

Teacher competencies in the post-method landscape: The limits of competency-based training in TESOL teacher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the application of competency-based training to teacher education in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). This approach to specifying curriculum outcomes emerged in Australia in the early 1980s and has recently begun to regain ground in terms of significance and impact. This is because of the requirement for a growing number of TESOL certificate and diploma courses in New South Wales to be accredited within the vocational education and training (VET) sector, a process replicated to varying degrees in other States and Territories. This paper, using evidence from the literature on the development and application of competency-based training in other fields and an exploration of changing teaching practices that have arisen in the transition to a post-method era in TESOL, argues that the narrow view of this approach is fundamentally unsuitable for language teacher education and that a viable alternative approach to course accreditation needs to be found.

Introduction

This is a time of change for the TESOL profession, when the preparation of new teachers, equipped to face emerging challenges in diverse teaching–learning contexts, is of increasing importance. It has been convincingly argued that TESOL professionals are working in a *post-method era* (Kumaravadivelu 1994, 2006a, 2006b), when comforting certainties about classroom practice must be continually re-examined and re-evaluated in light of a developing knowledge base and the role of hitherto unpredictable contextual parameters. At this time, more than ever, flexibility, adaptability and contextual awareness need to be emphasised in TESOL teacher education. In New South Wales, however, a worrying mismatch exists between the requirements of the profession in terms of the skills, knowledge, attributes and values of its members and the way in which these are shaped by the current accreditation framework. Newly developed teacher education programs are accredited within the regulations of the VET sector. To gain accreditation within the VET system, training courses must use a competency-based assessment framework that focuses on immediately measurable competencies, and this has a powerful wash-back effect on both course content and implementation. While there are some areas of training in which a competency-based framework may be appropriate, this paper argues that it is not in the best interests of the profession for competency-based training (CBT) to be the chosen model for TESOL teacher education.

The paper first provides a general review of the literature on CBT, including attempts made by its proponents to broaden the definition of a competency and for CBT to move beyond its behaviourist origins. It then examines the influence of CBT on the development of industry-specific professional standards in TESOL in the 1990s and provides examples of how more recent models have tended to move beyond this, in content and language. Further evidence of the importance of flexibility and the hazards of defining course assessment in competency terms is given, looking in more detail at the post-method context and the kinds of demands that living and working in a post-method era place on teachers, irrespective of their career stage. The paper then explores and critiques the details and implications of the current situation, in which the accreditation of TESOL teacher-training courses requires the adoption of a CBT framework in which not only assessment but also course content must be expressed in terms of discrete units of competency.

The paper highlights the need for a system of accreditation for teacher education courses that is more

compatible with the state of the profession and better able to promote conditions that maximise depth and flexibility of learning for both beginner and developing teachers. No attempt is made to argue for the adoption of a single solution, but the paper seeks to stimulate debate and to encourage the development of situation-specific teacher education and teacher assessment practices.

Background and ongoing issues in competency-based training

CBT originated from a model of adult education developed in the 1950s by the American defence forces. It was influenced by systems theory, behaviourism and positivist views of education (Hodge 2007). Richards and Rodgers (2001: 14) describe CBT as 'an educational movement that advocates defining educational goals in terms of precise, measurable descriptions of the knowledge, skills and behaviours students should possess by the end of a course of study'.

In a prevailing climate that emphasised accountability, the views of educational theorist Ralph Tyler (1902–94) were influential in promoting explicit objectives in curriculum design. It was argued that the success of learning programs should be evaluated in terms of observable changes in the behaviour of learners (Chappell, Gonczi and Hager 1995; Hodge 2007). In contrast to traditional sequenced programs, it was thought that learners could achieve mastery of prescribed competencies at their own pace and in their own preferred order. Criterion-referenced assessment provided opportunities for trainers to evaluate the success of their programs more scientifically and make appropriate adjustments.

