Maria Snarski and Andrea Billíková

M O Z A M B I Q U E • S L O V A K I A

Ready-to-use Methodology Materials: Breaking the Teacher-fronted Cycle in the Classroom

F OREIGN LANGUAGES ARE COMPULSORY IN MOST PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS in Slovakia, and English language classes are among the top choices. However, training the teachers of these classes in communicative and learner-centered methodology has been a challenge for the teacher trainers there. Despite the fact that there is an explosion of communicative, interactive, and colorful course books for students to learn English, there exist very few course books or on-line materials for students to learn how to become English teachers. While these student course books are attractive and attention grabbing, and contain a range of communicative classroom activities, the teachers who use them do not usually have the appropriate training to put the books to optimum use in their classes.

EFL teacher training in Slovakia needs to prepare teachers-in-training to use more up-to-date communicative and humanistic methods in their classrooms after they graduate and begin teaching. Unfortunately, without exposure to these learner-centered methods and techniques, trainees will likely graduate and slip into the traditional teacher-fronted teaching style in their classrooms.

This article presents a methodology materials development project in the Department of English and American Studies at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia, which had the ultimate goal of preparing future teachers to move away from the traditional teacher-fronted classroom and to instruct in a more learner-centered, interactive, and reflective manner. The challenges of the local situation are explained, the approach taken to the project is summarized, and the efficacy of the approach as perceived by both the developers and the students is presented. Throughout the article, reference is made to our lesson on learning styles to demonstrate how the approach taken to the project was put into practice. Although our comments are specific to the circumstances where we worked in Slovakia, we hope that other teacher educators working in similarly challenging pre-service teacher training will benefit from our experiences.

Challenges of the local situation

The Department of English and American Studies of Constantine the Philosopher University trains future teachers of English. However, the students who come to pursue the diploma in English language are doing so more often than not to maintain or improve their English language skills with hopes of earning a high salary after graduation by working as a translator or for an international company. As a consequence, students are initially less than enthusiastic about attending the three methodology classes required for the diploma in English.

The methodology classes taken in the third, fourth, and fifth years of study (referred to in this article as M1, M2, and M3, respectively) each consist of one lecture and one seminar per week for one semester. The following five elements challenged us as facilitators of the M1 seminars:

1. Initial motivation of students enrolled in M1 is generally low because, for many of them, their expectation of being a teacher means teaching a traditional teacher-fronted class, receiving little appreciation, and earning low wages.

2. M1 covers more theory than M2 and M3, making it less appealing to students.

3. Attendance at the weekly lectures in the methodology courses is not required.

4. Students typically come from a more passive, teacher-fronted, and note-taking learning experience rather than one that emphasizes critical thinking and questioning.

5. Students and teachers do not have primary source textbooks for the M1 course.

These are not unusual challenges facing teacher trainers in a changing educational context, so we think the approach we took to the M1 course can be applied by other trainers in similar circumstances. With this in mind, each of the five challenges is discussed in terms of how our approach helped us not only to address the challenge specifically, but also to overcome it.

Approach to project:
Loop input and reflective journals

The approach we took in teaching the methodology course stemmed from the fact that both of us were relatively new to the department. Having neither a designated textbook nor a file of materials for the course made it difficult at first for us to coordinate our efforts, but this lack of materials became our incentive for collaboration. The syllabus we used was a topical one developed by the previous teacher trainers at the university. Although we knew what topics had to be covered during the course and that we could approach the topics in our own teaching style, we were concerned about emphasizing the same content in our seminars, adequately covering what might be on the exit exam, and making the course appealing to trainees. We were also hopeful that if we taught the course interactively and in a lively manner, some of the students would become interactive and lively teachers, or at least reconsider positively their expectations about becoming teachers.

Loop input

Our approach to overcoming the challenges and getting away from a teacher-fronted classroom was based on two fundamental concepts: loop input and reflective journals. Loop input capitalizes on the use of both the content of a course and the process by which the content is conveyed. In Woodward's words, "The content is carried by the process, but the process is also part of the content. That is the loop" (1991:13).

In other words, we believed that it was critical to be model teachers in the M1 course and that the students had to be aware that each week we were intentionally modelling specific techniques and practices that we were professing in the content of the course. The students were then to critique our model (or our "process"), keeping in mind the content we had presented.

For example, when we were concentrating on the topic of learning styles, we went beyond the task of having our students determine their learning styles using a questionnaire. (In our case, we adapted a questionnaire from Tanner and Green 1998.) We also made sure that our lesson plan on learning styles was arranged in such a way that each style of learner (visual, audio, kinesthetic, and tactile) could profit from it.

