work, but it will still put them in a better position to monitor their teaching.

As can be seen, both *classroom observation* and *journal writing* can provide us with systematic processes by means of which we can monitor our practice, by observing and analysing the development and the outcomes of our teaching in terms of learners' behaviours and achievement of objectives. This will enable us to evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching procedures, hence allowing us to validate or to refute the theoretical principles behind them. In other words, these processes can provide us with the necessary tools to build a bridge between theory and practice.

Of course, this endeavour entails a great deal of work and responsibility, but it is precisely the amount of effort and tenacity we put into our work what determines the degree to which we can develop professional competence. So, it is up to us; we can become language teaching professionals or be simple amateurs who keep saying such things as “It works in theory, but not in practice.”

References

Bailey, K. M. (1990). *The use of diary studies in teacher education programs.* In Richards, J. C. and D Nunan. (eds.). Second language teacher education. Cambridge University Press.

Gebhard, J., S. Gaitan, and R. Oprandy. (1990). *Beyond prescription: the student as investigator.* In Richards, J. and D. Nunan (eds.). Second Language Teacher Education. Cambridge University Press.

Holly, M. L. and Mcloughlin, C. S. (1989). *Professional development and journal writing.* In Holly, M. L. and C. S. Mcloughlin (eds.). Perspectives on teacher professional development. The Falmer Press.

Porter, P.A., Goldstein, L.M., Leatherman, J., and Conrad, S. (1990). *An ongoing dialogue: learning logs for teacher preparation.* In Richards, J. C. and Nunan, D. (eds.). Second language teacher education. Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C. (1990). *The dilemma of teacher education in second language teacher.* In Richards, J. C. and Nunan, D. (eds.). Second language teacher education. Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. & D. Nunan. (1990). Second Language Teacher Education. Cambridge University Press.

Schön, D. (1987). Educating the reflective practitioner. Jossey-Bass.

Widdowson, H. G. (1990). Aspects of language teaching. Oxford University Press.