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## **Development in the Practical Knowledge of Language Teachers: a comparative study of three teachers designing and using communicative tasks on an in-service BA TESOL programme in the Middle East**

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### **Abstract**

Current thinking in language teacher education emphasizes the importance of the development of teachers' practical knowledge. However, while several studies have focused on describing practical knowledge in different contexts, there has been less research conducted into the manner in which practical knowledge develops in the context of in-service teacher education and into the factors that influence such development. These issues are addressed in this paper, which explores how three teachers of English on an in-service BA TESOL programme in the Middle East grew in practical knowledge, specifically with regard to the design and use of communicative tasks. Using qualitative data, the article charts their development over three years, examining changes in their ideas and practices. Implications for in-service language teacher education are discussed.

### **Key words**

Practical knowledge, language teacher education, communicative tasks

### **I. Teachers' Practical Knowledge**

Practical knowledge is "the knowledge that is directly related to action ...that is readily accessible and applicable to coping with real-life situations, and is largely derived from teachers' own classroom experience" (Calderhead, 1988, p. 54). This notion was promoted in early work by Elbaz (1981) and has been an area of particular interest to researchers in teacher education since, given that it is recognized that "much of what teachers know originates in practice and is used to make sense of and deal with practical problems" (Borg, 2006, p. 13). The term 'practical' does not imply an exclusive concern with teachers'

practical classroom skills; teachers' cognitions – what they think, know, and believe – are also central to effective instructional practice (ibid) and thus a core element of teachers' practical knowledge.

There has been periodic empirical interest in the practical knowledge of language teachers (e.g. Hulshof & Verloop, 2002; Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 1999; Tsang, 2004) though the focus of this work has typically been on describing what it is that teachers know. For example, Tsang (2004) describes practical knowledge in terms of the maxims underpinning the instructional decisions of a group of pre-service language teachers, while Meijer et al. (1999) identified several types of practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension in their study of language teachers in the Netherlands. Much less evident is attention to the manner in which practical knowledge develops and to the role that teacher education might play in this process. These are two issues we examine here, with specific reference to the particularly under-researched context of in-service language teacher education (i.e. where the participants have previous teaching qualifications and classroom teaching experience).

There is evidence, mostly from evaluations of the effectiveness of educational innovations both in language teaching contexts (Wedell, 2009) and education more generally (e.g. Smith & Southerland, 2007) that promoting the development of practising teachers' practical knowledge can present significant challenges. Teachers may experience changes in their cognitions without obvious changes in their practices. They may also display (often short-term) changes in instructional behaviours which are not underpinned by changes in their cognitions. Such limited impacts on teachers' practical knowledge can be at least partly (but not entirely) explained by the form in-service teacher education often takes (i.e. infrequent one-off sessions in which teachers receive input on aspects of language teaching, such as new techniques or curricula). In contrast, reflective models of in-service teacher education (Wallace, 1991), particularly those that are constructivist (Dangel & Guyton, 2004) and which thus encourage teachers, over time, to make connections between what they already know and do and new ideas and experiences, are seen (as argued, for example, by Farrell, 2007, & Mann, 2005) to have greater potential for supporting growth in both teachers' cognitions and their behaviours, and hence to enhance their practical knowledge. This is not an assertion we set out to test here, though there is evidence in the data we present below that a reflective and constructivist orientation to teacher education can support practical knowledge growth in language teachers.

Key in such an approach to in-service language teacher education are opportunities for teachers to become aware of their prior cognitions (Malderez & Wedell, 2007). Also vital are opportunities for teachers to examine these cognitions in relation to the new experiences and ideas they encounter during teacher education. In fact, as demonstrated in several

studies of educational innovation (e.g. Orafi & Borg, 2009), teachers are unlikely to embrace new ideas and practices – and indeed to develop their practical knowledge - without sufficient opportunities to first understand their current cognitions and practices. Such an awareness of what they currently think, believe, know and do will better enable teachers to “accommodate new ideas – to appreciate the theory underlying them, understand their practical realization, and evaluate their usefulness” (Lamb, 1995, p. 79).