We built in opportunities for trainees to experience different learning styles and reflect on them in their journals. For example, the blackboard and pictures were used for the visual learners, strips of papers were handed out during problem-solving activities for tactile learners, an activity requiring some movement was done for kinesthetic learners, and small group discussions were held for audio learners. After the session, the students were asked to reflect on how learning styles were addressed, specifically, how each style was targeted through our activities and techniques. Below are two of the students' comments on the approach used in M1:

- *Your seminar was one of the few in which a teacher was not just talking about different teaching methods, but also trying to teach according to them. The thing I liked about your seminars is that they were taught with fantasy and effort, so that I, a person who is not interested in teaching, became interested.*

- *The main difference between this class and others was the way of acquiring knowledge. We learned how to apply theory to practice by experiencing.*

These and other similar comments confirmed our belief that the loop input approach was effective and memorable. Students acquired new knowledge not only by hearing and reading about the theories and techniques, but also by directly experiencing them.

Reflective journals

To ensure that students understood the connection between the theory in the lectures (and readings) and the practice in the seminars, we gave reflective journal writing as homework. Each week we assigned a series of questions to help students make connections between the lecture and the seminar. For the seminar session on learning styles, the following journal entry was assigned:

"Read the selection from Maggioli (1995) and complete the chart entitled Accommodating Learning Styles. This chart summarizes how to help learners learn better by teaching with attention to their learning style. Based on the reading, what advice could you give students about becoming more effective and efficient learners for the times when the teacher is addressing a learning style other than his or her own? Be sure to include the reference in your reflection and quote appropriately."

Students were given two journal assignments each week: a series of questions to guide their reflection on the week's seminar session and an article to read, summarize, and comment on. We collected the students' homework at each lesson to check their reflections on the seminars as well as their progress in synthesizing and summarizing ideas. We used the opportunity of checking the homework to determine which aspects of the course were working well and which needed some improvement. Here are comments from the reflective journals of three students:

- *At first I was a little bit surprised that we had to write weekly reflections. It took me a great amount of time. But now I know it was good and made me study M1 during the semester and also write my own opinions about the problems of the topic.*

- *I appreciate that you have also provided us with feedback on our feedback. It helped me to correct my mistakes and encouraged me to do my work better for the next class.*

- *I cannot believe that I have written all the homework I was supposed to. Maybe I did it because I wanted to see your feedback, which helped me to improve my work during the course.*

The students' comments in their journals were encouraging. We believed that if the tasks

were frequent and practical, the course and its accompanying homework would be well received. Students in M1 tended to resist the reflective journals at first, but as the tasks appeared useful, their understanding of the material increased and their opposition to writing the journals decreased. In addition to learning the content of the M1 course through the weekly reflections, students were also sharpening their skills in summarizing, quoting, and expressing their own opinions, which were valuable skills for their future academic work.

Loop input and reflective journals were excellent classroom techniques for making the students more active and responsible for their learning. In addition, the two techniques served as a framework for us, the course developers and facilitators, for designing each weekly seminar. We took the topic from the syllabus, designed an interactive class to model the salient points of the topic during the seminar, and provided reflective questions as a focus for the students and to check their understanding of the topic. It actually became a simple three-step design process. In the learning style seminar, we took the importance of the different styles as the most salient point of the seminar and made sure we addressed each style in the seminar through various activities. Then we provided reflective questions so the students could consider the activities used in the seminar and reflect on what learning style was addressed in each activity.

We often invited our students to compare what we discussed or modeled in the M1 class to their other classes at the university to see how other teachers presented methodological concepts. Observing their other classes in light of the principles experienced in M1 helped these teachers-in-training recognize the significance of selecting methodological techniques to achieve a specific aim. M1 no longer seemed to be a detached, theoretical class that had little meaning. They could now analyze their other learning situations in terms of what they were studying in M1.

How our approach addressed the local challenges

We were able to use the techniques of loop input and reflective journals specifically to overcome the five local challenges previously mentioned.

1. Initial motivation of students enrolled in M1 is generally low because, for many of them, their expectation of being a teacher means teaching a traditional teacher-fronted class, receiving little appreciation, and earning low wages.

The teaching profession in Slovakia has been known to follow a traditional authoritative approach: teachers supply facts and definitions and give frequent tests. With our new approach to teaching M1, we were hoping the old adage of "teaching how you were taught" would hold true. It was not our intention to conduct a teacher-fronted classroom, and we hoped our students, as teachers-in-training, would benefit from the learner-centered techniques they experienced firsthand and reconsider the teaching profession as a rewarding career.

