"I'm Glad to Know I'm Not Going Mad!": The Use of Videos of Authentic Classroom Practice to Prompt Collaborative Reflective Practice Among Second Level Modern Foreign Languages Teachers

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Introduction

The scarcity of inside views of real Irish classrooms and especially the dearth of video-based resources that depict these, coupled with increased expectations for teacher education providers to work together (DES 2011), were among the considerations that motivated and shaped the development of the project described in this chapter. Video Ideas in Teaching and Learning Languages (VITALL) is a collaboration between the Education Department in NUI Maynooth, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the Post-Primary Languages Initiative (PPLI). It seeks to address, in one initiative, our shared concerns in relation to the production and use of resources to support the professional development of second level modern language teachers in Ireland.

A key influence on our thinking was the publication of the long awaited *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education* (Teaching Council 2011). As its title suggests, this document situates, along a continuum, three stages of teacher professional development: from initial teacher education programmes through to an induction process and on to in-career contexts. Within this three 'i' framework it is envisaged that teachers' experience of continuing professional development (CPD) would be underpinned throughout their careers by critically reflective practice and

by the theoretical models introduced to them during their initial teacher education.

A consequence of this policy is the increased impetus for teacher educators across different contexts to work together (even if this were not already an imperative with the reduced financial and human resources brought about by the economic recession). Such collaboration has the merit of producing a more cohesive approach to teacher professional development, by reducing both isolation and duplication among different teacher education providers and by making more efficient use of funding as resources produced are not only better, because collaboration produces better results, but can also be used in multiple contexts. Moreover, encouraging and enabling teacher educators to work together has the added value of being a model of cooperation that shows us 'walking the talk' of collaborative, reflective, discursive practice.

This chapter will describe the design and use of the video resources produced for Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teachers in second level schools in Ireland. Drawing on our own discussions and reflections, as well as on the insights offered by the language teachers we worked with to produce and to view the videos, it will explore the potential of these resources for teacher educators seeking to support teachers in the process of reflection and analysis of their own and others' classroom practice. In addition, we will consider the impact the process has had on us, the authors, as teacher educators. We will claim that these videos are most useful in a context that seeks to facilitate teachers to articulate their own conceptual frameworks about teaching and learning languages and that they can be read as artifacts that can prompt teachers to make their implicitly held theories of teaching explicit (Leinhardt et al. 1995)

The initial purpose of creating the VITALL videos was "to capture and promote innovative practice" (from our project proposal). What emerged as the project progressed, however, was a shift in our thinking in relation to the content and use of the videos and a questioning of the definition of "innovative practice". This change had consequences for the delivery of professional development workshops for teachers that were held as part of the project during the academic year 2011/12, described below, and during which the opinions of the participating teachers about this approach to CPD were elicited.

In all 13 edited videos were created, each with a distinctive focus on different aspects of language teaching and learning and featuring lessons in six different modern foreign languages (namely Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish). The videos show teachers, and sometimes learners too, outlining their ideas about teaching and learning

with footage from lessons to underscore what is said and provide concrete illustrations of the ideas presented.

Before describing the process involved in the creation of the videos and their subsequent use in the workshops with in-service teachers, relevant educational research and policy developments in relation to teacher education in Ireland will be discussed and we will give a brief overview of the ways video technology has evolved in teacher professional development contexts.

Research and Policy Contexts

i. Teachers in professional communities

New models of teacher professional development that place teachers' experience at their core are being embraced in many different teaching and learning contexts internationally (Guskey 2002, Borko 2004, Stoll et al. 2006, Blankstein et al. 2008). Such models are based on concepts of teacher change that arise from teacher reflection, discussion or "honest talk" (Liebermann and Miller 2008) and collaboration among teachers working in supportive professional groups or professional communities.

However, examples of second level teachers in Ireland discussing their practice are not widely available (Hogan et al. 2007, Conway et al. 2009). The country rates poorly in international comparisons of activities such as peer observation and collaborative planning and reflection (Gilleece 2009, Clarke et al. 2010). Although the power of reflective, discursive approaches to professional development is asserted and even celebrated within teacher education and educational research, very little evidence of teacher-driven reflective practice in Irish schools can be found (Gleeson 2012).

Teachers, working under the combined pressures of timetabling, examinations and mandated change, typically have little time and limited opportunity to engage in discussion about their approaches to teaching and learning (Clarke et al. 2010). Professional collaboration remains technical in nature, centring on the exchange of information about classes and resources and co-ordination of activities (Gleeson 2012). In general, there is no culture of collaborative teaching involving co-planning and co-teaching a lesson (Gilleece et al. 2009, Clarke et al. 2010). A culture of individualism predominates where teachers work alone in their classrooms without many real opportunities or much encouragement for collaboration with peers (Gilleece et al 2009). Teaching is not viewed in a collegial

context and this contributes to the creation of a culture of what Shulman described as "pedagogical solitude" (Shulman 1993).

The Teaching and Learning International Study (TALIS) Report 2009, for example, finds that just 8% of Irish teachers visit other classrooms for observation in contrast with 28% across Europe (Gilleece et al. 2009). Observation is frequently associated with ITE and equated with the adjudicative gaze of the teaching practice supervisor or later on with that of the schools' inspector. Since practice is seldom informed by these more complex forms of professional collaboration, teachers remain isolated in their own teaching contexts which may impact negatively on the quality of teaching and learning (Hogan et al. 2007).

There is also a lack of support for teacher learning in the Irish second level context (Hall et al. 2012). In Ireland in-career professional development for teachers has largely been syllabus related and concerned with implementation of revised examination syllabuses and support for mandated change (Granville 2005). Traditionally the external experts have done little to encourage teachers to look to themselves and their teaching contexts for professional development. CPD is generally 'top-down' in approach with teachers' experiences and understandings left to one side as the expert delivers new approaches, ideas or information. This conditions teachers into a state of "learned helplessness", an over-dependence on others for professional development (Cole 1997: 17) and a perception that improvements to teaching come from others (Lieberman and Miller 2008).

Although a growing trend exists internationally for teachers' particular contexts of practice to be used as sources of CPD, there is also limited evidence of this happening in Irish schools (Gleeson 2012). Schools, in general, do not encourage or support teachers to look to themselves or their colleagues as stimuli for, and potential sources of, professional enrichment. They are not generally facilitated in any meaningful or systematic way to play an active role in their own professional development or that of their peers. Somewhat ironically, despite being expected to foster learner autonomy and active learning approaches in their classrooms teachers are left in a position of dependency for their own professional growth and development. They are encouraged to look to external experts to mediate theory for them and to pass on 'tricks of the trade' (Cole 1997). Traditional CPD does not encourage the notion of the "teacher as researcher" who examines and reflects on their own and others' classes as a means of drawing together theory and practice. Teachers are therefore denied valuable opportunities to become "authors of their own work" (Hogan et al. 2007: 5), to make their implicit theories

about teaching and learning explicit and to critically reflect on their approaches to teaching and learning. This perpetuates the notion that teachers' practice is highly contextualised with a practical and classroom bias. Gleeson (2012) argues that because teachers in Ireland have limited opportunities for professional dialogue and debate they do not give priority to knowledge of practice and they are agnostic or sceptical about research in education. Subject knowledge is prioritised over knowledge of practice (Sugrue et al. 2001) and pedagogy suffers from invisibility (Hall et al. 2012). A theory-practice rift prevails with discussion of practice and theory being left behind after completion of initial teacher education (ITE) and appearing to have little to offer accomplished teachers.

ii. A key policy development

In the Teaching Council's policy of promoting a three 'i' approach to teacher professional development incorporating, as noted above, a continuum between initial, induction and in-career teacher development, there is no place for a theory practice divide. Each stage of the professional journey is valuable for informing the others through a marrying of theory, practice, reflection and professional dialogue. Every teacher and student teacher has the potential to advance their own professional development and that of others given adequate opportunity and support.

Each student teacher comes to their course with 10,000 hours of classroom observation experience. Making this "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie 1975) explicit, and mining it, can enable them to better understand the effect of their experience on their understandings of what constitutes good teaching and learning and the curriculum (Darling-Hammond 2006). Similarly the classroom teaching experience of both student teachers and experienced teachers has rich potential as a stimulus for reflection and discussion with peers to explore pedagogies and make explicit the links between theory and practice. Teachers' situational and intuitive knowledge should be opened for examination and links forged between theory and practice.

It is widely agreed that 21st century teachers need opportunities to become more inquiry-oriented professionals working in school cultures where knowledge is generated and shared (Hargreaves 2003). Such a change also implies a shift from autonomy in teaching to viewing teaching as communal property (Conway et al. 2010). Where there are inadequate opportunities for professional collaboration, valuable opportunities for teacher development are lost (Conway et al. 2009). The classroom can be

exploited as a context for teacher learning and uncovering practice for peers can usefully provide insight into pedagogy and improve the quality and impact of teaching and learning. In order for this to happen, greater supports from school management ought to be offered where attention is paid to instructional leadership activities that support collaborative practice (Gilleece et al. 2009).

iii. The tradition of video analysis

In an era where 72 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute (Reisinger 2012) the popularity of video is undeniable and its appeal almost universal. In teacher education video technology has been used for the past half century to develop in-service and pre-service teachers' capacity to evaluate teaching, and by implication, improve their own practice (Borko et al. 2008, Rickard et al. 2009). Evidence that it contributes to lasting change in the practice of teaching is relatively sparse (Tripp and Rich 2012) and research findings on its impact have been mixed (Sherin 2004). However, there is justification for using it. As well as having the power to capture what the absent observer would see were they present, video can also make visible aspects of a lesson that very often go unnoticed, even by the most seasoned observer (Brophy 2004).

One of the most worthy aspects of video appears to be its adaptability to changing trends in teacher education research (Sherin 2004). Various applications of video technology in teacher education have evolved since its first appearance in the 1960s. In the early days video use was closely aligned to the practice of micro-teaching, where a teacher would be recorded teaching a mini-lesson focusing on a single defined teaching skill, followed by reviewing the recording in line with set criteria and, post-analysis, repeating the skill with another group. In later years, case-based methods of analysis, informed by work by Lawrence Stenhouse, among others, became popular and *video* cases were found to allow complex situations to be made accessible in visual form (Walker 2002). Video has been extremely popular as a medium for "modelling expert teaching" (Sherin 2004: 5): an approach that exposes novice teachers to practices that might not otherwise be observed or may not be readily observable. The practice of using video technology has changed from a focus on identifying particular behaviours, in the micro-teaching tradition, to one termed "video-reflection" (Tripp and Rich 2012:728) where teachers use videos of themselves and/or of colleagues to critically reflect on the effects of actions in a given context. Such an approach was

influenced by the emergence of cognitive psychology and places a greater focus on teachers' *thinking* rather than on their behaviour.

As the predominant approach to teacher education has become one that is underpinned by critically reflective practice, video has been particularly useful in supporting teachers to *explore* their own mental models of teaching. The "exploratory" approach, as described by Tochon (2008), invokes a strong emancipatory aspect where teachers are "empowered" to become critics of their own practice and to articulate their tacit knowledge of and assumptions about teaching and learning (Leinhardt et al. 1995). Following work pioneered by Donnay and Charlier (cited Tripp and Rich 2012) in Belgium in the early 1990s, video analysis, as it is now practiced, is most often characterized by collaborative reflective practice. At the present time, "video clubs" (Sherin and Han 2004, Armstrong and Curran 2006) are emerging as popular means to enable practising teachers to view their own and others' practice in safe, supportive settings, facilitated by a moderator who ensures that value is gained from having one's pedagogical thinking challenged by trusted colleagues.

The VITALL Project Initiative

The VITALL project is situated in the tradition of video analysis. Initiated in Autumn 2010, the aim of the project at the outset was to create an on-line archive of short video recordings, depicting authentic classroom practice for use by both in-career and pre-service teachers. We hoped these would encourage and support innovative, active methodologies in classrooms by virtue of making them visible and accessible in the public domain. Although we started out with the intention of positioning our videos as models of expert teaching and innovative practice, as the project developed, we came to consider the status of the videos differently and deemed them to be more powerful as a stimulus for reflection and discussion among peers engaging in similar approaches who would appreciate time and space in which to discuss them. In this respect the VITALL videos fit with Tochon's "exploratory" model and, used effectively, they offer an opportunity for teachers to articulate their views about teaching and can act as a means for them to further their own critical self-awareness as teachers (Tochon 2008).

Similarly, with regard to the research and policy developments of recent years described above: the project addresses calls for greater collaboration among teacher educators and more judicious use of resources, and complements the policy of continuing teacher professional

development that attempts to make meaningful links between the different stages in a teacher's professional journey.

The project title hints at our belief, based on our experience in teacher education, our reading of the relevant literature and on our conversations with teachers, both informally and formally (McDermott and Richardson 2004), that it is *vitally* important for teachers to see examples of active learning approaches in real classroom settings. However, our experience and discussions also told us that teachers' efforts to make their classes vibrant and dynamic were often stymied by the constraints of timetables and examinations and by the prevailing culture of individualism in schools. As a first step, then, the project set out to 'reveal' teachers practising and talking about language teaching in authentic settings. The second step would be to bring this to the attention of teachers for the purpose of opening further reflective and pedagogic conversations among them.

In order to gather inside views of classrooms we contacted teachers whom we knew to be practitioners of particular teaching and learning approaches and who would also be open to sharing their classroom practice. We hoped to highlight different approaches such as the use of Drama in Education; Assessment for Learning; pair-work activities; authentic texts; multimedia technology and digital storytelling for language learning and so on. Most of the teachers we approached agreed to being involved in the project. The minority who didn't wish to participate cited the pressures of time and workload as reasons.

By targeting a representative cross section of different class levels (junior and senior cycle; exam and non-exam classes) from various school types (voluntary secondary; community; DEIS; fee-paying; single-sex; co-educational) across a wide geographical spread, in both urban and rural settings, we hoped to assemble multiple representations of Irish second level language teachers' contexts as well as diverse understandings of good practice. Finally, we aimed to produce videos that would represent as many as possible of the different languages taught at second level.

The participating teachers were asked in advance to consider their teaching approach and their views on teaching and learning languages and to explain how the lesson to be recorded matched their particular philosophy and style of teaching. Their articulation of these views, during a short interview, acted as the narrative for the video. We also asked them to tell us about the class group chosen to enable us to ensure that we covered the range of classes we had hoped. Although we had our own ideas about what we meant by 'teaching approach' the responses ranged from general comments about taking a communicative approach to more

specific ideas about breaking up the structure of lessons to reflect the structure of the exam.

Having received school and parental permission to record the lesson, a day and time was agreed for the filming to take place. As the recordings were neither scripted nor rehearsed and the focus of the lessons was decided by the teachers, the videos represented genuine 'moment in time' language lessons that were part of the teachers' normal schemes of work connected to the previous and follow-on lessons.

The lesson (and in some cases more than one lesson) was videoed along with an interview with the teacher and sometimes with the learners too. In the interview the teachers spoke about the lesson and the thinking that informed their choices in planning and delivering the lesson. The learners were invited to say what they liked/found useful about their teacher's approach.

Afterwards the team viewed the videos and edited each to approximately five minutes. The videos were then put on the project website with a descriptive title, a brief summary of the class profile and lesson focus along with a list of keywords. Additional resources, such as links to other websites with materials to support or explain further the approach depicted, or sources of texts used in the lesson for example, were added to the individual page created for each video and may be supplemented further on an on-going basis.