Teachers’ explorations of their current cognitions and practices can be further enhanced by attention to the factors which shape them. Research has shown, for example, that language teachers’ prior experiences as learners themselves can have a powerful impact on their beliefs and practices. Another influential factor is of course the context in which teachers work; after reviewing numerous studies, Borg (2006) concluded that context can play a crucial role in shaping beliefs and in influencing how these are realized; in his words, “the social, institutional, instructional and physical settings in which teachers work have a major impact on their cognitions and practices” (p. 275).

There is evidence then, that the development of teachers’ practical knowledge can be enhanced in teacher education contexts which provide opportunities for teachers to examine and understand the factors shaping their prior cognitions and current practices, and which also enable teachers to reflect on experience and to experiment practically with new ideas in a constructivist way. While such claims are generally accepted, specific empirical evidence of growth in language teachers’ practical knowledge over time is limited. Our aim here is to address this issue by examining growth in the practical knowledge of three teachers on an in-service BA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programme. We do so with particular reference to their use of communicative tasks, which was a central concept in the methodological strand of this in-service teacher education programme.

## **II Communicative Tasks**

The value of communicative tasks in supporting language acquisition has been discussed by various authors, including Ellis (2003). For the purpose of this article, a communicative task (CT) is a pedagogical sequence of activities that involves learners in using language meaningfully to attain an objective. CTs need to be understood in the context of task-based learning (TBL), which, in turn, “can be conceived as a development within the communicative approach” (Littlewood, 2004, p. 325). Learner-centredness is a key dimension of this approach; thus it focuses, on the role of learners, their individual differences and feelings, and on the social nature of the learning process (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003). Features of communicative language teaching thus include learner-sensitive error correction techniques, varied interaction patterns that include pair work and group work, and activities designed to

motivate learners to engage in meaningful peer interaction opportunities without interruption from the teacher (Richards, 2005).

On the in-service programme studied here (see below for details), teachers were introduced to a model of CTs proposed by Cameron (2001). In this three-stage model, preparation activities lead into a core communicative activity, characterized by meaning-focused oral interaction, which is then consolidated by follow-up activities. While communicative purpose is essential to this model, as it is to other TBL models, e.g. Willis (1996), in other respects this model differs. Willis' (1996) model is regarded as representative of a 'strong' form of TBL (Skehan, 1996), as learners complete a task by drawing largely on their own pre-existing linguistic resources before language input, tailored to needs that become evident while they are completing the task, is fed in afterwards. In contrast, CTs such as Cameron's model, which include a focus on form at an early stage within the task cycle, have been labelled as 'weak' (Skehan, 1996), more closely resembling communicative language practice than authentic communication (Littlewood, 2004).

Such weaker versions of TBL may be more feasible to implement in foreign language classrooms in state schools. As Carless (2002) reminds us, many teachers in such contexts lack training in language teaching methodology, have limited language proficiency, or work with large classes in cramped under-resourced classrooms. Additionally, in such contexts teachers may also need to follow a prescribed structural syllabus where CTs are not present; to adopt CTs in such contexts, then, teachers may themselves first need to design the tasks. This too, as we see below, was the case in the context studied here.

Criteria for assessing CTs emerge from various studies discussing task and materials design; e.g. Arnold & Rixon (2008), Ellis (2006), Johnson (2003): Is the CT well-organised and motivating? Does it promote authentic language use, with a focus on meaning? Does it encourage interaction between learners in pairs and groups, when they have the opportunity to take linguistic risks without interference from the teacher? Does it promote active learning? Is it learner-centred in the handling of pedagogical procedures, so that transactions such as giving feedback and correcting errors are carried out in a way that is sensitive to the learners' feelings (Tudor, 1996)? Teachers already working with a communicative curriculum might be able to meet these criteria by adding tasks and restructuring lessons. Where this is not the case, as already noted, the challenges to teachers wanting to adopt CTs are significantly increased. External contextual constraints such as prescribed syllabi apart, the extent to which teachers will modify their practices and incorporate CTs into their teaching will also be influenced by their cognitions. In particular, Carless (2003) found that teachers were more likely to engage with CTs when they had a positive attitude towards TBL as well as well-developed understandings of the nature of CTs. As to how such understandings and attitudes, and indeed areas of knowledge including

practical knowledge in designing and using CTs, develop, though, research evidence is limited.