M1 students made these comments on becoming teachers:

- *After going through M1 seminar, I realized that teaching can be interesting, but it depends not only on the particular subject but also on the teacher's personal characteristics and attitudes to this subject and to her profession.*

- *I think I'm now more confident and also more interested in becoming a teacher, although it takes more time to prepare for the lessons and materials than I expected.*

- *I don't know why but I feel more interested in becoming a teacher and finding the ways to work with students. I think that M1 was very good experience for us.*

- *I became interested in teaching and even if I do not want to be a teacher, I would like to try it at least.*

- *I was not planning to become a teacher. But the M1 course showed me that teaching does not have to be boring.*

Foreign language pedagogy has come quite a way since the days when the predominant teaching techniques were simply having students memorize facts and definitions and giving frequent tests. Nevertheless, there seems to be a lag in teacher training aimed at bringing communicative and humanistic techniques to some parts of Central Europe. This lag in training might be partially responsible for the lack of interest in becoming a teacher in the region. Our students had probably not experienced interactive methods when learn-

ing English or other subjects in school, so their view of what it meant to be a teacher was likely limited.

Although we could not do anything about the low wages associated with the profession, we hoped to show that teaching could in fact be fulfilling for the instructor and help dispel any negative image of the profession. The students' reflections show this goal was reached.

2. M1 covers more theory than M2 and M3, making it less appealing to students.

Initially, loop input and reflective journals turned the seminar into a puzzle for the students. Once they grasped how the seminars were set up, they began to look more critically at our teaching to see whether we were indeed putting into practice the techniques we espoused. For the various methods covered in the syllabus (audio lingual, Suggestopedia, etc.), we gave demonstrations in class. Students could then see if what they experienced matched what they had read about the method. They were also able to compare the methods more easily. In teaching the seminar this way, we hoped that the theory was no longer just something the students read about, but something they also experienced.

The course moved from being based mainly on observation to becoming more hands-on due to the progression of the syllabus topics. The early sessions on various methods focused on simulation and participatory techniques. The later topics required the students to apply their knowledge by developing lesson plans, observing specific aspects of a class, and evaluating textbooks.

Students made these comments on how the theory was put into practice in M1:

- *I liked that I learned many things through brainstorming, discussion, and games. Sometimes, I didn't even realize that I was learning.*

- *M1 course was quite different from the subjects where only the teacher speaks and students write.*

- *The theory was explained very well—through our experience and through many examples.*

- *I appreciated the link between the theory and real life. We dealt with things that will be useful when teaching.*

- *I can still remember the methods and I have an idea of what they look like in practice. If*

we had learned the theory only from books, I would not have remembered that as well as I can now.

Making the connection between theory and practice using loop input was critical to the success of the course. We found that engaging students in class activities directly related to the theory or the information presented in the lectures helped them to take responsibility for their learning, something with which they initially had problems. It became clear through the students' comments and responses that they appreciated our interactive approach and wanted more of it in their future studies.

3. Attendance at the weekly lectures in the methodology courses is not required.

Although we had no control over the fact that some students were unable to attend the lectures, we did make the information from the lectures available to them. We put together a reading file that included relevant chapters or sections from various books and periodicals on methodology to cover the content of each week of the syllabus. Students were expected to borrow a reading each week and summarize it in a reflective manner. We were not so much concerned that they wrote in an academic style, but that they understood and gave their opinions on the topic.

The reading file served as an additional means for the learners to get information from the lecture. It also gave them exposure to academic writing and professional journals. The summaries, combined with their weekly reflections and seminar handouts, created a condensed methods textbook.

Through the weekly summaries, students learned to select materials and practice summarizing and quoting skills. These skills are often neglected; university students in Slovakia are prone to copy entire passages from books without citing or quoting materials used. Since the trainees are expected to show these academic skills in their diploma thesis, M1 became one of the courses that gave them practice in these skills. Two students made these comments on the weekly lectures:

- *Coming to lectures and taking the notes was okay, but I felt as a robot when writing the notes. Sometimes I did not focus on the topic at all because I did not manage to concentrate on writing the notes and listening to lectures.*

- *I could not attend the lectures, so the idea of the reading file was great. Some articles were too academic. I am glad that I was made to work hard during the semester by reading these articles. I think that I have improved my English too, especially vocabulary connected with language teaching.*

The weekly reading from the file and reflective journal writing about it partially covered the gap created when students could not attend the lectures. At the same time, the assignment requiring them to summarize and reflect on the reading sharpened their academic writing skills. This approach to getting the information from the lecture proved to be a way to promote responsible and autonomous learning, because the students knew that, ultimately, they were accountable for the material. The reading file provided an easily available alternative to the lectures for those who could not attend. For those who simply appreciated being able to read the information at their own pace, it served as a supplement to attending the lectures, either as preparation before attending or for consolidating their learning afterwards.

4. Students typically come from a more passive, teacher-fronted, and note-taking learning experience rather than one that emphasizes critical thinking and questioning.