A further set of resources arising from the project was created from a long interview with Professor David Little who agreed to provide a comprehensive overview of key areas in MFL teaching and learning. This interview, focusing on the historical and theoretical backgrounds to approaches in MFL teaching and learning, was divided into episodes each covering a different topic. These video clips were filed under 'Resources' on the website for use as reference or for the purpose of private study, as a support for teachers interested in revisiting relevant language learning theory, rather than for use directly within the workshops.

Video editing and shaping the workshop

During a meeting convened in order to edit the first video we concluded that our objective of making videos of exemplary and innovative practice needed to be revised. While the teaching that we recorded was very good, and mindful of the generosity of the teachers we recorded, we realised that what we were developing would be better understood as exemplars of *real* rather than specifically innovative classroom practice. We began to appreciate that capturing exemplary

practice on video with thirteen different teachers in as many or more classrooms, each highlighting different and distinct themes, would be difficult if not impossible without scripting and rehearsing the content and consequently losing the vibrant quality of the authentic situations. We questioned the definition of innovative practice and came to understand that the strength of the videos was in the reflection and much needed professional discussion among teachers that the videos would prompt within a workshop setting. We concluded that videos, seen as portrayals of real practice, would help foster a 'bottom-up' approach to ITE and CPD and open the way for a more dialogic process in professional development and this led us to the design of a workshop that would 'revisit theory in the light of experience'.

To date the videos have been used by members of the team with several different groups of pre-service language teachers in three Schools of Education and in workshops and presentations organised by both the PPLI and the PDST for in-service teachers. For the purpose of this chapter we will focus on one of the workshops offered to practising teachers under the auspices of the PDST.

Following the process of editing the videos and developing the website a two-hour workshop was offered by the PDST as an option to MFL teachers in the Autumn and Spring terms 2011/2012. A total of 155 teachers from around the country participated in this workshop at 11 different Education Centres. The workshop, entitled *Revisiting Theory in the Light of Experience* had the objective of facilitating reflection on, and discussion of, approaches used by modern languages teachers to develop their learners' communicative competence. A finding in previous research by one of the team had uncovered 'the view that young teachers had a language for talking about teaching and learning that was not shared by more established teachers' (McDermott 2005: 37). By engaging collaboratively in prepared tasks, teachers were invited to revisit the principal tenets and theoretical underpinnings of a communicative approach to language teaching that all teachers would have been exposed to as part of their initial teacher education. The process in the workshop aimed to encourage an articulation of the teachers' practical applications of a communicative approach within their particular teaching and learning contexts. The collaborative, active nature of the tasks helped create an atmosphere that was conducive to a sharing of practice and ideas and discussion and subsequent debate in relation to these. The theory pertaining to communicative language teaching was presented and engaged with using activities that characterise the approach itself, for example, jigsaw reading, pair work, information gap exercises. Following

these activities and in order to offer further insights into other colleagues' opinions on approaches to teaching and learning, a selection of between two and four of the VITALL videos were then viewed. To respect those who had shared their practice and reflections via the videos and also to help create a positive, 'can do' atmosphere where teachers were encouraged to share ideas, the videos were viewed through an 'appreciative lens'. While watching a video participants were asked to focus on three questions 'What I take away from this video and why?' 'What I would use in my class and why?' 'What I would not use in my class and why?'. After viewing the video the responses to these were shared among pairs and then offered to the larger group for discussion. This, in turn, stimulated further reflection and discussion among participants about the content and themes in general and their application to participants' particular teaching and learning contexts. It was remarked by the facilitator and by participants that the tasks at the beginning of the workshop focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of a communicative approach revised a vocabulary that enabled a better articulation of their practice.

Participants were asked to provide a written feedback evaluation of the workshop, based on open-ended questions that asked what they found most useful and what they would recommend for future workshops. 145 feedback sheets were returned representing a 93.5% response rate. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with the vast majority of responses (95%) being focused on the discussion of practice and the sharing of ideas with peers. Some typical responses on what teachers found most useful are given here:

Real life examples beyond the theory: the experience of colleagues.
Videos and advice from other teachers.
Teachers sharing knowledge and resources.
Videos: it's good to see what really works in classrooms.
Interesting to discuss with other teachers about what is going on: watching examples of teachers was very interesting and helpful. Thanks!