Overall, then, we have argued so far in this paper that further research is needed into how in-service language teacher education can support the development of teachers' practical knowledge; we have also highlighted the use of communicative tasks as a particular area of language teaching where insights into practical knowledge growth over time remain limited. The research we report here responds to these issues and we will now outline the language teacher education context in which the study we report here was conducted.

### **III Context**

This study took place in the context of a BA TESOL programme run by a British university for the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman. This was an in-service course, designed to upgrade the qualifications of all Diploma-holding teachers of English in Oman (some 900 teachers completed the programme between 1998 and 2008). The programme consisted of a range of modules covering ELT methodology, language analysis, and research methods.

Various criteria used by Dangel & Guyton (2004) to identify constructivism in teacher education are evident in the design of the BA programme. The teachers benefited from participant-centred instruction, with regular opportunities for task-based, analytical and interactive work. Awareness-raising activities that invited teachers to re-examine their beliefs and practices as teachers of English were also a common aspect of the BA TESOL. Use was made of input in the form of readings, videos of classroom practice, role-plays and scenarios of classroom situations to prompt teachers to engage with theoretical material and to connect this with their own views and experiences. Teachers were encouraged to adopt a critical stance to the ideas they encountered through lectures and from their reading.

Apart from one eight-week period in the second year when teachers studied in the UK, the programme was taught entirely in Oman via a combination of intensive study and day release sessions. Intensive study took place in blocks of 2-6 weeks in the winter and summer, when the teachers were free from classroom duties. In between these blocks, teachers were released from school once a week to attend classes led by regional tutors who were based full-time in Oman (the first author of this paper was one of these). Key aims of the day release sessions were to give teachers opportunities to review material covered in the intensive blocks and to enable them to reflect on their attempts to use this material to inform their classroom practices. Once a semester, regional tutors visited the teachers in their schools to observe classes and to discuss these with teachers; these observations were not assessed and the

focus of the discussions was on helping the teachers reflect on their practices and the thinking behind them; this process also involved supporting the teachers in making connections between their classroom practices and theoretical ideas encountered during their studies.

The teachers completed a number of assignments during the programme. Particularly relevant for this study were early methodology modules which introduced teachers to the notions of communicative activities and tasks (with a particular focus on Cameron's 2001 model referred to above). The assignments for these modules involved teachers in analysing their curriculum materials, considering how communicative tasks might be incorporated into these materials, and designing, implementing and reflecting on such tasks (for an in-depth account of the BA TESOL and the educational reform project it was part of, see Atkins, Lamb & Wedell, 2009).

#### **IV Research Methodology**

This paper draws on a larger project investigating practical knowledge growth of several teachers over three years (Wyatt, 2008). It provides a comparative analysis of the work of three teachers with respect to their use of communicative tasks (CTs) and thus extends insights into other aspects of individual teachers' work (e.g. teaching reading), which have been reported elsewhere (Wyatt, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

##### ***1 Research questions***

The research questions examined here were informed by the literature discussed earlier and stem from the following hypotheses: a constructivist in-service language teacher education programme may support practical knowledge growth in designing and using CTs. However, for such growth to occur, the programme may first need to support changes in the teachers' cognitions and practices with regard to the use of learner-centred communicative methodology. Willis (1996) has argued that this is a necessary condition for TBL to flourish. Accordingly, in the context of the three-year in-service BA TESOL Programme described above, the research questions are as follows:

1. Is there evidence of developing awareness of the learners in the teachers' reported beliefs?
2. Do their lessons increasingly appear to incorporate learner-centred peer interaction?
3. Do lessons increasingly appear to be structured around meaning-focused communicative tasks?
4. Which factors appear to contribute to (or hinder) the practical knowledge growth of these teachers in designing and using CTs?

These questions connect with the two key themes highlighted in the earlier discussion of literature: the extent to which teachers' practical knowledge of CTs developed during the BA TESOL and the ways in which this teacher education programme facilitated any such development.

## ***2 Participants***

At the time of this study, a new curriculum for ELT in Oman was being introduced across the country; at the same time, the previous curriculum was being phased out. The two curricula differ significantly in the extent to which they are learner-centred and communicative, with little evidence of these characteristics in the older curriculum. Having said that, even the new curriculum was not designed around CTs as defined by Cameron (2001), and teachers working with it still needed to adapt the course book if they wanted to incorporate CTs into their lessons. Two of the teachers in this study worked exclusively with the old curriculum while one (Sarah) also taught the new curriculum in the last eighteen months of the course. Table 1 provides information about the three teachers.

*Table 1: Participating teachers*

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Grades taught</i>	<i>Ages taught</i>	<i>Class sizes</i>	<i>Teaching experience</i>
Sarah	Coastal town	1-9	6-15	40+	12 years
Waleed	Coastal village	4-6	9-12	40+	8 years
Omar	Mountain village	4-9	9-15	10-20	10 years

## ***3 Research design***

The research methodology used was qualitative case study. This aimed to be strong on reality (Stake, 2000), offering a rich, vivid description of events whilst seeking to understand the perspectives on their work of the individuals being studied (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). It drew upon data gathered longitudinally from observations and interviews to trace the development of teachers' practical knowledge over time. The observations (for which the first

author here acted as a non-participant observer in his capacity as a regional tutor on the project as well as researcher) provided direct evidence of what teachers were doing in their classrooms. Given the experiential and performative dimensions of practical knowledge, as indicated in the definition provided in I above, a study of practical knowledge devoid of evidence of what teachers do would in our view be questionable (see Borg 2006). The interviews, which, when conducted in schools, incorporated post-lesson discussions, were semi-structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) and provided opportunities for teachers to articulate the thinking behind their instructional practices; they were thus central in giving us access to their cognitions. Assignments produced by the teachers as part of their studies (and in which teachers had to design lessons using CTs) were also analyzed as documentary evidence of development over time in the teachers' understandings of CTs. Criteria discussed in II (above) were used in analyzing teachers' work; e.g. how well-structured and motivating were the CTs designed, how well did they seem to promote authentic language use?

There were five observations of each teacher, one per semester throughout the research period (15 in total). These had a focus agreed on in advance and sometimes established by the teacher, which was possible as teaching practice was not an assessed component of the course (see III, above). The non-assessed nature of these observations reduced the threat of reactivity in what the teachers did. Narrative records of the lessons were made by the observer. Incorporating five post-lesson discussions, there were seven interviews with each teacher between 2003 and 2005; in 2006, as part of the member checking process (Stake, 1995), two of the three teachers were interviewed again; the third was unfortunately unavailable at the time. All 23 interviews were tape-recorded. As noted above, 12 assignments, which were produced by the teachers as part of their coursework, were analysed (see Appendix 1 for the time frame for data collection).

Data collection and analysis were interactive and iterative (Calderhead & Shorrocks, 1997); that is, analysis commenced during the data collection phase (rather than after its completion) and this allowed each stage of data collection to be shaped by the prior analysis of the data already available. Interview and observational data were transcribed and central themes in the practices and discourse of each teacher identified following established procedures for coding qualitative data (see, for example, Silverman, 2001). So categories were developed in which extracts of data were grouped, sequenced, juxtaposed and otherwise arranged analytically for further questioning. Central to this analytical process was the blending of the various sources of interconnected data available (Holliday, 2002, discusses this process in the context of qualitative research). Data were coded (after Borg, 1998) as follows and these codes will be used in the findings presented below.