By using the experiential aspect of loop input, the students were automatically more active in the class. Getting students active, however, often requires the right conditions in the classroom. We deliberately tried to lower teacher talking time to a minimum to allow for increased student talking time. This required that students be more responsible outside the classroom by arriving for class prepared and with their homework completed. For this reason we stressed the reading file and weekly reflections.

With the loop input, the students became more animated and eager to participate in the seminar. We took the roles of advisers, monitors, and partners. The sessions were arranged in such a way to promote an exchange of opinions either in pairs or groups, or the entire class. We were open to giving students feedback on their work at the end of our sessions, and they were open to giving us their feedback on our teaching by writing their reflective journals. Here is one student com-ment typical of most students' reaction to the interactive classroom:

- *You let us express our opinions. I am very shy and lazy so I do not speak much at other seminars. But there was always something to discuss at M1 so I had to speak and think.*

Although eliciting can prompt students to respond, it is not sufficient to sustain student participation. Creating an interactive classroom takes planning and the right conditions. We found a mixture of outside preparation and in-class application to be a good combination for a more learner-centered classroom.

5. Students and teachers do not have primary source textbooks for the M1 course.

Each week as part of our preparation for class, we wrote very meticulous lesson plans. We did this intentionally for several reasons. First, we wanted to ensure that all seminar sections were taught consistently. We also wanted to keep a detailed record of what we taught and how we taught it for future semesters and instructors. We needed to have a template for the weekly student handout, too. Finally, we wanted to model the importance of lesson planning for the students.

Because writing detailed lesson plans is time consuming, we shared the responsibility. Each week, one of us would prepare the upcoming topic listed in the syllabus and have a draft lesson plan for the other instructor to read over and comment on. We would then meet and discuss the plan in terms of its aims, materials, related readings, activities, sequencing, and timing.

A weekly handout for the students was created based on this lesson plan and distributed and used in each seminar. The handouts were, in effect, a mini-version of our lesson plans for the class. Each handout included the aims of the particular class, a list of readings (in the reading file), the tasks completed and time allocation, and the weekly reflective questions. Most of the handouts were only one sheet of paper photocopied on both sides. In the task section, we left space for students to take notes. In this way, they were accountable for obtaining some of the information in class, but they were guided on what they needed in their notes. Also, they were often so busy experiencing techniques that it became difficult to take too many notes. Many students commented on the weekly handouts in their journals:

- *There were many materials used. For me, the handouts were very important. I always knew what we were about to do during the lesson. I liked the clear objectives.*

- *The handout is also very useful because it's easy to remember what we have done in the semi-nar, what problems we discussed, etc. It helped us to write our reflections, and it was good for remembering certain facts from the seminar.*

- *I especially like handouts with homework. If I have it written down on a sheet of paper, I can look at it any time I want to. To have it on the table while I write the homework is very use-ful for me. It is a little syllabus that I write.*

- *When I saw your preparation for our lessons, I felt responsible to accomplish my homework for M1. You worked hard and it would feel unfair if I did not.*

The lack of materials was problematic from the beginning. We knew that simply handing out piles of photocopies was not the answer. Providing relevant materials that engaged the students was fundamental to help them begin taking responsibility for their learning.

Conclusion

We think our approach was successful in overcoming the challenges associated with poorly motivated pre-service teachers, a lack of textbooks, and a history of teacher-fronted instruction in a teacher training institution. Although there are still aspects of the course that need to be improved, the comments from the students' end-of-course evaluations illus-trate that the course, plus the rather simple techniques of loop input and reflective jour-nals, were both productive and effective. In addition, most students seemed to appreciate our efforts in the M1 course.

We hope that this explanation of the redesign of the Methodology 1 course with the learner-centered tasks, reflective journals, and modeling of theoretical concepts will be useful to other teacher trainers facing similar chal-lenges. We feel that regardless of whether grad-uates expect to teach, the methodology courses can appeal more broadly to students by equip-ping them with critical thinking skills as well as evaluative and reflective skills for whatever pro-fession they may choose.

Note:

We invite readers to view the detailed sample lesson plan and student handout on learning styles mentioned in this article at: http://www. ff.ukf.sk/kaaa/courses/m1_learningstyles.htm

References

Maggioli, G. H. D. 1995. *Managing learning styles in the classroom.* Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Tanner, R. and C. Green. 1998. *Tasks for teacher education: Trainer's book.* Essex: Addison Wes-ley Longman.

Woodward, T. 1991. *Models and metaphors in lan-guage teacher training.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maria Snarski is a U.S. Department of State Senior English Language Fellow in Maputo, Mozambique. She was a Fulbright Scholar in Slovakia when she worked on the meth-odology materials project.

Andrea Billíková is a lecturer in the Depart-ment of English and American Studies at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia.