Practicing Theories or Theories of Practice? An Investigation of the Role Theories of Teaching Play in the Practice of pre-Service and Experienced Teachers

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ABSTRACT. *This paper investigates the beliefs pre-service and experienced teachers hold about how theories of teaching and learning influence classroom practice. Two focus groups were held, with pre-service and experienced teachers enrolled in an MA programme in Applied Linguistics in the United Kingdom. Following these focus groups, stimulated recall interviews took place with select members of these focus groups. What emerged in the data collected was that teachers in both groups possess a similar perspective on the efficacy theory has with regard to classroom practice; however, experienced teachers were not able to articulate a method for integrating theory into classroom practice. It is posited that this is due to individual teaching contexts and differing personal beliefs regarding teaching and learning.*
Keywords: classroom practice, theory, procedural knowledge, declarative knowledge, teacher development

I. Introduction

This paper examines the role that theories of teaching and learning play in classroom practice from the perspective of pre-service and experienced teachers. Under investigation is the notion of integrating theory with classroom practice. An analysis of focus group and interview data reveals that pre-service and experienced teachers articulate similar beliefs regarding the role theory plays in classroom practice, despite differing levels of classroom experience. The findings reveal that experienced practitioners are unable to display any systematic approach for integrating theory and practice. It is argued that teaching context and personal beliefs on the part of practitioners makes the notion of a systematic method of integrating theory with practice problematic. Thus, the following research questions were designed to examine the possible similarities and differences pre-service and experienced teachers would hold regarding the role of theory and how theory could be integrated into professional practice.

1. Do pre-service teachers with little to no teaching experience have beliefs about language learning and teaching that differ from experienced ESL teachers beliefs?
2. What differences in understanding of theories of language teaching and learning do pre-service teachers display?
3. Do experienced ESL teachers display knowledge of how to integrate theory into classroom practice, and if so, how is this done?
4. Is there a discernible difference between the knowledge displayed about theory and its role in classroom practice in pre-service and experienced ESL teachers?

II. Literature Review

Pre-service teachers and their developing understanding of the role that theories of learning play in effective classroom practice is a subject of ongoing discussion in the academic community (Freeman, 1996; Freeman and Johnson, 1998; Allen, 2002; Ulichny, 1996; Watzke, 2007; van Gool, 2003). It is widely agreed that pre-service teachers need a theoretical underpinning to inform classroom practice in order to facilitate language acquisition on the part of the learner as stated by Krashen:

> 'When we provide theory we give them (teachers) the underlying rationale for methodology in general. This permits adaptation for different situations, evaluations of new techniques, and evaluations of theory. Without theory, there is no way to distinguish effective teaching procedures from ritual no way to determine which aspects of a method are helpful and which are not helpful' (MacDonald, Badger & White, 2001, p.953).

As Markee (1997) asserts "professionally developed teachers are good teachers" (p.90). It has been claimed that pre-service teachers may view theory as having little to do with the day-to-day running of a classroom and so regard it as being irrelevant. This suggests a polarization between what is seen to be useful for classroom teaching by pre-service teachers and theoretical ideas which may be perceived as being impractical (MacDonald et al, 2001 a). MacDonald (2001) also observes that the teacher education curriculum is also often divided between research and theory courses and practical teaching courses.

Freeman and Johnson (1998) describe the traditional approach of teacher education programmes as operating "under the assumption that teachers needed discrete amounts of knowledge, usually in the form of general theories and methods that were assumed to be applicable to any teaching context (p. 399)." This quote argues that early programmes for training language teachers may not have taken into account the differing backgrounds that pre-service teachers bring to bear in the process of learning how to be a language teacher, and the fact that pre-service teachers will operate in a variety of contexts, an observation also made by Allen (2002), Pennington (1996),

Kwo (1996) and Busch (2010).

For a theory of teaching practice to gain acceptance, it is logical to assume that the theory in question is viewed as being of use to the prospective and practicing language teacher in terms of effectiveness in teaching the target language and learner uptake of that language. However, the problematic aspect of this notion is *how* pre-service teachers are to integrate these theories of language teaching and learning into classroom practice. Owing to the fact that integrating theories about language teaching into classroom practice is problematic, a distinction between teacher education and teacher training has emerged in the academic community. MacDonald et al (2001) quoting Richards and Nunan, describes teacher education as the development of theories related to decision-making in the classroom and strategies of critical self-awareness, while Ellis views teacher training as familiarizing student teachers with techniques and skills to apply in the classroom. There is a distinction and also a link between theory and practice (Almarza, 1996), or what has been referred to as declarative and procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge is framed as knowledge about teaching, focusing on theoretical understandings, while procedural knowledge according to Johnson is knowledge of how to teach and the instructional routines to use in class.