Teacher's pseudonym	Source of data	Number
Sarah - S	Assignment - A	1-8
Waleed - W	Interview - I	
Omar - O	Observation - O	

The research was conducted according to the strict ethical guidelines set by the Ministry of Education and the university involved. The participating teachers were volunteers who provided written informed consent and who were aware that they could withdraw from the research at any time. They were also guaranteed anonymity and it was also made clear to them that their participation in the study would not have any negative effect on their studies on the BA.

## V Findings

### *1 Is there evidence of developing awareness of the learners in the teachers' reported beliefs?*

As noted above, we believe that broad understandings of and positive attitudes towards learner-centred instruction will inform teachers' practical knowledge (and hence implementation) of CTs. Our first question thus examines the extent to which such understandings and attitudes were, or became, evident in the interviews and written work produced by the teachers. We focus on their actual teaching later.

In the first interviews conducted towards the end of the first year of the course, all three teachers reported changes in their cognitions that suggested they had become more learner-centred since beginning their studies. Each teacher is discussed in turn below.

Influenced by input on learners' characteristics (Halliwell, 1992) and communicative language teaching (Harmer, 2001) at the start of the course (SI.1), Sarah reported changes in how she saw her role in the classroom and in her approach to dealing with learners' errors:

Before I thought that the teacher is the first in the class, she has to talk a lot and the children, only they could receive, but now I try to make them talk more than I talk ... I tell them "try to talk in English as much as you can, if it is wrong, no problem, but try to say something", this is maybe one of the ideas, another idea that I told you, I am trying to change my behaviour with the students, I am trying to become more friendly with them, and sometimes before I was thinking that if I was teaching a rule, the children must understand the rule in that lesson, but now I think that maybe after one week or after one unit they can understand that rule but not at exactly that time that I introduced it, so I accept their mistakes now, not like before (SI.2).

The changes in her thinking signalled here developed over the subsequent months; in a written assignment produced in May 2004, for example, she described her role as that of “a guide and catalyst for classroom communication”, encouraging the use of English while she monitored, but not intervening. She argued, quoting Willis (1996), that correcting learners’ mistakes each time would not help them develop their speaking because it would not change the order in which linguistic features began to occur accurately in the spontaneous speech they produced (SA.3).

Influenced by input on language acquisition, Sarah also became much more conscious of the importance of affect in language learning. In September 2003, after giving girls from different classes in the school a questionnaire, eliciting their feelings about English, she discovered that some of the reasons they mentioned for not liking English were related to the teacher’s behaviour. Complaints from girls, for example, were that they disliked English because the teacher “always shouts at them, embarrasses them”. After discovering this, Sarah reported that she was trying harder to create “a supportive environment inside the class by changing ... the atmosphere... the treatment”, changing her way of dealing with them (SI.2).

Waleed’s interviews and written work also pointed to an enhanced understanding of his learners. Although he believed he had always been a caring teacher, before the course his understanding of young learners had been limited: “We didn’t know that much about how to care for our students in the class and to look for their instincts, what they need from us and also to focus on their abilities.” Almost a year into the BA, though, after studying various modules on teaching methodology and language acquisition and learning, and engaging in practical activities relating to them, he declared

I know now how children acquire and learn language, what they need to do this ... what kind of strategies they use ... also the stages they go through... but before we thought that learning comes from the teacher and comes from the books (WI.2).

An outcome of this deeper understanding, Waleed reported, was that he felt better able to support learners through providing more appropriate scaffolding (in a Vygotskyian sense). Waleed had come to feel that he had ‘a responsibility to motivate’ that he was trying to fulfil (WI.2).

There was less evidence early in Omar’s spoken and written data of changes in his beliefs in relation to learner-centredness, though he did report adopting more learner-centred practices. “I have different ways of teaching”, he explained in his first interview (OI.1). New techniques he was exploring were error correction techniques, which now incorporated support from peers as well as self-correction, with his intervention a last resort: “I’m trying to solve [their] problems without the pupils knowing what I’m doing” was how he

explained his approach (OI.2). He was also using groupwork for the first time. He felt it was motivating for the weak pupils, “and some shy pupils try to speak with the others and the leader of the group tries to be a teacher supporting his friends” (OI.2).

