Translating Concerns Into Action In The Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

This study highlights the concerns and research findings of 11 foreign language (FL) student teachers in the secondary school system in a developing country. They were in-service student teachers who were required to engage in action research as part of their professional preparation. Their research experience enabled them to develop new ways of approaching their concerns with regard to developing the communicative competence of their students. In the first instance, action research prompted them to identify a concern in their classrooms. The tools of action research facilitated their exploration of these concerns in that each had to translate the concern into an intervention which they monitored and reported on. The study reports on what these student teachers identified as concerns and why, and describes the teacher's intervention in each case. Each teacher's findings are also reported. What is noteworthy is the potential value of action research as a tool for any teacher since the study includes varied types of schools and varied levels.

Keywords: teacher research, foreign language, communicative competence, teacher education, foreign language acquisition.

Introduction

There exists a plethora of published findings in academic journals on studies conducted by FL teaching practitioners and by non-teaching theorists in the field of language learning and teaching. For teachers in Trinidad and Tobago, discovery and renewal are somewhat ad hoc or informal outside of formal teacher development programmes. In addition, their innovation and initiative do not have a well-established forum for dissemination.

Teacher preparation programmes such as the postgraduate Diploma in Education programme offered at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, present the opportunity for teacher action research but without the opportunity for dissemination outside the bounds of that institution. The programme is in-service part-time for secondary school teachers and lasts one academic year. This paper focuses on research conducted by 11 FL teachers who were among approximately 30 who completed the programme within a 3 year period.

As part of the curriculum process on the programme, teachers are required to identify a problem in their FL classroom and to develop and implement a research project over 2

semesters. In the first semester the project is researched and planned and in the second semester it is implemented and reported on. Plenary and tutorial sessions on research methodology constitute a major feature of the curriculum and teaching process which constitute most of the programme credits. The choice of topic is determined by each teacher with approval from the FL teacher educator. From the range of topics selected within this 3 year period, the most common overarching theme was the development of communicative competence. Thus this theme was selected for this study.

For most of the teachers on the programme, action research is a new experience. The value of having the opportunity to design their own research and implement it cannot be understated. Equally significant is the experience of exploring new interventions in their FL classrooms. They have all been teaching for over 5 years but no more than 10 years. Developing communicative competence in their students is the underlying goal of the syllabus they use for teaching FLs in Trinidad and Tobago (Caribbean Examinations Council, 2005). Action research capability is seen as a major step in their professional continuum. As such, if we are to value their initial experience of conducting research, we must recognise their explorations and findings as worthy and valuable in the field of FL teaching.

Literature Review

Introduction

What makes teaching a profession is far from a complete discussion. Teachers have their own concerns about their practice and their status and have depended on professional development programmes to keep them *au courant* with best practice in the interest of their students' learning.

Teachers themselves can identify the areas which they consider to be useful in their own professional development. For example, Igawa and Tsujioka (2009) investigated the professional development needs of 36 Cambodian teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Most of those teachers highlighted teaching skills and methods as the area where they needed most help.

Teacher research

In-service and pre-service teacher education programmes generally point to the usefulness of teacher research in the classroom and make provision for such in an attempt to hone the student teacher into a reflective practitioner. Gebhard, Gaitan and Oprandy (1990) who view classroom investigation as an activity that empowers and frees teachers from the oppression of acting upon decisions made by others, advocate investigative reflection as a basis for decision-making.

Stuart (1988) sees the research experience as a positive contributor to teachers' own practice through self-evaluation, while Zephir (2000) emphasizes that since developing

teachers do have their own hypotheses, classroom-based research is a useful tool for them to test their personal theories.

In a report summarising discussions of persistent concerns of FL teachers in California in the United States of America, among those identified by language educators were the "lack of information on the relevance of research among teachers and lack of understandable research results available to the community as well as teachers" and "lack of involvement by all stakeholders (politicians, teachers, students, community, researchers) in designing research and lack of teachers' voice on what needs to be researched" (National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center, Iowa, 2000, p.9).

