Reflecting on teacher–student relations in TESOL

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Research in general education suggests that relationship-building is at the core of quality learning experiences. Yet relationship-building has not received the attention, it deserves from researchers in the field of TESOL where teacher–student relationships of various types are a central component in successful teaching and learning. This article examines the perspectives of three experienced English as a Second Language teachers on teacher–student relationships and the nature and importance of personal and emotional investment in relationship-building, elicited during group discussions in a teacher reflection group in Canada. Results indicate that the entertainer–audience pedagogical relationship was important for all three teachers, but also raised questions for them which they had to address. In addition, setting boundaries for teacher–student relationships and the issue of student responsibility were reflected on by all three teachers.

Introduction

Research in general education has revealed that teacher–student relationships are at the core of any quality learning experience (Bullough 2008). In addition, research has also indicated that different teachers will have differing conceptions of such relationships and many may not be consciously aware of how they build, negotiate, and maintain them. Nevertheless, the nature of these relationships affects interactions between teachers and students both inside and outside the classroom.

Although research in general education has recognized the importance of teacher–student relationships, it has not received similar attention in the field of TESOL. This is problematic because it is now recognized that teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) are often the first or primary contacts that newcomers (for example immigrants, migrants, and refugees) have in a target language community. As Hawkins and Norton (2009: 32) have noted, ESL teachers 'serve as social mediators and informants in the new environment' as well as helping 'newcomers negotiate new social relationships' and how to better understand 'unfamiliar belief systems, values, and practices'. Thus, it is even more important for the field of TESOL to reflect

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on how ESL teachers view such relationships, given that they have such important implications for teacher–student interaction inside and outside the classroom. This article aims to fill the research gap by examining three experienced ESL teachers' perspectives of teacher–student relationships, revealed during group discussions in a teacher reflection group in Canada.

Teacher–student relationships

Teaching is a relational act because it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the people (teachers and learners) from the act (teaching and learning). If teaching did not involve relationships and teachers acted like well-oiled machines, then classrooms would be very boring places. This is why teachers can be viewed by their students as being entertaining or boring, or approachable or distant, and/or students can also feel supported, ignored, or mistrusted by their teachers. For teachers, the relational and indeed emotional investment involved in teaching includes constant monitoring of and listening to (and sometimes eliciting) how their students are feeling, and evaluating if they need assistance with their learning. Furthermore, as Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006: 123) have observed:

> ... taking the time to listen to students' problems or worries, giving advice or guidance to them, and showing warmth and love are all examples of emotional work in teaching.

Thus, in order to be able to assist their students' learning and give advice while attending to their problems, teachers must be able to build trusting and caring relationships with their students. However, building and maintaining such relationships is hard work for teachers and, as a result, some teachers may find such relationship-building physically and emotionally draining, which, in the long term, can lead to frustration and exhaustion (Hargreaves 2000). This is a reality for many teachers.

Within the field of TESOL, however, this reality has not been acknowledged, and in some instances it has even been devalued by some administrators who consider the work of English language teachers as only to teach language and not to develop learners as individuals. The closest that TESOL seems to have come to recognizing that teachers and students have any relationship is the notion of 'rapport' or 'teacher–student rapport', which many supervisors (teacher trainers or teacher evaluators) seem to be able to recognize and measure. However, and as Scrivener (2005: 23) has noted, while 'rapport' is clearly important, 'it is also notoriously difficult to define or quantify'. Clearly, therefore, we need to consider other ways of exploring teacher–student relationships in TESOL.

One way to explore how ESL teachers perceive teacher–student relationships is to examine how they talk about these experiences with others in a teacher reflection group (Garton and Richards 2008). As Garton and Richards (ibid.: xxii) have noted:

> The way teachers talk about their experiences is fundamental to understanding how a teacher's knowledge influences what happens in the context of their work.

Thus, the main purpose of this article is to address the gap in TESOL research on teacher–student relationships by examining three experienced ESL teachers' perceptions of these relationships as communicated during group discussions over a one-semester period (12 weeks) in a self-initiated teacher reflection group in Canada. In this context, the teachers were working with immigrants to Canada, in a specifically second language context.

The study

As noted above, this study involved teachers in a teacher reflection group reflecting on their own practices both inside and outside the classroom in order to 'support teachers in understanding and enhancing their own practice ... with learning grounded in teachers' own classrooms' (Kiely and Davis 2010: 278). Due to the fact that not much is known about the content of reflections of experienced ESL college teachers in Canada, the study utilized a case study method (Merriam 2001) that was exploratory and descriptive in nature (Bogdan and Biklen 1982). Other TESOL scholars have successfully utilized such a case study method for similar types of research (see, for example, Clair 1998).

Participants

The three participants in the teacher discussion group (for reasons of anonymity called T1 [teacher 1], T2 [teacher 2], and T3 [teacher 3]), who all knew each other before the study, were all experienced female ESL college teachers and teaching in the same institution in Canada, as outlined in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1 below, each teacher had an additional qualification beyond their initial undergraduate BA degree, such as a Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). In addition, T1 had a MA degree in Applied Linguistics. Each teacher had at least 15 years' ESL teaching experience. The genesis of the teacher group is unique in that I was approached by the three participants and asked if I would be willing to facilitate their group discussions and reflections as a 'critical friend' (Merriam op.cit.). My role was thus to give advice as a 'friend' rather than as a 'consultant', in order to develop the reflective abilities of the teachers in the group and, especially, to encourage the teachers to discuss their practice in an open and trusting environment. The college programme they were all teaching together on was an intensive, pre-admission English language preparation programme where most of the students (aged from 18 years upwards) would enter a main college programme after achieving a sufficient level of proficiency in English speaking, reading, listening, and writing.

TABLE 1
Participants

	T1	T2	T3
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Degree (highest)	MA AppLing/ TESL	BA/Certificate in TESL	BA/Certificate in TESL
Experience	17 years	16 years	15 years
Institution	College	College	College

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative research procedures were used in the collection and analysis of the data in this study (Bogdan and Biklen op.cit.). Data were collected during the first semester of the academic year through weekly group meetings. All three teachers agreed to commit themselves as much as possible to attending all the group meetings. There were 12, two-hour (average) group meetings in total and all were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The group discussions followed a trajectory of moving from chat for the first few minutes to more focused discussions that were specific to the teachers' work. Each group discussion was held in a supportive atmosphere, and the teachers themselves decided the topic and focus of these discussions each week.

The data were analysed with the following research question in mind: When three experienced female ESL teachers talk regularly about their practice in a teacher reflection group, what can be noted in their discussions about how they approach teacher–student relations in their practice? At the end of the data collection period, all data were scanned multiple times by this author and by two research assistants for appropriate interpretation of patterns and themes (Bogdan and Biklen op.cit.; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The data were also triangulated to ensure the findings were credible: a piece of evidence was compared and cross-checked with other kinds of evidence (such as researcher notes, audio tapes, and transcripts of group discussions).

Findings

The findings are presented as an answer to the main research question, as noted above. Three major issues arose from the group discussions related to teacher–student relationships:

- to entertain or not
- student responsibility
- boundary setting.

To entertain or not to entertain?

All teachers must fulfil a wide range of roles and responsibilities, and some of these involve motivating students to learn and keeping their lessons interesting. For example T3 recounted how she used storytelling with her students as a way of getting emotionally closer to them, and as a means of keeping student anxiety levels low. She commented that 'story telling brings me closer to my students and also helps them learn English in fun ways'. She noted that as a result of her use of storytelling, one student called her an 'entertainer' and that she took this label as a compliment because she said: 'I always try to give as much of myself to students and my teaching'.

However, although both T2 and T1 noted the importance of keeping students interested and motived during lessons, they also worried about the use of 'entertainment' in their lessons. For example T2 pointed out that she did not like the metaphor of 'teacher as entertainer' and in response to T1's comments, she wondered 'how much of ourselves should we give?'. T2 continued:

> What is it that drives us all to entertain? I wonder. I don't always entertain. There are certainly days where like I say, 'There's no entertaining today so just open your books'.

T2 noted that she had disliked this whole idea of 'teacher as entertainer' since the time she had taught in an Asian country many years ago where she had felt that she 'always had to entertain the students to keep them happy, rather than teach them'. She then remarked on the tension between 'keeping students happy and helping them to learn what they need', pondering the issue of style over substance before continuing, 'Do we have to make them all happy all the time? Do they always have to be enjoying themselves?'. In a later group meeting, she talked about the priority of her students' learning rather than her entertaining them and being liked. She noted that after years of experience, she was comfortable with the idea of not entertaining, even if it resulted in the students not liking her:

> I think there was a point in my career where I realized where it wasn't about being liked. That was a huge step for me as a teacher to realize that it doesn't matter if they like me or want to be my friend.

T1 also noted that she was conflicted about the whole idea of teaching as entertainment commenting that 'many times I even fake being funny but I cannot keep it up all the time because it is not my real personality'. T1, in agreement with T2's comments above, noted that teachers must beware of 'mistaking style over substance while teaching', and that she had confidence in her own way of keeping her students interested during her classes. T1 continued by stating that her teaching style was not always a true reflection of who she was outside class: 'I'm not bubbly all the time. I'm not social all the time. So I have to find my own time and way that I relate to my students'.

In summary, therefore, although T1 embraced this 'entertainer' role in her pedagogical relationships, both T2 and T3 were conflicted about, and continue to be faced with, the dilemma of whether to entertain or not entertain.

Student responsibility

Teacher–student relationships are by their very nature unequal because the teacher has almost exclusive responsibility for providing opportunities for students to learn. Thus, teachers must generally take the lead in encouraging, motivating, and showing sensitivity towards their students' learning. Such responsibility can also weigh heavily on teachers' sense of their own well-being if students do not reciprocate in their willingness to learn. For example T2 relayed a frustrating experience with one student who, according to her, would never be prepared for class, would not work on his tasks by himself, and who had a very short attention span to the point where he even closed his eyes during lessons and put his head down on the desk. She said:

> He's like sleeping right? I don't even think he had a book. He always borrows my book. Anyway, I'm like [calls the student's name] 'Have you finished?'. And he's just stretched out there on the desk head in elbow.

She said that although she was frustrated with the student, she did not give up on him as 'You have to keep on him because he needs someone to, a little bit to keep on him'. Here, we can see the teacher taking responsibility for the learner.

Another example of the complex issue of student responsibility for learning was T1's recount of a critical incident about a student who would look really angry when he did not understand what she was teaching him: 'He's got a really, really angry face'. However, she noted that she would not just give him the correct answer as she believed that this would not help him learn anything:

> Well he hadn't understood the part of the story and he'd missed one of the key points. I didn't want to just change his answer. I wanted to show him where to look for it, right?

However, even though she was frustrated with him, she said that she did not let him know this and thus she 'just let him be'. T1 then noted that she found working with this student during the remainder of the semester 'emotionally draining' because she said he would not react after that during any further classes and 'withdrew emotionally from the lesson'. She expressed her frustrations saying:

> He doesn't give me anything. He just looks at me and when it happened, from the very first day of school he was like that and at first I thought, what?

However, T3 noted that teachers needed to 'draw some line with students who do not take responsibility for their own learning' stating:

> We're not, for the most part, responsible for our learners' learning. I think that they are, as individuals, responsible for their learning. I am responsible for presenting, and guiding, and managing, and giving them opportunities to learn but I am not responsible for them to actually do the learning.

In addition, T1 maintained that teachers 'should not micromanage [my] students' learning' because she feels that 'students are responsible for their own learning as teachers are responsible for presenting, guiding, and managing'. So although all three teachers said they were willing to provide as many opportunities as possible for their students to learn, they also noted that within the Canadian context, students were seen as adults and as such also had to reciprocate by taking some responsibility for their own learning.

Boundary setting

The above discussions focusing on the teachers' role as 'entertainers' and how much of themselves they would 'give' to their students and the students would reciprocate, led to further discussions on how the teachers set boundaries to help them limit their emotional involvement and exhaustion while maintaining positive teacher–student relationships (Hargreaves op.cit.). T3 noted that it was difficult for her to know where to 'draw the line with having relationships with students', as she said that although she sometimes got energy from the constant interactions with her students both inside and outside the classroom, she also experienced an exhaustion that she called 'burnout'. T3 continued by giving an example of her interactions with her students outside of class and just how much of herself she had invested in her students:

> I mean my burnout, I'm sure comes from the constant interaction but I also get energy. But just yesterday some students wanted to ride in my car

to the Mall, fine. I thought we'd just hit the Mall and they would go their way and I would go mine, but they didn't. They stayed with me and I was with them all the time in the Mall.

In fact, T3 noted that she helped them shop in the Mall for four hours that evening after class because, she said, 'I could not bring myself to leave them by themselves shopping in case they needed me. So I stayed and helped them shop and they were very happy'. However, T3 noted that this had also led her to feel exhausted both physically and emotionally and, as a result, she remained conflicted about the amount of extra roles and responsibility she had taken on, not only for her students' learning of English but also for their outside class activities.

Discussion

The case study outlined in this article offers some insights into the complexity and importance of teacher–student relations as a reality of TESOL. The findings show that all three ESL teachers have invested heavily in building personal relationships with their ESL students both inside and outside the classroom. The results also indicate that such relationship-building was at times rewarding but also exhausting. This result is consistent with research in general education that points out to teachers that on the one hand such relationships may be a source of professional satisfaction, but on the other hand they can become a source of disappointment, anxiety, and even anger for many teachers as well (Isenbarger and Zembylas op.cit.). In the case study, for example, one teacher found the 'teacher as entertainer' role she embraced was rewarding for her when she used storytelling to build a closer relationship with students. However, the other two teachers were not so convinced by the entertainer–audience approach to pedagogical relationships with students, and wondered how much of themselves they should 'give', and where they should draw the line in building caring relationships with students (for example how to deal with going to the Mall or with the emotional withdrawal of a student). Research in general education has indicated that maintaining such caring relationships requires a lot of emotional investment and output, such as spending extra personal time with a student or students (as all three teachers did above), or even masking anger when upset with a student or students (Hargreaves op.cit.; Isenbarger and Zembylas op.cit.).

The results of the case study presented in this article suggest that the often conflicting teacher–student caring relationships placed on ESL teachers can result in dilemmas and tensions with knowing when and how far they should go when trying to help students both inside and outside class. If we consider teaching to be caring work that is premised on having a reciprocal relationship between teachers and students, where the 'carer' and the 'cared-for' should both contribute appropriately (Isenbarger and Zembylas op.cit.), we need to ask what is 'appropriate'. How much caring is too much? Where do or should ESL teachers draw the line in a relationship that provides opportunities or blocks of opportunities for motivation and learning? These are not easy questions to answer because the power dynamics of the classroom already tend to separate the teacher from the students, and lead to each keeping to their own side of the 'desk' both physically and emotionally.

The three experienced ESL teachers in this case study identified how they faced these dilemmas within their context of teaching ESL in Canada, through a process of reflective dialogue. However, different teachers have different conceptions about their teacher–student relationship roles and may reach different conclusions. For the most part though, a majority of ESL teachers do not articulate these relationships explicitly. Yet it is important for them to articulate and reflect on such issues because they have important implications for the type and quality of teacher–student interactions both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, teacher education programmes should also address the issue of teacher–student relationships and encourage student teachers to reflect on how they intend to build, negotiate, reciprocate, and maintain such relationships without becoming frustrated, angry, or totally exhausted.

Conclusion

The case study presented in this article reported on three experienced ESL teachers' perceptions of teacher–student relationships in Canada. The teachers noted that while realizing these relationships, they encountered a number of dilemmas such as whether to entertain or not to entertain, and issues surrounding the degree of reciprocity in teacher–student relationships. They also noted that it may be necessary to create some boundaries between teachers and students so that teachers can consider and maintain their own well-being. Of course the issue of teacher–student relationships and the ways in which they are realized and the problems arising will differ according to the context, and as such, further studies in different settings are necessary. One way of continuing such research is to encourage experienced ESL teachers to reflect on their teacher–student relationships in teacher reflection groups as was the case reported on in this article. Such results can inform teacher education programmes.

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