Overall, then, there was evidence here that during the first half of the BA all three teachers reported changes in their beliefs and/or their practices that point to a greater awareness of the centrality of learners in the learning process. We would argue that these shifts in teachers’ thinking were conducive to the adoption of CTs in their work, and we now turn to the observational data to assess how these accounts of reported growing learner-centredness were realized in the classroom.

### ***2 Did the teachers’ lessons increasingly appear to incorporate learner-centred peer interaction?***

To address this question, which focuses more specifically on the performative dimension of practical knowledge, we first examine the observed lessons for evidence of ‘closed’ pairwork or groupwork activities, i.e. when small groups of learners are involved in working together independently, without intervention from the teacher, who may be monitoring the work of a number of groups simultaneously. ‘Open’ pairwork activities, in contrast, are frequently used for display, with everyone in the room able to listen. We felt the presence of closed pairwork activities would have provided learners with opportunities to engage in private spontaneous speech, regardless of the task set, particularly if such activities were frequent and lengthy. Another indicator we will consider is the use of learner-centred error-correction techniques during lessons, as their presence might suggest an atmosphere conducive to learner-centred work; indeed, the teachers themselves related such techniques to learner-centredness (V1, above).

Firstly, with regard to the presence of closed pairwork and groupwork activities, we present Table 2 (overleaf). As the table reveals, not all the observed lessons included such activities. This suggests that the greater learner-centredness suggested by teachers in their spoken and written data may not have been fully reflected in the classroom.

It is interesting to note that all five of Waleed’s observed lessons included pairwork and groupwork activities; in three cases, the opportunities learners had for meaning-focused peer interaction were frequent and sustained. In Sarah’s case, the final three lessons also included such activities. In her interviews, Sarah indicated that the failure to include some form of peer interaction in other lessons was due to poor time management more than anything else (i.e. she had planned for such interaction but ran out of time and omitted this from the lesson). There were closed pairwork activities in three of Omar’s lessons; in the last two these occurred right at the end of the lesson, just before the bell rang.

Table 2: Did the observed lessons include closed pairwork and groupwork activities?

Date	Observations of the three teachers		
	Sarah	Waleed	Omar
Oct 2003	SO.1 (X)	WO.1 (✓)	OO.1 (✓)
Mar / Apr 2004	SO.2 (X)	WO.2 (✓)	OO.2 (X)
Oct 2004	SO.3 (✓)	WO.3 (✓)	OO.3 (X)
Apr 2005	SO.4 (✓)	WO.4 (✓)	OO.4 (✓)
Sept / Oct 2005	SO.5 (✓)	WO.5 (✓)	OO.5 (✓)

(✓ = pairwork/groupwork present; X = pairwork/groupwork absent)

Correction was an area that provided teachers with opportunities to utilize more learner-centred and interactive techniques. All three teachers used peer and self correction techniques from the beginning of the research period, and spoke and wrote positively in favour of these ways of responding to learners' errors. Omar, though, was observed on a number of occasions interrupting students when they were reading aloud; in one case, he stopped a student to ask "Is it travelled or trifled?" (OO.5). Omar was aware that focusing on errors in this way can inhibit learners and acknowledged that "they avoid reading aloud because they are afraid to make mistakes" (OI.6). Nonetheless, the practice of directly pointing out or correcting errors during whole-class reading aloud was one that persisted in his work.

### ***3 Did lessons increasingly appear to be structured around meaning-focused communicative tasks?***

In the previous section the focus of our analysis was on the use of closed pairwork and groupwork activities, including peer correction. Here we analyze the observational data with specific reference to the presence of meaning-focused CTs (Cameron, 2001), in the sense we discussed (in II) earlier.

Table 3 (overleaf) provides a simplified summary of the analysis of the extent to which the teachers used meaning-focus CTs. We are aware that in qualitative terms presenting data in this form may appear reductionist, but we do feel this is a useful way of providing a quick overview of the trends we

observed; we will now go on to comment on these observational data in more detail.