Otway-Charles (2006) conducted a study of FL teachers on the Diploma in Education programme in which this research article is situated, and concluded that although the research experience on the programme was challenging for the student teachers, all the participants reported that "they had gained in some way from the experience and would try again to do this in their classes" (p.197).

Communicative competence

This paper focuses on those teachers whose research was based on some aspect of enhancing the communicative competence of their students. Teachers in the study were aware that one way in which competence in second language acquisition can be developed is through the use of language for real communication (Shrum & Glisan, 2000). An examination of the status of listening, speaking and writing skills helps us to situate the teachers' investigations in this study.

Listening

Listening accounts for roughly half the time we spend using language (Joiner, 1997). It can be said to be central to all learning and "more than forty-five percent of our total communication time is spent in listening. Speaking takes thirty percent, reading takes sixteen percent, and writing takes nineteen percent" (Feyton 1991, p.174).

Listening ranked very high in what French learners found difficult at the beginning of their A Level course and for German learners it was a major source of anxiety and insecurity (Graham, 1997). However, Powell (1999), in response to these findings explains that "the problems seemed to arise when teachers had too high expectations of learners" ability to cope with authentic discourse" (p.169).

Writing

Writing, though crucial to communicative competence can create a type of apprehension or anxiety unique to written communication and is a result of writing under pressure or writing about feelings, attitudes and experiences (Cheng, 2002). In terms of perceptions

of their writing ability, students' perceptions of their own writing and on writing itself impacts on writing abilities (Khaldieh, 2002). Inherent value in the writing tasks that students are asked to perform is crucial according to Terry (1989). This points to the potential for more interesting and absorbing writing activities for students. In fact, Yonglin (1995) indicates that an eclectic approach to teaching writing and composition has yielded a variety of innovative methods/techniques in the classroom. The need for carefully designed writing tasks is supported by Bilash (1998) and Terry (1989) who comment that most students, even at the beginning stage, can write for communication if the tasks are realistic, meaningful, occasioned by need and appropriate to the level of linguistic sophistication.

Motivation

In addition to the linguistic skills required for communicative competence, teachers are usually also concerned about the motivational aspect of teaching and learning. In a study conducted by Pigott (2008) university students revealed that they consider as important to their learning activities such as listening to real conversations, actual conversations, pair work, listening to music, group work, playing games and watching videos. They appreciated genuine communicative activities, relevant and fun lessons. Zubairi and Sarudin (2009) also found that at this level, students are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to study a FL. If students are to even select FL study at the post secondary level, their experience at the secondary level must prepare them motivationally to do so.

Developing communicative competence

FL teacher development programmes have for decades signalled the importance of communicative tasks in the development of communicative competence. Omaggio Hadley (2000) argues that "teaching oral skills is teaching only half of the process of communication and adds that students gain a sense of confidence with the language when their listening abilities are well developed" (pp.177-178). Along with this is her belief that the integration of the receptive and productive skills "is essential for attaining higher levels of proficiency" (p.182). Even before that, Finocchiaro and Bonomo (1973) stated that improvement in listening comprehension may engender improvement in students' ability to speak. In terms of oral competence, according to Littlewood (1981), appropriate practice should enable students to speak the language appropriately in specific social situations. This explains why experts in the field advocate that communicative tasks are crucial to the development of communicative competence.

Useful techniques which have been identified to develop such competence include role-play, the use of authentic material and drama. According to Ladousse (1987) drama and role-play enhance the learning environment by adding a relaxed atmosphere through activities that students perceive to be fun and thus less anxiety is experienced. Furthermore he contends that role-play situates students to use forms of language which are necessary to develop social relationships.

Bacon (1992), Joiner (1997), Rivers (1972) and Powell (1999) all highlight the importance of including authentic material in the FL classroom. These experts in the field recommend exposure to authentic discourse to be able to function in the language. Authentic discourse assumes that students are placed in realistic situations or simulations of such in order to realise authentic discourse.

The use of situations or contrived reality, of essence, requires the use of drama in the learning setting. According to Bason (2005) "drama…develops all of Gardner's intelligences, but is particularly strong in Spatial, Bodily/Kinaesthetic, Interpersonal, Linguistic, and Interpersonal Intelligences. Using drama as a teaching tool activates many of the innate human intelligences often neglected by traditional methods of teaching" (p.1).

Focus of This Study

From their study of teachers in China, Wilhelm and Chen Pei (2008) concluded that teachers should be encouraged to adopt a leading role in instructional design with support in their efforts to incorporate more learner-directed, interactive approaches in their local teaching. They concluded that there is a need for more in-depth study of approaches preferred by teachers and of how instruction is actually implemented.

This study looks at how a group of teachers on a professional development programme implemented an action research effort in an attempt to develop their students' communicative competence.

Methodology

This is a case study of 11 student teachers of FL who conducted action research in their own classrooms over a period of 4 to 6 weeks. It is an exploratory investigation of their concerns with regard to developing communicative competence in their students, their analyses of their concerns, their interventions and their findings from their own documented research.

This study seeks to find out what student teachers identified as their students' needs in the context of developing communicative competence in the FL, and how they attempted to provide for those needs. Ultimately, the study aims to inform future planning of teacher-education programmes for FL teachers.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are teachers' concerns in their teaching of FLs?
2. How did they intervene to treat with their concerns?
3. What has their action research revealed to them?

The sampling for this study was purposive. The teachers selected were all participants in a year-long part-time in-service programme for secondary school teachers. In that sense it is a homogeneous group, but heterogeneous in that their experience varies somewhat, and they come from 11 different schools with varying contexts. Two of the teachers are from Tobago (the smaller and less developed island of the republic of Trinidad and Tobago) and nine are from Trinidad. Of the 11, six teach at traditional (grammar type) church-affiliated schools two of which are single sex while the other five teach at a junior secondary, a senior comprehensive government school, a new sector government school and a church affiliated mid-ranking school. These 11 teachers were selected according to the topic of their research and did not all do the programme together in the same year, but within a span of six years.

The teacher education programme in which they participated requires that they conduct action research in their classroom, based on an area of concern that they have each indentified. Out of 30 students, this group of 11 represents those who chose research topics related to the development of communicative competence which was the most common theme identified for research in their classrooms. It should be noted that all these teachers prepared their students for the same examination at the Form Five Level and the Form Six Level. They all chose from textbooks and resources recommended by the Ministry of Education of Trinidad and Tobago. They were also expected to follow the national curriculum and to be guided by the syllabus of the examining bodies which recommended strategies for developing communicative competence. Even though they are all practising teachers, many of the strategies and techniques they chose to use for their research project seemed to be new to them in terms of actually implementing them.

The initial step was to select by the title of their research those projects that focused on any aspect of communicative competence, including the development of any linguistic skill: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Then an analysis of each project was done to identify a) the communicative element chosen for investigation b) the intervention implemented and c) the findings. The projects were categorised and reported under common skills and the intervention for each concern was reported.

Findings

What were teachers' concerns and what were the interventions they tried?

A. Developing listening skills

1. Teacher: ML

 Research context
ML taught at an all girls' traditional school. Her Advanced Level class was studying Spanish by choice and had high achievement levels as determined by their regional examination results (Caribbean Examinations Council) at the end of Form Five. At the time of the study the teacher was guided by the Cambridge G.C.E. Advanced Level

Syllabus which did not include the Listening skill as a component. The students had insufficient practice listening to native speakers so that when such speakers "are invited to speak to them or movies are shown, students are shocked and it is very difficult for them to comprehend what is being said".

Intervention
ML embarked on an attempt to improve their listening skills via the use of taped materials: radio news broadcasts, announcements and radio programmes in the FL over six 80 minutes classes and two 40 minutes classes. She developed pre and post tests and calculated mean and standard deviation to analyse the scores to determine increase in performance.