It is widely documented that there are areas of vocational education in which CBT can make positive contributions, such as providing a bridge between industry clients and training providers (NCVER 2000). CBT can encourage professionals to become better able to understand and articulate the nature and requirements of their work (Bowden and Masters 1993). It can also provide increased accessibility and flexibility in training based on national industry or enterprise standards. This provides an infrastructure in which teachers and administrators become more accountable for quality (Jackson 1993).

In 1998 the contribution of CBT to outcomes in vocational education and training was examined in an Australian national evaluation study (Mulcahy and James 2000). The study found benefits to employers had been significant, with two key advantages: training outcomes could be aligned to workplace-specific skills and learning could be achieved on the job.

However, even literature that argues in support of CBT acknowledges complexities and difficulties in its application. For example, Mulcahy and James (2000) reevaluate the links between industry and educators, and caution that there exist different and possibly contradictory concepts and cultures of competence. They also note that while CBT meets the needs of industry in general terms, there is a need to reconsider definitions of competence so that they can more adequately accommodate developing perceptions of vocational knowledge.

CBT has also been criticised for its focus on technical competence, leading to the neglect of other skills areas in emotional, social and intellectual realms. As the Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2000: 1) acknowledges:

CBT seems particularly effective for imparting procedural knowledge and routine problem-solving skills, making it well suited for technical skills acquisition. It is not as well suited to the development of conceptual and experiential knowledge.

The narrowness of accepted conceptions of CBT has also been discussed by Toohey et al (1995), with the main criticism again directed at the tendency of CBT to assess only aspects of performance that are routine and easy to measure. They emphasise that a broader view of competency is needed, one which goes beyond mere technical skills. Hager and Gonczi (1993) also consider this problematic, but are more optimistic that the CBT model used in many contexts within Australia, or at least supported by advocates of competency standards, adopts a broader approach.

Taking a critical approach to some of the assumptions underlying CBT, Stevenson (1993: 87) refers to the paradigm as 'an example of how legitimated terminology both empowers and enslaves both adherents and critics'. Stevenson concludes by expressing scepticism about the possibility that the type of skilled, adaptable and innovative workforce that governments are seeking can actually be delivered by CBT. Biggs (1994) considers the process rather than the products of learning, identifying hazards in the tendency of the quantitative approach taken in CBT to ignore psychological issues. It is argued that such reductionist

and behaviourist assessment takes place at the expense of holism and encourages students to simply reproduce learned knowledge and procedures, leading to a sacrifice of complexity and depth.

On the question of practical application, Cornford (1997) reports on the experience of teachers attempting to apply CBT in Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. Problems include perceived pressure to pass students, plus difficulty in reaching agreement on assessment and standards. It is significant that in this study, 61% of the teachers interviewed claimed that the introduction of CBT had been a moderate or severe hindrance to the skill levels achieved by students. Cornford attributes this to fundamental weaknesses in the paradigm itself.

The most significant flaw identified by critics of the competency-based approach seems to be its failure to transcend its behaviourist origins, with the result that the scope of a CBT course can be artificially restricted by the imposed necessity to define competence in ways that are measurable. Referring to the formulation of competencies, Chappell, Gonczi and Hager (1995: 176) observe that:

though it is reasonably easy to produce these sorts of descriptions when the focus is limited to relatively straightforward task skills needed in the workplace, attempts to produce descriptions of more complex work practices, commonly involving complicated interactions of various sets of knowledge, skills and abilities, generally fail.

This paper argues that these basic flaws in the model, specifically the emphasis on technical competence and the criterion of measurability, plus developments in the TESOL field itself, make CBT unsuitable as an approach to course design and evaluation in second language teacher education.

Teacher competencies in Australia and New Zealand

Despite the issues identified above, CBT is becoming increasingly significant in teacher education in the VET sector in Australia, and is exerting a growing influence on curriculum in other sectors of adult and child second language learning. This is demonstrated in the TESOL sector by the appearance of professional standards documents that refer to *teacher competencies*.

In response to the influence of the CBT movement in other sectors, the first set of TESOL teacher competencies was commissioned by the Australian Council of TESOL Associations/Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ACTA/ATESOL) in 1993. A generalist document for the broader teaching profession (MACTEQT 1994) was taken as a starting point and a reference group of academic and industry representatives was appointed to attempt to 'define the specialised field of TESOL teaching' in a manner consistent with 'competency statements in other professional areas'¹ (Hogan 1994: 1). This document proposed competencies in four categories – *knowledge, practice, ethics of teaching and professionalism, and professional development* – with performance indicators largely defined in behavioural terms. For example, the knowledge component referred consistently to demonstrating knowledge and awareness. A subsequent working draft was circulated for reconsideration in 2003 (ATESOL 2003). This proposed seven elements of competency that focused on what teachers at different stages of their development from graduate to leader should know or be able to do (Figure 1). In line with the prevailing philosophy of CBT, indicators of these competencies were expressed predominantly in terms of observable characteristics. Performance indicators for the competencies used verbs such as *demonstrate, exhibit, design, use, work* and *apply*.

Figure 1: ACTA/ATESOL TESOL teacher competencies 2003

- Know their subject content and how to teach that content to students
- Know their students and how they learn
- Plan, assess and report for effective learning
- Communicate effectively with students
- Create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments through the use of classroom management skills
- Continually improve their professional knowledge and practice
- Be actively engaged members of their profession and the wider community

Meanwhile, in New Zealand, teacher competencies were also under consideration. The development of competency standards for all English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in New Zealand was undertaken by a professional subcommittee of TESOL ANZ in a project beginning in 1994 (Haddock 2006). Based on the Australian and Canadian models (Keevil Harrold 1995), examples of competency statements were developed and industry representatives were encouraged to 'challenge, endorse, change or delete' (Haddock 2006: 4). After four years and extensive consultation, a list of required knowledge, skills, attitudes, education and experience was compiled (Figure 2).

Figure 2: TESOL ANZ elements of competency (1998)

Teachers should have:

KNOWLEDGE of:

- factors affecting language learning
- broader principles of teaching
- the process of L2 [second language] development
- different learning styles
- TESOL methods
- phonological and structural features of English
- the principles behind materials development and selection
- the impact of L1 [first language] on language teaching
- the principles of TESOL course design and curriculum development

SKILLS to:

- provide appropriate models of language in context
- accommodate varying levels and abilities
- use a language level appropriate to the student's ability
- provide constructive and sensitive feedback to facilitate learning
- use a variety of teaching strategies
- provide a balanced program
- facilitate independent learning
- assess and use appropriate resources
- monitor learner progress
- carry out a needs analysis
- ensure assessment is valid and understandable by the student and other stakeholders
- select and use a range of TESOL methodologies
- develop suitable assessment tasks
- use both formal and informal methods of assessment techniques
- select and apply a range of second language assessment
- use a range of functions to enable students to participate in New Zealand society

ATTITUDES which:

- mean behaving in a non-racist, non-sexist and professional manner
- create a classroom environment conducive to learning
- encourage teacher–student rapport
- ensure that students know what they are doing and why
- ensure contribution to professional development programs when possible

EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE which includes:

- TESOL training
- continuing professional development
- qualifications in ESOL
- learning another language

This wide-ranging set of teacher abilities and attributes was a valuable contribution, and the strength of the New Zealand competencies is probably partly due to the extensive grassroots consultation that went into their development. Although CBT provided a theoretical underpinning, it was not so rigidly applied as to restrict attributes to readily measurable constructs, as was the case in Australia. In fact, strictly speaking, many of the items on the New Zealand list are not competencies at all. All of the items listed in the education and experience category, and many of those listed in the knowledge and attitude sections, do not translate into observable behaviour. They do, however, provide an excellent set of guidelines for what an employer should look for and what a teacher educator should work towards.

None of the early Australian competency documents were ever formally ratified by ACTA, and representatives of ATESOL also expressed reservations. As Richards (n.d.) explained:

In considering the different drafts promulgated by ACTA, the ATESOL Council became concerned that, while ever more concise, each successive version risked losing the essence of what it means to be a TESOL professional.