For some the videos had the effect of refocusing them on approaches such as the use of the target language and giving them an impetus to try out new things in their own lessons:

I will use the target language more: encouraged by other teacher videos.
Many new ideas which I hope to try out in class. Introduced to new adaptation of technology.
New ideas, especially easi-speak microphones and slam poetry.

Others found it useful to see techniques they were unfamiliar with (such as drama in education, or using technology) being used successfully. The value here was in hearing about the techniques and methodologies from other teachers. Moreover, seeing these portrayed in the lessons and spoken of by ordinary Irish school goers underlined the message that a given approach works, that it is motivating and leads to improved self-confidence among learners to use the language.

Primarily, teachers valued the opportunity for focused talk concerning their practice with peers. They found it reassuring to know others faced similar challenges and this knowledge seemed to have the effect of being confidence building:

> *Just meeting other language teachers and discussing ideas is reinforcing and helpful.*
>
> *Reassurance that what we are doing in the classroom is okay.*

As another teacher, whose words are used in the title of this chapter, expressed it to the facilitator when they were leaving one of the sessions:

> *I'm glad to know I'm not going mad! It was so good to talk to other teachers, so reassuring!*

Almost all the respondents registered their appreciation of the new ideas for classroom practice acquired, such as use of Digital Storytelling, Assessment for learning, drama techniques etc. These ideas came entirely from peers: both those present at the workshops and those sharing their practice on screen. The facilitator had focused on preparing tasks that would lead participants towards reflection, analysis and discussion and on creating an atmosphere that was conducive to these. Any ideas provided by the facilitator were stimulated by the discussion and were offered as a fellow language teacher and not as an "external expert". The videos facilitated discussion and debate concerning teaching and learning and this generated further ideas and strategies. We would argue that the VITALL videos helped facilitate a new approach to CPD where teachers' expertise and experience are harnessed for their own and others' professional development.

Summary and Conclusion

The production of the VITALL videos involved collaboration between four colleagues who were providers of initial teacher education, teacher induction and continuing professional development for teachers. Our intention had been to create an on-line archive for teachers and student

teachers for use in developing their practice, an aim that initially had placed the videos in the tradition of showing teachers "models of expert practice". Feedback to date has shown that the videos have some value in this regard, however, as the project progressed we came to appreciate their greater value in initiating conversations among teachers in relation to practice and in disrupting established norms in schools.

The use of the VITALL videos in the professional development of language teachers provides opportunities to see inside the classrooms of peers and to hear them talk about their practice. This, within a supportive environment, can act as a stimulus to reflect on and discuss with peers the viewer's own practice as well as the practice of others. It facilitates a sharing of ideas, methods and strategies that empowers teachers to become more actively involved in their own and others' professional development. In addition, it gives value to teachers' experiences and can help diminish the perceived need for expert outsider interventions for CPD provision.

This project and the resources it has generated provide both a framework and content suitable for use in locally-based and school based contexts. Time, space and in particular an atmosphere of professional trust are the prerequisites to professional dialogue among teachers. The videos represent an invitation to view classroom practice and to hear teachers articulate their theories of practice, and figure as a first step towards a longer term discussion of practice that may have liberating rather than limiting impact on teachers (Gleeson 2012).

Our collaboration in the production of the videos has also had an unexpected benefit for us. The process has involved working very closely together and has stimulated us into focused and meaningful discussion and reading on the nature of good practice in the modern languages classroom and in teacher education. The project provided the four partners with a motivating opportunity to develop a community of practice. This has enabled us to share our expertise and experience with one another, and to learn from and support one another, so that we are empowered to better support and encourage the teachers and student teachers with whom we work. The videos have had the unexpected, and much appreciated, effect of providing professional development for those tasked with facilitating the professional development of others.

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