What did ML conclude?
The teacher felt that the study showed that "with careful planning by the teacher, constant exposure and practice, listening skills do not only improve, but any negative effects initially experienced by students actually diminish". The post-test scores revealed a marked improvement in her students' listening skills. Some benefits of listening to authentic materials noted by the students included: widening their range of vocabulary, exposure to current affairs, exposure to the history and factual information about Hispanic countries, and comprehension became easier with practice.

B. Developing writing skills

2. Teacher: NR
Research context
NR reported that "whilst most of the teachers at the school are conscientious, their teaching approach is grammar-translation and pseudo-communicative writing" with very little success. The class under study was mixed at the Form One level at a Junior Secondary School which excels in Sports and the Arts but academic achievement is generally not high. The students in the chosen class are described as generally attentive and willing to work. They seemed to enjoy oral practice during class time but found difficulty in writing. They even feel overwhelmed with a sense of despair when they are required to do creative writing.

Intervention
NR set out to find out their habits and perceptions about speaking and writing in order to ascertain whether the process approach could facilitate the transition from speaking to writing. That is, she incorporated in the oral practice and transcriptive writing, brainstorming, first draft, peer review, second draft, self-proofreading and peer proofreading before submission. She taught 10 lessons over a nine week period and focused on three new topics. Each new topic began with student-centred oral activities and oral practice which were followed by transcriptive exercises. The final writing activity was creative writing. NR utilised pre and post tests to ascertain students' performance as well as pre and post intervention questionnaires to determine students' habits and perceptions about speaking and writing. She also kept a teacher's journal

which was also used to record students' affective response to the lessons and observations about their written work.

What did NR conclude?
This teacher reported that the data revealed that the process approach was effective in facilitating a successful transition from speaking to writing. In this particular class the students initially had a preference for oral practice. Contextualisation and student-centredness of the transcriptive exercises were contributory factors in the students' positive feedback. The intervention was successful in improving both students' writing competence and their writing confidence. "Their active oral participation… facilitated the retention of vocabulary and automatic use of Spanish linguistic structures in their writing". Students also began using structural phrases in their writing which had not been taught. Additionally the use of rubrics and the opportunity to submit second drafts helped the students to produce better writing.

3. Teacher: SD

Research context
SD taught at a mixed traditional school and was faced with Advanced Level Spanish students who experienced difficulty expressing in writing in the TL either their own ideas or ideas from written texts despite the fact that they had had experience writing dialogues, essays and letters at the earlier stage up to the year before this study. The class consisted of three girls and one boy. Their socio-economic background makes it difficult for them to access additional resources for language learning. The teacher reports that when they see a text for the first time they assume they must understand every word and there is the tendency to use chunks from reading passages in their writing instead of paraphrasing, rephrasing, using circumlocution or summarising.

Intervention
 In order to improve their capacity this teacher sought to discover the processes these students used in reading and writing. Over the course of five lessons she involved the students in discussions, independent practice, reflective journal writing, comprehension monitoring strategies, elaboration strategies and affective strategies. Pre and post tests determined the extent to which there had been improvement in the students' writing skills and pre and post intervention questionnaires were administered to elicit students' feelings about reading and writing. A teacher's observation and reflection record was also kept during and after each lesson.

What did SD conclude?
Among the challenges her students encountered in reading and writing were: understanding task instructions and questions in Spanish, lack of self-confidence, inhibition, finding Spanish synonyms, teacher's approach and knowledge of current affairs. Some of the strategies they employed in the execution of tasks were: collaboration, asking questions, guessing. Initially all four students found reading to be more challenging task than writing. After the intervention all students found writing to be

difficult. Post test scores were significantly lower that pre test scores. A major constraint for the students in the development of their writing seemed to be the use of the target language in the classroom for issuing instructions and posing questions. This seems to have interfered with the students' ability to complete tasks and it seemed to have demotivated them.

4. Teacher: RA

Research context
RA's school is situated in the smaller, less developed island of Tobago. It is a traditional government-assisted school. The Foreign Language department is vibrant and the administration promotes the study of at least one FL at the Form Five level.
RA stated that many of her Form Four Spanish students, eight male and 21 females, "were not motivated to write and their attempts were stilted and of minimum word length". The students were using translation to render their written assignments. Writing had not been emphasized in the lower forms.

Intervention
RA decided to use group work as an instructional tool to motivate her students to write and to improve their writing skills. Over a period of four weeks and nine lessons the students were divided into groups of mixed ability with a group appointed leader. Apart from measuring performance through the use of pre and post testing, the teacher also used structured written student feedback to ascertain students' feelings about the use of group work.

What did RA conclude?
The majority of the 28 students indicated that they had enjoyed and benefitted from the group work and some expressed the desire to continue with the strategy. A significant observation was that the few students who had before seldom or never participated in class maintained low participation even during the use of group work. In terms of improvement, with the exception of 2 students, there was evidence of moderate improvement in the writing skills, judging from pre and post test scores.

5. Teacher: SJ

Research context
SJ taught at a traditional school in Tobago where FLs have been integral to the curriculum. However, French has not been as popular as Spanish within recent times.
SJ's seven French students at the Form Five level seemed to have a low interest in writing accompanied by "deficiency in their writing skill". They are six girls and one boy, naturally gifted, highly motivated and competitive. They belong to supportive, working class families.

Intervention
SJ chose to use simulation to provide her students with real-life situations in order to engender real interest and motivation for writing and to enable improvement in writing in

French. She taught ten lessons over nine weeks based on simulated life in a Guadeloupian village providing all the resources necessary. Pre and post tests were used to determine whether students' writing skills had improved. Students' journals, discussion and a post questionnaire together with a teacher's observation checklist were used to determine students' interest in writing during and after the intervention.

What did SJ conclude?
She arrived at the conclusion that attendance at class was "exemplary" and students even stayed "past allotted time to engage teacher in discussion". Students demonstrated an air of anticipation, and camaraderie. All students responded that simulation was an interesting way to do French and that it had helped to increase their interest in the subject. The actual improvement in writing, although evident was not overly significant.

Writing and oral skills

6. Teacher: AL

Research context
AL taught at a mixed mid-ranking school where she feels FLs are not supported. She reports that there is limited cooperation within the department. Teaching strategies consist of mainly 'chalk and talk' and there are limited resources. This teacher's concern was that her Form Two class was just one of many who had poor performance overall in speaking and writing Spanish. It was a mixed class of 17 boys and 17 girls. They are described as a well-disciplined class.

Intervention
AL selected differentiated instruction to improve her students' productive skills over nine lessons. She used singing and chanting, rhythm, games, visual aids, and group work. She used topics that were within the students' set syllabus and which she thought they would be interested in. She administered pre and post tests to measure improvement.

What did AL conclude?
The pre and post test results indicated that half of the class of 15 students declined in their oral proficiency while the other half, with the exception of 3 students, improved. In the writing skill overall performance declined in the post test. A significant reflective observation made by the teacher was that the students should have been given more practice in both skills. She also remarked that during the intervention she was not able to differentiate her instruction sufficiently to cater to all the students' needs due to lack of planning time.

Developing oral competence

7. Teacher: AA

Research context
AA taught at a junior secondary school with a high percentage of students with literacy and numeracy deficiencies. Her Form Three students, 10 boys and 11 girls, had limited opportunities to use Spanish in real life situations. They thus had the perception that Spanish was not an important subject to study with the consequence that "they were reluctant to over-extend themselves in using it in everyday settings, even among their peers". Spanish periods are sometimes sacrificed to remedial English.

Intervention
AA decided to incorporate role-play and drama in eight lessons in an effort to increase their oral proficiency and to maximise the fact they were "eager" and "conscientious". She intended that these media would create situations that mimic real life. However, she focused on students' perceptions of their oral capability after the intervention as opposed to measuring their improvement statistically and utilised a questionnaire to get students' feedback.

What did AA conclude?
After the intervention, more that half of the class of 13 students felt excited about speaking Spanish, whilst in isolated cases, there was the experience of feeling "stupid", "scared", and "confused". All students felt that the use of role-play made them more capable in conversing in Spanish. From her own observation, the teacher felt that there was a new eagerness to do the role-play activity and to practise speaking in the classroom.

8. Teacher: DN

Research context
This research was conducted at government secondary school in a district known for crime and illegal drugs. Most of the students fall within the low-income bracket. DN's Form One students, 15 boys and nine girls were inhibited, disinterested and sometimes even defiant with regard to speaking Spanish. Apart from other possible causes, she linked this behaviour with a bias students had entered the secondary school with. The students had little or no awareness of Hispanic culture. She reported that "classes tended to be uninteresting and uncreative, with little emphasis on communication and meaningful learning".

Intervention
This teacher explored the effect of promoting an appreciation of Hispanic culture on the behavioural change of her students with emphasis on speaking Spanish. She taught ten lessons and also explored the ways in which she could facilitate the infusion of this culture component. She used realia, games, pictures, authentic material, role-play and

interactive group work. She observed their behaviour during the lessons and reported on it.

What did DN conclude?
The intervention also enabled her to witness her students' willingness to use Spanish to communicate when there was authentic material and realia present. Even though limited, there were instances of spontaneous use of Spanish. Their attitude towards native speakers in their presence was positive. She also concluded that apart from culture, the use of electronic media also enhanced student interest and positive response.

9. Teacher: AM

Research context
AM taught at a traditional all girls' secondary school known for high achievement. Units of work including assessment paid minimal attention to oral competence. Her 14 Form Four Spanish students were considered to be comparatively low achievers and were hesitant to respond in Spanish. Many, even when prompted, abandoned their attempts to produce the language orally.

Intervention
This teacher tried to determine if varied communicative activities, cooperative strategies and frequent informal assessment would help to develop her students' oral competence while motivating students. Eight lessons were taught using role-play, information transfer, information gap and information gathering activities. She conducted pre and post tests to measure improvement. An observation checklist was use to record perceived student motivation.

What did AM conclude?
From her data she concluded that there was an increase in the level of oral competence with even the "weakest student" demonstrating improvement. She also concluded that the use of informal intermittent assessment designed within a communicative framework did have a positive impact on the development of students' oral competence. She found that the motivation to participate seemed to depend on the communicative activity employed with information gap and information transfer showing best results.

10. Teacher: DP

Research context
DP taught at an all boys denominational secondary school. Examination results for Spanish have been good compared to many other subjects at the school. DP concluded that his 35 mixed ability Form Three Spanish students' "speech often reflected incorrect pronunciation, lack of fluency, improper intonation" and "great hesitation" to speak and had "an affinity for role-play and simple drama presentations.

Intervention
He attempted to improve their oral competence by using drama as a teaching tool for eight lessons which utilised three main elements of drama: role-play, drama presentations and improvisation. Pre and post tests were administered to determine the extent to which drama had an impact on oral performance.

What did DP conclude?
"The use of drama as a teaching tool…to improve their oral competence did have a resounding impact". Post-test results showed significant increase over pre-test scores.
Rubric used for scoring the tests included pronunciation, intonation, responsiveness and fluency. The teacher also reports a bonus benefit in that the students began to speak the TL independently in and outside of the classroom

11. Teacher: SL

Research context
SL taught at a mixed traditional denominational (church affiliated) secondary school with large number of passes at final examinations but not necessarily high grades. French is a low ranking subject in terms of student choice. Her Form Three French class comprises 13 boys and 20 girls and have difficulty expressing themselves in French, with the result that they avoided speaking at all cost. Their oral practice consists of learning phrases by rote for their final assessment. Their overall performance at school would place them in the average to very good ability group.

Intervention
The intervention utilised by this teacher was the use of listening materials in French to develop the oral competency of the students. The unit consisted of 16 lessons, with the first 2 being used for pre-testing of the oral skill. The use of a pre and a post test enabled her to ascertain whether the students had improved in their speaking skills at the end of the intervention.