It can be argued that the goal of teacher education programmes would include establishing links between these areas in the minds of pre-service and experienced teachers and to provide these teachers with insights into how to integrate theory into practice. Gatbonton (1999) asserts that 'novice and experienced teachers occupy different stages on a continuum depicting the development of expertise' (p.46). If this is the case, encapsulating theories for practitioners to apply in practice is inherently problematic, especially with regard to pre-service teachers; no one practitioner will have the same needs or same perception of how theory can inform classroom practice. There is a bind between the knowledge necessary to manage a classroom, theoretical underpinnings that inform professional practice and how the two can be integrated.

In the literature, there is another aspect discussed with regard to pre-service teachers and that is the beliefs that the pre-service teacher holds with regard to learning and classroom practice (Allen, 2002; Ulichny, 1996; Almarza, 1996). In the process of learning to teach it is possible that a pre-service teacher may hold a pragmatic view of theory and not see it as having a large role to play in classroom practice. This means that such a teacher is focused upon procedural knowledge. Personal values and beliefs may inform what pre-service teachers plan to do in the classroom to a large extent. Pennington (1996) claims that pre-service teachers will only be affected in areas 'where input is valued and salient to the individual and where it is congruent with and interpretable within the teacher's own world of thought and action' (p.340). Allen (2010) declares that 'even before beginning their careers, beginning teachers may have strongly developed beliefs about teaching and learning' (p.519). Pre-service teachers, then, enter the classroom with a prior set of beliefs and knowledge of how classrooms work, based on

their early experiences as learners and this perception shapes how they view learning and teaching. These beliefs interact with the pre-service teacher's knowledge of theories about teaching and learning (declarative knowledge) and understandings of classroom practice (procedural knowledge). This has an impact upon, and shapes, the ideas the practitioner holds about teaching.

In summary, there are three factors that can potentially influence classroom practice; declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge and values and beliefs that practitioners hold from their educational experiences.

III. Method

Focus Groups

Two forms of data collection were employed. Two focus groups were held, one with a group of pre-service teachers, and another with a group of experienced teachers, the criteria for experience being six months or more of teaching practice. The responses elicited within the focus group were filmed and recorded to ensure accuracy and then transcribed verbatim. This transcript was then analysed to discern themes that emerged in relation to the questions asked about theories of language teaching and learning, and how theory could be integrated into classroom practice. This approach was also carried out in order to discern themes that emerged with regard to the relationship between beliefs and teaching practices that the focus group participants held.

Stimulated Recall Interviews

From the focus group the aim was to discover participants' perspectives on the issues outlined above, which could then be examined in greater detail in stimulated recall interviews. This method of data collection was chosen because it would allow a more considered and evaluative response from respondents as to observations made in the focus group and would allow the researcher to go deeper into the thought processes that informed the responses given in the focus group.

In summary, focus groups and stimulated recall interviews were employed to function as a methodology that would allow for a comprehensive approach to analysis of the data collected in order to answer the research questions posed in this investigation. The methods employed here are qualitative in nature and were employed to examine participants' views of how theories of teaching and learning relate to the business of classroom practice and allow for a depth of analysis of beliefs and knowledge that quantitative methods would not.

Research Participants

The participants in the first focus group, containing pre-service teachers with little to no

teaching experience, were seven Educational and Applied Linguistics students from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, engaged in M.A degree research. Six of these informants were from China, with one participant having two months teaching experience, another one week, and a final member of this group less than a year, while the final member of this group was from Hong Kong. These informants were chosen because they possess little to no teaching experience but were enrolled in a Master's degree programme in Applied Linguistics, and were enrolled in a module called 'Introduction to TESOL' which includes a session of micro-teaching, which had recently been completed. The participants were volunteers and had signed consent forms for their data to be used in this study. Hereafter they will be assigned pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