After further consideration, a substantially revised document was released in 2004, under the title *Professional standards* (adapted by Antenucci et al 2004 from the set of standards developed in South Australia in 2003 by the ESLE committee). Too detailed to reproduce in full, this document sets out teacher *dispositions, understandings* and *skills*, all considered in terms of educational setting, orientation to teaching and learning, and professional practice. In sharp contrast to the preceding version, none of the standards are expressed in behavioural terms and competencies are not mentioned at all. In addition, the level of generality in this document is such that, beyond a broad learner-centredness, understandings and skills are not recognisably linked to any particular teaching approach or method. While certainly not formulated in a way that would satisfy CBT purists, they provide valuable guidelines for a number of key functions, including professional accountability, peer appraisal and review, planning of professional development, certification of professionals at different levels, and the development and accreditation of teacher education programs.

Years of consultation and consideration by dedicated members of the profession on both sides of the Tasman seem to have resulted in similar conclusions; that is, that there is a critical point on the generality–specificity continuum beyond which teacher professional standards cannot be described, if they are to remain meaningful to the profession. Reflecting on the process of the development of professional standards reveals their implications for the application of CBT to TESOL teacher education, with the later documents revealing elements that a narrow competency-based model would disallow. This is a matter of grave concern, because even if an elements-of-competency checklist is designed for the primary purpose of assessment, it nevertheless exerts a strong pressure to tailor course content and activities towards that end, to the neglect of providing a holistic educational experience for TESOL professionals of the future.

Competency-based training and the post-method landscape

One further contraindication for applying CBT to TESOL teacher education is the changing status of teaching methods. As we saw above, the New Zealand document specifies that teachers must *have knowledge of TESOL methods* and the *skills to select and use a range of TESOL methodologies*. The ACTA/ATESOL documents are not specific regarding what constitutes demonstrating knowledge and awareness of teaching methods. However, CBT cannot be applied to TESOL without decisions being made as to what constitutes *knowing how to teach* and judgments being made about which specific behaviours can be taken as evidence of this knowledge, leading to questions such as:

- should chorus drilling be included or the operation of an overhead projector?
- would the use of Internet resources constitute a sufficiently core teacher behaviour in a broad enough range of contexts to warrant being broken down into a set of performance indicators?
- would the specification of any fixed sets of competencies with behavioural indicators not presuppose a commitment to one approach or method?

The answer to the last of these questions depends on the specificity of the performance indicators. It is a particularly complex issue in the current state of the language-teaching profession, which is now

characterised by a movement away from method and a greater emphasis on professional autonomy and judgment (Pennycook 1989, 2001; Prabhu 1990; Richards 1990; Kumaravadivelu 1994; Kumaravadivelu 2001, 2002; Brown 2002). Kumaravadivelu (2006b: 67) explains the post-method era in this way:

a realization that the concept of method has only a limited and limiting impact on language learning and teaching, that method should no longer be considered a valuable or a viable construct, and that what is needed is not an alternative method but an alternative to method. This growing realization coupled with a resolve to respond has created what has been called the *postmethod condition*.

This section of the paper considers the impact of this *post-method condition* on the applicability of CBT to TESOL teacher education.

The language-teaching profession has a long history, which was characterised in earlier phases by a sustained interest in method (Howatt 1984; Nunan 1991; Richards and Rodgers 2001). The rapid evolution that took place in the 19th and 20th centuries included a range of methods: grammar translation, direct method, audiolingualism, the humanistic *fringe* methods of the 1970s and the long-surviving communicative approach. These all sustained a sense of optimism that there was a best method that would someday be discovered. It was around the time that CBT was beginning to impact on Australian education that Prabhu (1990) and Richards (1990) began to articulate what had long been suspected; that is, that the quest for a best method may have been fundamentally misguided.