What did SL conclude?
Comparison of pre and post tests showed evidence of improvement in oral French. However, it was noted that the improvement could had been influenced by another variable: the use of role-play activities to enable practice of the oral skills. The increased time spent on oral practice in the classroom assisted in alleviating, to some extent, student anxiety during their oral assessment.

Summary and Discussion

When we examine the problems teachers identified in their students, they span the following areas:

Table 1: Students' challenges in FL learning

Listening	Writing	Speaking
- Extreme difficulty in understanding native speakers' speech - Insufficient practice	- Limited opportunity to practise - Negative perception of usefulness of the language - Lack of effort - Uninterested - Inhibited - Defiant - Negative attitude toward the FL - Hesitant - Incorrect pronunciation - Lack of fluency - Improper intonation - Avoidance - Learning by rote	- General difficulty - Understanding task instructions and questions in Spanish - Lack of self-confidence - Inhibition - Finding Spanish synonyms - Teacher's approach - Knowledge of current affairs (content) - Lack of motivation to write - Stilted writing - Minimum word length - Low interest - Deficiency in the skill

From their experience and tacit knowledge, the 11 student teachers analysed their student's performance and made conclusions about their concerns and in most cases, offered reasons for them. Despite the fact that Gebhard, Gaitan and Oprandy (1990) are of the opinion that teacher research empowers teachers to make their own decisions, and that self-evaluation is an important element of teachers' practice (Stuart, 1988), teacher education programmes need to perhaps need to develop continuing relationships inside schools so that teachers engage in this process of translation concerns into action through action research. As seen, the single research project on the programme is a means of preparing teachers to continue to test their own theories, an important part of teacher professionalism (Zephir, 2000).

Having gone through the process of identifying the students' challenges in terms of communicative competence, viewed as a composite, the 11 teachers concluded that certain techniques and strategies facilitated improvement in student performance and attitude with regard to Listening, Writing, and Speaking (See Table 2).

Table 2: Techniques and strategies used by teachers

Listening	Writing	Speaking
-Careful planning on teachers' part	- Brainstorming, first draft, peer review, second draft, self-proof-reading, peer proof-reading - Collaboration -Students asking questions - Guessing - Simulation - Differentiated instruction	- Role-Play - Drama - Appreciation of Hispanic culture - Communicative activities - Cooperative strategies - Developing oral through aural

Teachers' relative success with these strategies suggests that, in the first instance, a forum should be established so that these findings could be shared with the wider body of practising teachers, if not at the national level, at least at the district level. This calls for more dialogue between the academic institution responsible for the research projects and the Curriculum Division and the Teacher Education Unit of the Ministry of Education. For too long findings from teacher research have remained dormant with its potential usefulness eclipsed.

One interesting aspect of the projects in this study is that it is evident that teachers have been convinced of the significance of preparing students for real communication in the target language notwithstanding the fact that a major concern is also the preparation of their students for academic examinations. One challenge that teacher educators face in this context is that teachers do not seem to recognise the close relationship between their examination syllabus (Caribbean Secondary Examinations Council) and the communicative approach to language teaching. This lack of recognition stymies teachers' efforts when they perceive that using the syllabus as guide would not prepare their students to communicate in the real world. This is a misconception which needs attention. Such attention could mean a new emphasis on helping student teachers to plan more practical and applicable schemes of work on the postgraduate diploma in education programme.

The teachers in this study all reported some degree of success in their attempts to enhance their students' ability to communicate. Together with performance, many of them also reported increased motivation, interest and lessened inhibition. These are all fundamental to the successful learning of a FL. To have achieved these kinds of success is a major gain. Planning lessons that incorporate the types of materials and strategies employed by these 11 teachers entails much preparation time for brainstorming, reading the literature in the field, discussion, and sourcing resources. Time-management is the key to achieving the desired goal of lessons that enable maximum learning. The skills required for effective lesson planning and implementation must also be strategically developed, not only in pre and in-service teacher education programmes, but as continuing professional practice among the teaching fraternity.

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