The participants in the second focus group were five experienced teachers of English as a second language, also enrolled at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne as M.A students in Educational and Applied Linguistics. Originally, it had been my aim to conduct this focus group with practitioners of more than two years teaching experience but it emerged that two of the participants had been teaching for nine months. However, it was decided that the data contributed would likely be worthwhile, as the two participants in this case were still 'experienced' practitioners compared to the participants in the first focus group. The informants also represented a more diverse grouping than the first focus group in terms of country of birth and teaching background. One informant was from Turkey and had nine months of teaching experience. There were three British informants participating in this focus group, one having five years of teaching experience in England, Australia, Thailand and Poland, while another informant had 11 years of teaching experience in Asia and eastern Europe; the final member of this group of British informants had nine months of teaching experience in China. The final member of this focus group was Chinese and had three year experience of teaching Middle School in China. These participants were also volunteers and had signed consent forms for their data to be used in this study. These participants were also assigned pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

IV. Findings and Discussion
(1) Focus Group One – Inexperienced Teaching Practitioners

The first form of data under analysis is the responses given by participants in the first focus group containing pre-service teachers with little to no teaching experience. What emerged from this data was an account of the knowledge that pre-service teachers possess before becoming in-service teachers with regard to theory and its place in classroom practice.

The first item of interest to emerge was that the participants in this focus group professed to hold no knowledge of theory at all. In response to the preliminary question of 'What theories about language teaching are you familiar with?', 'Vygotsky' and 'Chomsky' were the most

common responses. When asked for clarification of theories proposed by either Vygotsky or Chomsky, Rose stated, 'About theory I have no idea'. This was the consensus of the group until Sarah-Jane noted, 'I just know the approaches'. It was at this moment that the informants showed greater understanding, mentioning two 'approaches; Task-Based Language Teaching and Communicative Language Teaching. Upon further questioning, it was made apparent that the participants' lack of understanding regarding the term 'theory' was not conceptual, rather it was semantic; approaches is the term used in the 'Introduction to TESOL' module and so is what the participants are familiar with. Other themes to emerge from this focus group were, the abstract nature of theories of language teaching for pre-service teachers, how theories about language teaching could be integrated into classroom practice, how theory can inform classroom practice and the difficulty of integrating theory into practice.

i. The Abstract Nature of Theory

When asked if it was easy to follow the content of lessons in the 'Introduction to TESOL' module when the class content was about theory, Rose related that:

> Sometimes, ah I feel it's a little abstract. Umm…can't understand theory completely because I have no experience.

Donna stated that she had one week of teaching experience and her experience of teaching had been:

> Ah I just taught ah taught one girl and I ah volunteer teacher and I just follow the text book.

These comments are revealing because they encapsulate two of the problems that commonly face pre-service teachers; the dichotomy between the possibly abstruse content found in theories about language teaching for the pre-service teacher and the idea that it is through classroom practice that the validity of theory becomes clear. Also evident is the potential for pre-service teachers to rely on text books as an authority to follow in classroom practice as observed by Berliner:

> "The novice teacher may have too little experience to reflect on until extensive classroom experience has been acquired" (Kwo, 1996: 296).

Numrich (1996) posits that there is a process that pre-service teachers undergo in order to acquire facility in teaching and so it can be said that while pre-service teachers may struggle at times to see the value of theory as it relates to practice, they are aware that there is a relationship between the two and that theory can inform and influence classroom practice. That theory appears to pre-service teachers as abstract renders its application in the classroom context problematic.

ii. Theories about Language Teaching and Classroom Practice

The participants in the focus group identified Communicative Language Teaching and

Task-Based Learning as the two theories that would be of benefit in future teaching practice. The perception expressed was that either theory would help the prospective teacher achieve certain pedagogical goals. Sarah-Jane stated that Communicative Language Teaching would be of benefit to her because it is:

> learner-centred…learner-centred and communicative skills…more important than maybe the…focus on the meaning not the form.

Donna stated that she would also select Communicative Language Teaching as a method to employ in the future because it would 'produce the student's ah the student's speaking'. Astrid selected Task-Based Language Teaching as offering her the most scope as a future practitioner:

> Because in China TBLT a little similar with this TBLT now we have learned.

Zoe also selected Task-Based Language Teaching because:

> I think it can give a student a very strong impression and make them easier to learn.

Zoe's response tallies with Busch's (2010 belief that 'pre-service teachers default into methods and techniques that they experienced, rather than what they are trained to do...' (p.319), a belief also shared by Allen (2002) and Ulichny (1996). It is made apparent in literature related to pre-service teachers and their perspective on the role theory may play in classroom practice that prior beliefs and experiences, or what Almarza (1996) calls 'the apprenticeship of observation' (p.51) plays a major role in how the prospective teacher is going to teach.

iii. How Theory Can Inform Classroom Practice

In response to the question, 'Do you think knowing about theories will make you better teachers in the future?', there was general acceptance that this was the case. Sarah-Jane was adamant that this was so, based on a belief that 'we should know the theory then put it into practice'. Rose stated that:

> Ah if I know some theories and ah when I teach students I feel confident.