Performance indicators aligned to elements of competency sit more comfortably with the methods era than with pluralistic teaching and learning contexts. For example, the distinguishing features of the prescriptive method of audiolingualism (1950–70) (Nunan 1989; Richards and Rodgers 2001) could readily be adapted to visible performance indicators. Audiolingual teachers could demonstrate competence in these highly specific tasks:

- using an audiocassette machine
- presenting a dialogue
- providing an accurate language model
- conducting a drill
- supervising learners in a language laboratory
- teaching specific predetermined vocabulary items
- teaching specific predetermined language structures
- teaching specific predetermined elements of phonology
- preventing the use of L1
- providing positive reinforcement
- correcting learner errors.

In the implementation of this method, where certain practices are proscribed and prescribed, competent audiolingual teachers could be recognised by the fact that they could be observed **not** to:

- explain grammar
- undertake communicative activities before drilling the target forms
- sequence units by any process other than linguistic competence
- encourage learners to take risks and make errors
- emphasise fluency over accuracy.

The *post-method condition* (Kumaravadivelu 1994, 2001, 2006a, 2006b) goes beyond the abandonment of the quest for a best method to a fundamental redefinition of method itself, strongly advocating a shift in power from theorists to practitioners. The post-method condition 'enables practitioners to generate location-specific, classroom oriented innovative practices' (Kumaravadivelu 1994: 539). A post-method pedagogy is built on three principles:

- 1 *particularity* or a localised context-sensitive approach
- 2 *practicality* in which the unequal power relationship between theory and practice is overthrown
- 3 *possibility* or a manifestation of a critical approach emphasising the role of teaching in identity formation and social transformation.

The role of teachers as transformative intellectuals (Pennycook 1989, 2001) includes ensuring their own continued professional growth, never desisting from questioning every aspect of practice, influencing society in ways that maximise social justice, enabling learners and assisting them in achieving control over their lives. The nature of these abilities, and the timeframe in which opportunities arise to apply them, are incompatible with measurement in competency terms. They span and underpin a whole career and are not demonstrable on demand. Neither is it satisfactory to argue that they are not attributes of an early career teacher. Somewhere the seeds of these attitudes and disposition must be planted and nurtured, and CBT-defined teacher education does not encourage this.

Kumaravadivelu (2002: 18) also emphasises the crucial value of teacher autonomy and subjective sense of plausibility. He proposes an influential set of macrostrategies, open-ended options that encourage a strategic and sensitive approach to teaching, contrasting these with the technician approach in which the teacher is in a relationship of passivity and dependency on theorists. Many of these diverge even further from quantifiable competencies than the lists cited earlier in this paper, as can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Macrostrategies (Kumaravadivelu 1994)

- Maximise learning opportunities
- Facilitate negotiated interaction
- Minimise perceptual mismatches
- Activate intuitive heuristics
- Foster language awareness
- Contextualise linguistic input
- Integrate language skills
- Promote learner autonomy
- Raise cultural consciousness
- Ensure social relevance.

Again, the gap between this strategic approach and the CBT view of essential behaviours is difficult to bridge and the timing of measurement remains an issue. How, for example, could one measure the extent to which a teacher is successfully maximising learning opportunities? How many hours of teaching would it be necessary to observe in order to form a viewpoint on this? The only way to formulate a response using the kind of performance indicators acceptable in CBT would be to go for much greater specificity. However, this could only take the form of requiring teachers to perform specific predetermined classroom tasks, constituting, in all but name, a return to method. If, as it seems, the profession is moving forward and articulating different professional priorities, then CBT performance indicators cannot be satisfactorily applied to TESOL in this changed environment. The type of practitioner needed in a post-method context is different from one who has learned to apply one, or perhaps more than one, method.

The post-method teacher (Kumaravadivelu 2001) has, as a defining characteristic, autonomy, which is based on confidence and competence.

From whence does this competence arise? A possible answer is provided by Allwright (2003, 2005), who proposes *exploratory practice*. This is teaching that prioritises the learning opportunity over the teaching point and takes the revolutionary philosophical position of giving classroom quality of life a higher priority than the effectiveness of instruction. The seven principles he proposes are outlined in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Principles of exploratory practice (Allwright 2005)

- Put quality of life first
- Work primarily to understand language classroom life
- Involve everybody
- Work to bring people together
- Work for mutual development
- Integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice
- Make the work a continuous enterprise

Confidence and a sense of plausibility can emerge through the application of these principles. Even though some of the broad principles could be realised in more specific strategies (Kumaravadivelu 2006a), it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to design a set of performance criteria that would permit an occasional observer to objectify and measure all of them. They are not about what teachers can do on demand, but what they, on the basis of recognising possibility and exercising judgment, choose to do when the time is right. For the teacher developing competence, they are both the destination and the route.

Brown (2007) advocates *teaching by principles* and identifies a set of cognitive, affective and linguistic principles that describe how effective language learning takes place. These move even further away from a competency-based approach. They are not knowledge, skills or attributes but are perhaps best described as areas of awareness that form a basis for teacher decisions about classroom practice. The primarily *cognitive principles* are automaticity, meaningful learning, the anticipation of reward, intrinsic motivation, strategic investment and autonomy. Under a heading of *socio-affective principles* come language ego, willingness to communicate and the language–culture connection. The native language effect, interlanguage and communicative competence are broadly classified as *linguistic principles*. While some of these principles may indicate a set of teacher behaviours and contraindicate others, they are no more readily expressed in terms of elements of competency than Kumaravadivelu’s strategies or Allwright’s principles.

Brown’s principles also include moral ones, which take into account the growing awareness of the social roles and responsibilities of TESOL professionals. For example, in facing the possible cultural biases of the communicative approach, the teacher should ‘respect the diversity of cultural patterns and expectations among our students, while utilising the best methodological approaches available to accomplish course goals and objectives’ (Brown 2007: 518).

Another component of Brown’s (2007: 216) principled approach, which is incompatible with CBT, is the focus on *being* rather than *doing*. The teacher has to be able to act in a range of roles – controller, director, manager, facilitator and resource – according to the demands of the circumstances. In real-life classrooms the roles that teachers need to assume are frequently unpredictable and the circumstances that invoke them cannot be reproduced at will by a competency-based trainer armed with a predetermined, decontextualised checklist.

The failure of competency-based models to acknowledge the underlying wisdom that teachers must develop has two possible explanations. The first is that features that cannot be operationalised within the model are simply ignored. The second is a building block model of learning that assumes the candidate

acquires discrete units of competency through training packages, and that these spontaneously accrete into a competent human resource tailored to the demands of the workplace. The fluid nature of beliefs about teaching and the increased focus on teacher autonomy in decision-making in a changing work environment seem to point towards the applicability of holistic rather than reductionist assessment strategies for new and developing TESOL professionals.

Current application of CBT to TESOL course accreditation

Despite mounting issues with applicability, CBT models still play a major role in some sectors of TESOL teacher education in Australia today, primarily in short courses offered outside university settings. This section of the paper discusses the problems that result from the application of a narrow view of CBT by the accrediting body, and the implication for course providers, teachers and learners.

The gate-keeping organisation for recognition of teacher qualifications in Australia is the National ELICOS Accreditation Scheme (NEAS n.d.). NEAS does not undertake independent accreditation of TESOL courses, but is empowered to *recognise* a TESOL qualification accredited by an approved authority. In New South Wales, the recognition authority is the Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB), a New South Wales statutory body established under the *Vocational Education and Training Act 2005*. VETAB has the power to accredit vocational courses, define the terms of accreditation and renewal, and, in certain circumstances, cancel the accreditation of course providers. All courses in the VET sector must be competency based. Institutions that purchase the right to deliver courses must work backwards from a set of discrete units of competency to determine the actual course content and teaching activities.

Whether or not a course must be approved by VETAB depends on the situation of the provider. For graduate certificate and diploma courses offered within the university sector, it is still possible to obtain accreditation through academic boards, thus avoiding the necessity to formulate courses and assess students in competency-based terms. University centres and private companies operating under franchise to conduct internationally recognised courses, such as International House or Trinity College courses and CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults), continue to operate in Australia under the accreditation of the umbrella organisations. There also exist some informal, more commercially oriented courses that have a strong focus on English as a Foreign Language and whose graduates do not intend to work in ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) in Australia or contexts requiring formal accreditation. Some of these avail themselves of the possibility of obtaining recognition by international bodies such as CITA² or IATQuO³, while others do not make any claims to having passed through any independent evaluation or moderation.

Thus, accreditation requirements for TESOL teacher educators can hardly be described as a level playing field. Australian TESOL providers without access to an external accrediting body have no option but to pursue accreditation through the VET sector, in which all course outcomes must be expressed in terms of rigidly defined units and elements of competency. Recently, a number of TESOL qualifications have been accredited in this way, as Certificate III, Certificate IV or diploma courses.

For educators working in a paradigm of learning that is very different to CBT, and specifically those with a strong awareness of the implications of the post-method era, this can involve significant and troubling compromises. As discussed above, the ATESOL and TESOL ANZ professional standards documents express convergent ideas as to the nature of professional core skills, values and dispositions. However, the process of accrediting a course through VETAB does not validate or encourage this approach.

Once permission to develop a course has been granted by VETAB, a process of industry consultation must be undertaken. Questions have been raised by Auerbach (1986) and Williams (1994) as to whose interests are served by this process. If industry, in this case educational managers and entrepreneurs rather than teachers themselves, is allowed to define its ideal worker, this could turn out to be to the detriment of teachers and learners. As Williams (1994: 10) has asked, 'Whose social and cultural assumptions do competency statements reflect?' For the course designer attempting to satisfy the needs of student teachers, learners and industry – and at the same time attempting to avoid duplication – course design involves a balancing act of challenging complexity.

It has been argued (Chappell, Gonczi and Hager 1995: 176) that there is a narrow view and a broad view of CBT:

[One] feature of the narrow definition is that it not only presupposes that competency should be measurable, but suggests that the quality of CBT courses should be judged on the basis of whether the competencies outlined in the courses are written in ways that make them measurable.

Narrow CBT favours a building block, rather than an organic, approach to learning (Nunan 2001) – reductionism as opposed to holism. An examination of the instructions to course designers published by VETAB unambiguously indicates that it is the narrow view that is being applied. This is evident in the prescribed format that an accreditation application to VETAB must take. Each competency must be broken down into elements, defined in the guidelines for course developers (VETAB 2002) as ‘the basic building blocks of a unit of competency’. These:

continue the description of the key purpose of the unit itself. They describe, in outcome terms, functions a person is able to perform in a particular area of work. The elements combine to make up the unit (VETAB 2002: 14).

Performance criteria that ‘specify the activities, skills, knowledge and understanding which provide the evidence of competent performance’ must also be developed (VETAB 2002: 14). Although knowledge and understanding are mentioned, VETAB makes it quite explicit that the overriding criterion in formulating an assessment strategy is that the competency must be observable: ‘A proposed course must contain elements of competency describing actions or outcomes that are demonstrable and assessable’ (VETAB 2002: 14).

However, as shown above, it has become increasingly inadequate to express the professional knowledge of a TESOL professional in this way. Even if it was possible to reliably create conditions under which a teacher could unfailingly demonstrate these abilities, often what the teacher can potentially do under contrived circumstances is less important to success in the real, professional context.

There is a real danger of a course becoming a *product*, which is an artefact of this process, and quite different and frequently quite incompatible with the initial vision of the course designer. Designing a VETAB-compatible TESOL course involves colluding with an institutionally sanctioned fiction of what teacher education is about.

A narrow competency-based approach to teacher education is dangerous in its failure to capture essential elements of what a teacher can know and judge. The nature and outcomes of the learning experience of a student teacher can actually be adversely affected by the constraints of CBT. In developing a sense of plausibility, the language teacher’s own experience as learner plays a central role. The process of being a student teacher offers opportunities to expand and nurture a developing professional consciousness, to transfer insights from the experience of learning to subsequent teaching contexts. In contrast, competency-based experiences of training may well lead to the transfer of these course design and assessment practices to language teaching in contexts where they are not appropriate, to the detriment of learners.

In the discredited transmission model of teacher education, the role of the teacher educator involved explaining and demonstrating the best way to teach. Implementing the VETAB definition of CBT constitutes a resurrection of this model, as specific skills and classroom practices and behaviours must be demonstrated regardless of their compatibility with the individual student teacher’s philosophy and vision. This stands in sharp contrast to the role of the post-method teacher educator, who recognises and values the prior and evolving knowledge and experience of the teachers within a context of particularity. As Kumaravadivelu (2001: 552) explains:

Teacher education must therefore be conceived of not as the experience and interpretation of a predetermined, prescribed pedagogic practice, but rather as an ongoing dialogically constructed entity involving two or more critically reflective interlocutors.

The extent to which a teacher education program must continue to incorporate experiences of traditional specific methods, procedures or techniques continues to be debated (Liu 1995). I would also argue that exposure to these, together with an interrogation of their place in the history of methodology and their implicit assumptions about language and learning, do need to be part of pre-service teacher

education. Teachers must know some things to do in the classroom, but the techniques and procedures need to be enriched by an understanding of their history and where they fit, in terms of the development of ideas and practices. Teacher educators must also consider Kumaravadivelu's (2001: 535) suggestion that teachers be exposed to a pedagogy of possibility 'by helping them to critically engage authors such as Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1994) who have raised the field's consciousness about the power and politics, ideologies and inequalities that inform L2 education around the world'. The effect of this experience on teachers may be profound without being readily observable. CBT not only devalues the application of a critical approach to teacher education but would seem to negate it totally by creating and promoting a framework in which it has no place.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that the disadvantages of TESOL courses being accredited by VETAB as sets of competencies are major ones, and there are many reasons why alternative approaches need to be debated and explored. In the methods era, it may have been possible to achieve useful pre-service teacher education through the demonstrated mastery of a prescriptive set of endorsed practices, but this is no longer the case. While training packages, with elements of competency and performance indicators, may be suitable for many skills-based technical areas of learning, in practical and philosophical-pedagogical terms, TESOL teacher education has outgrown it.

Quality assurance of Australian TESOL certificate and diploma courses remains important, but it should be done through an accreditation system that is equitable, encourages incorporation of core knowledge and skills, and simultaneously promotes in teachers a breadth and depth of knowledge, flexibility and social conscience from the very beginning of their studies. Assessment practices need to be tailored to reflect, rather than drive, course goals and content. If CBT is to have any role to play in this, then it must be in a radically different form from that which is currently applied.

This paper has sought to provide a basis for the argument that the profession should self-regulate independently of the VET sector; however, it must be acknowledged that this change will take time. Until it is achieved, the only possible course of action for professional teacher educators would seem to be that which is anecdotally reported as currently taking place: a combination of surface compliance and covert resistance. Even if it is necessary to appear to implement a set of competencies and call it teacher education, professional educators understand that this is not the essence of what they are doing. The most important *input* into teacher education does not correspond to immediate measurable outcomes, nor can it be meaningfully described as training. On the contrary, insights may be acquired during a TESOL course that influence, shape and awaken key values and dispositions. Some of these learning experiences may not bear fruit for many years.

Notes

- 1 For further discussion of Hogan's elements of competency see Ellis (2003).
- 2 CITA (The Commission on International Trans-regional Accreditation). Information is available on its website:
http://www.citaschools.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23&Itemid=44
- 3 IATQuO (The International Accreditation of TESOL Qualifying Organisations). For more information about IATQuO standards, see its website <http://www.iatquo.org/standards.htm>

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