This was echoed by Zoe who stated:

> I think it is in the theories ah very good for teaching because theories has been tested for years and it should be a good way to make your teaching ah efficiently.

Such comments show that for pre-service teachers there is a belief that theory can and should inform practice. Freeman (1996) states that 'theory…is a unified means to conceptualize teaching' (p.489). However, the above comments also reveal that the pre-service teachers in this focus group have only a general understanding of why practitioners make theory a part of practice, based on affective notions such as confidence building or efficiency.

iv. The Difficulty in Making Theory a Part of Practice

When answering the question, 'What do you think would be the problem with making theory part of your teaching in the future?', the informants demonstrated an understanding and

awareness of practical concerns related to classroom teaching, these being the level of learners, learner motivation, class timetabling and whether the learners will relate to the approach used by the teacher in classroom teaching. Donna stated that:

> The problem I think is the students may not like your teaching theory because ah for example of you want to use TBLT ah you make your class interesting ah impressive but students just want to pass the exam.

This comment shows that pre-service teachers are aware of the difficulty in integrating theory into practice though are not able to offer any solutions to this dilemma. It is possible that their understanding of the problems in making theory a part of classroom practice (learner motivation for example) are based upon their understandings and experience of the educational context in China, according with Ulichny's (1996)view that an 'interpretive framework is brought to class based on past experiences as teacher and learner' (p.195).

From the focus group conducted with pre-service teachers with little to no teaching experience, concerns emerged related to the abstract nature of theory, general theories about language teaching and learning, how theory can inform classroom practice and the difficulty in making theory a part of practice. The informants displayed a lack of detailed understanding of how theory and practice are related and how this relation can be revealed through classroom practice, arguably because they have no classroom experience to call upon. The informants displayed beliefs about teaching rather than knowledge, revealing that the respondents in this particular focus group possess a stronger grasp of procedural knowledge about how language classrooms work, rather than a complex understanding of conceptual knowledge about the theoretical underpinnings of professional classroom practice.

(2) Focus Group Two - Experienced Teaching Practitioners

A second focus group was held with an assortment of teachers with varying degrees of experience, ranging from nine months to 11 years. It was decided to hold a focus group with experienced teachers in order to determine if teachers with experience display greater understandings of theory and the role it plays in classroom practice, and an awareness of how to integrate theory into classroom practice.

It was readily apparent that this group of informants possessed a greater knowledge of theories related to language teaching; informants mentioned the communicative method, the silent way, direct method, natural approach, grammar-translation and the audio-lingual method. Informants were also able to relate their understanding of these theories to their classroom teaching experience. An example of this was offered by Mickey:

> I've worked in ah private international big language chains of schools so it's mainly been communicative methods.

Referring to classroom practice was a trend that emerged consistently in the data. Themes that

emerged were the methods in which these informants learned about theory, the problematic nature of relating theory to practice, and how knowledge of theories improves classroom practice.

i. Learning about Theory

Two of the informants in the focus group have CELTA certification and both mentioned that such training predominantly focused on a narrow form and application of Communicative Language Teaching. Mickey said that he had also gained knowledge of theories related to language teaching through reading and then applying what he had read in the classroom. Jack related that he had gained the majority of his understanding of theory in his M.A studies at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, rather than from his teaching practice. Melanie said that she had attended teacher training courses in her native Turkey that focused on approaches and techniques to language teaching where theory was a large part of the classroom content. However, for this informant, 'what makes you a real teacher is the classroom itself'. She felt that there was a dissonance between theoretical discourse and the practical demands of the language classroom. This is in keeping with MacDonald's (2002) contention that there is a perception in student teachers that research and theory are too theoretical and are not based on the realities of classroom practice.

ii. The Problems of Relating Theory to Practice

When asked about relating theory to practice, Mickey asserted that the difficulties in this case are related to lack of knowledge on the part of the practitioner. He stated:

> it's very easy to go away and read something in a book but when it comes to designing a classroom activity…

Unlike respondents in the previous focus group, informants from the group of experienced teachers related their answers to practice. This argues that experienced teachers base their concept of theory around how it can apply to classroom practice and the possible advantages it may offer.

iii. Knowledge of Theories: Making Teaching Better

It was generally agreed in the focus group that knowledge of theories would make teaching better. Examples based on practice were given to illustrate how this would be the case. Jack asserted:

> If you're repairing student errors, um previous to doing this course I would do it intuitively. However, doing it intuitively as a professional teacher's inadequate. You need a strong theoretical grounding, you need to understand why you're correcting to ensure acquisition occurs.

Jack's statement identifies theory as giving practitioners insight into what informs professional practice. The group of inexperienced teachers were not able to do this, demonstrating that

experienced teachers are better able to conceive of theory as having a bearing and influence on practice. Jack further exemplified this point, claiming that:

> If you're lacking any underpinning theory it's it's kind of an irrelevance, you need to ensure students are actually learning, not just they might be communicating but they are learning.

This comment is revealing because Jack is able to distinguish between communication and learning for a purpose. It would seem that he is able to link theory with practice, in terms of articulating what he as a teacher aims to achieve in class (learning) and a classroom phenomenon (communication) that may not indicate learning. Mickey pointed out the need for a practitioner to possess a 'metalanguage'. He believes that knowledge of theory provides this.

> You need to learn in the classroom and you also need to read or be exposed to this knowledge so you can give yourself, I guess if nothing else, a metalangauge for what you're doing, you need to be able to put it in words because doing things intuitively doesn't always work.

It is clear that experienced teachers are able to articulate why theory should play a role in teaching practice. However, from the focus group participants were not able to explain how theory should be made part of practice. It was agreed that this is difficult to do and that classroom experience should eventually lead to an awareness and method for doing so.

Stimulated Recall Interviews

It was decided to hold stimulated recall interviews with selected participants from the focus groups in order to examine responses that were of interest in greater detail and so gain a greater understanding of how participants conceive of the relationship between theories of teaching and learning and classroom practice.

1. Billie

Billie had claimed in the focus group for inexperienced teachers that knowledge about theories would help pre-service teachers. When asked why this was the case, she responded:

> It's like when you know more, like I have no experience at all in teaching and then I come here to learn about the theories um so that I can have a background knowledge like a foundation…and based on the foundation I go and apply the theories to practice.

It is revealing that Billie was not able to make a link between these theories and classroom practice; at the pre-service level it appears that theory is an abstract notion and that practice makes theory relevant for pre-service teachers.

2. Melanie

Melanie had been teaching for nine months in Turkey. In the focus group she had agreed that knowledge of theories was useful but as was stated earlier, it was in the classroom that a practitioner became a real teacher. Her feeling was that:

> When it comes to the classroom they (theories) sometimes don't work and the teacher has to make

up his own way.

Melanie's comments reveal that a practitioner of even limited experience has already begun to conceive of how theory can inform practice but also of how theory can be shaped to apply to the context the practitioner works in. This is of note because Melanie's situation delineates the importance of practice in a practitioner's understanding and application of theory.

3. Mickey

Mickey is a teacher with 11 years experience in a variety of contexts. In the focus group for experienced teachers he had asserted that theory would supply practitioners with a 'metalanguge' related to expressing concepts involved in theory. He was asked if pre-service teachers could gain knowledge of theory independent from classroom practice. He responded:

> I think some of it comes with experience unwittingly…you're going to get a feel for what works and what doesn't work. But I I think it can't be with experience alone. You need the metalanguage and you need the wider theoretical underpinning.

The perspective offered here is that theory and practice must go together. It is offered as a possibility that a practitioner can gain knowledge of theories through practice but may not be able give a name to the knowledge being gained. The need for a metalanguage allows practitioners to describe and evaluate their knowledge of theory and how it applies to practice.

In summary, the interview data shown here reveals that Billie, Melanie and Mickey were able to articulate the value of theory for classroom practitioners, this being that such theories provide a basis for classroom practice. However, unlike Billie (an inexperienced teacher) Melanie and Mickey offered a differing perspective. They stated that theory was malleable and adaptable to the needs of the classroom teacher. An awareness of how and when to adapt theory to suit the pedagogical needs of a given moment is acquired with experience. This suggests that theory is an abstract concept for inexperienced teachers and theories of teaching and learning would be more effective when combined with teaching practicum. Inexperienced teachers lack insight into the limitations of theory and how theory can be applied in classroom practice.

Findings

This paper has attempted to answer four research questions. The first was whether or not pre-service teachers with little to no experience held beliefs about language learning and teaching that differ from those of experienced ESL teachers. From the data collected it would appear that inexperienced teachers do not necessarily hold differing views. Though lacking teaching experience, participants from this group were able to articulate views of language learning and teaching that referred to the educational context the participants were from. One example of this was the position taken on Task-Based Learning Theory and its relation to

learning in the Chinese context. Issues such as the advantages it offers to the practitioners, as well as some of the potential drawbacks were mentioned. Though lacking in teaching experience, the pre-service teachers did not display beliefs about language teaching and learning that were essentially different from those of the teachers in the group of experienced practitioners.

The second research question was about the differences in understanding of theories of language teaching and learning that pre-service teachers displayed. The data shows that these pre-service teachers were able to display some understanding of theories; while this understanding was limited and was not informed by classroom practice, participants were able to express a view that theories such as Task-Based Learning and Communicative Language Teaching have a role to play in practice, if only to give a practitioner confidence. It could be said that participants focused on the affective value of theory rather than how it informs classroom practice. Responses offered by the group of experienced teachers often related theory with classroom experience and so displayed greater sophistication and a framework of how theory informs practice However, the responses offered by the group of pre-service practitioners did reveal a belief that theory would be useful and possibly applicable when it came time to begin a teaching career. The responses given by experienced practitioners oriented towards how classroom experience influenced which theories could be applied in class (Communicative Language Teaching for example), and how theory might be applied (selecting different sections of the textbook to use based on learner needs).

The third research question investigated whether experienced ESL teachers displayed knowledge of how to integrate theory into classroom practice. The data reveals that even with varying levels of experience, practitioners from this group were not able to describe or outline a particular method for integrating theory with practice. Instead, the views expressed focused on the notion that over time, classroom practice would develop in the novice an idea of which theories would work in the classroom context. Classroom experience would shape how novice teachers would view theory and how they would chose to integrate it into practice. It could be argued that this view is an approach to integrating theory and practice but it does not display the unified idea of systematic uptake that a method would support.

The fourth research question was whether or not there was a discernible difference between the knowledge displayed about theory and its role in classroom practice in pre-service and experienced ESL teachers. In this case, pre-service teachers were able to only discuss two theories with any authority; they were Task-Based Language Teaching and Communicative Language Teaching. As stated earlier this would appear to be because they had experienced these approaches as learners. Experienced teachers were able to discuss a wider number of theories, including the direct method, audio-lingual method and the grammar translation method, in addition to those discussed by the group of novice teachers. Experienced teachers

were also able to relate these theories to classroom practice, giving examples of how knowledge of these theories had informed practice. The ability to relate theory to practice meant that a more integrated understanding of theory was displayed, a significant difference between the responses and evaluations offered by the pre-service group of teachers.

V. Conclusion

Integrating theories of language learning and teaching with classroom practice is problematic, not only for pre-service teachers but also for experienced practitioners. It is argued that there is a distinction between the two; yet it is also argued both inform and influence each other (Freeman, 1996; Freeman and Johnson, 1998). While it is not argued here that there is a dichotomy between the two, this paper has made clear that pre-service teachers are not able to articulate a role for theory as part of classroom practice beyond providing a foundation for pedagogy. In teacher development programmes such as the one pre-service participants were involved in, greater opportunities for classroom practice would likely foster critical facility as to how to adapt theory to the classroom context. Theory without classroom practice appears to provide pre-service teachers with knowledge of what theory potentially offers but no basis for understanding how to integrate theories of teaching and learning into classroom practice, according with the views of Markee (1997) and Almarza (1996). A limitation of this study is that it does not examine data taken from classroom practice. In the case of experienced teachers, this was not possible as they were no longer in their teaching contexts; rather they were fulltime graduate students. Pre-service teachers had performed one session of collaborative micro-teaching. However, I was not given permission to analyse this data. I would suggest that it would lend credence to the argument presented here that pre-service teachers are unable to relate theory to practice had I been able to analyse this data. This leaves the research presented here open to charges of lacking depth, as findings are unsupported by episodes of classroom practice that delineate how these participants go about integrating theories of teaching and learning into classroom teaching. I would suggest that this research offers insight into the beliefs held by pre-service and experienced practitioners into theory and its role in classroom practice and so functions as a beginning point for further research into how MA programmes prepare pre-service teachers for teaching careers vis a vis theoretical constructs of teaching and learning. As has been stated here, experienced practitioners offered a perspective that classroom practice engendered an awareness of how to adapt theory in the service of pedagogical concerns as and when they occurred during teaching (see section 7 for more on this). The value of theory, as stated by McDonald et al (2001) is that it moves teachers beyond knowledge to understanding that can be adapted to the pedagogical needs of the classroom. Methods are integrated together to form a methodology for the business of teaching and learning.

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