*Table 3: Did the observed lessons include meaning-focused communicative tasks?*

(✓ or X)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Observations of the three teachers</i>		
	Sarah	Waleed	Omar
Oct 2003	SO.1 (X)	WO.1 (X)	OO.1 (X)
Mar / Apr 2004	SO.2 (X)	WO.2 (X)	OO.2 (X)
Oct 2004	SO.3 (X)	WO.3 (X)	OO.3 (X)
Apr 2005	SO.4 (✓)	WO.4 (✓)	OO.4 (X)
Sep / Oct 2005	SO.5 (X)	WO.5 (✓)	OO.5 (X)

In the first three observations, either the teachers did not incorporate CTs in their plans or, if they did, did not manage to include CTs in their lessons for reasons of time. Waleed described the work in his first observed lesson as “just preparation activities” (WI.1); his third lesson too consisted of a long preparation activity which did not enable him to complete a core activity before the end of the lesson. Sarah also ran out of time in SO.1 - she had a core activity prepared she did not get to (SI.1); she described her second lesson as “a grammar lesson” (SI.3). Her third observed lesson was with a Grade 1 class she was new to, and her main concern was with classroom management issues (SI.4). Omar did not use CTs in any of his first three observed lessons.

In contrast, Waleed’s fourth and fifth lessons and Sarah’s fourth lesson were structured as CTs, with clearly identifiable three-part structures (as suggested in the model from Cameron, 2001). In each of these lessons, the curriculum material was used in some way in the preparation stage and then again in the follow-up, while a core communicative activity was added to each to encourage learners to interact purposefully with peers and materials. Waleed’s fifth lesson, for example, was built around a task adapted from coursebook exercises. In the coursebook, these exercises moved directly from

the controlled practice of describing people (which Waleed incorporated in a different form into his preparation stage) to guided writing (the basis of Waleed's follow-up). Materials central to Waleed's core activity were photos of family members the learners brought in. The core involved the class in looking at the photos, and then asking and answering questions about their friends' relatives (WO.5). Waleed argued that the learners already had "some knowledge about how to structure a question", and in this lesson he wanted them to develop their speaking through using that knowledge "in a different situation... pupils can imagine that they are sitting together, maybe at their homes or something like that, and one of them sees a photo" and asks questions. This was something that they might do in the real world, and he felt it was genuinely communicative (WI.7). Similarly, Sarah had a communicative core at the centre of her fourth lesson; a reasoning gap activity (Parrott, 1993) that encouraged imagination and creativity in the spontaneous telling to each other of stories that followed on from interactive work in inferring meaning from visual information and practice of using conversational strategies (SO.4).

Omar did not appear to attempt meaning-focused CTs at all in his final two observed lessons. Nevertheless, as his regional tutor, the first author here did encourage him to do so, enquiring after one lesson whether it would be possible to create a CT out of the curriculum material he had used by adding a communicative core. Omar replied that it "would be difficult". The task would require "a whole extra lesson" and he had to complete the syllabus and did not have time (OI.4).

Clearly, there was uneven growth in the three teachers' practical knowledge in using CTs. Waleed's lessons were increasingly structured around meaning-focused CTs (and the analysis of his methodology assignments over the course also confirmed a progressive development in his understanding of CTs). In Sarah's case, the observational evidence was less compelling, though she did demonstrate in one lesson that she could structure a lesson around a meaning-focused CT. This was accomplished successfully, with all the expected elements of a CT present, and transitions between activities managed fluently (SO.4). This suggests she had developed confidence in working in this way.

Support for the view that, despite limited observational evidence, Sarah's practical knowledge grew in designing and using CTs is provided by an analysis of her written assignments. These progressed from a 'communicative' activity for her first assignment that was not very communicative though it possessed game-like qualities (SA.1) to a simple communicative task centred on the key concepts of information gap and communicative purpose (SA.2) to more complex tasks. The next CT she produced for an assignment on speaking and listening skills created a clear context, gave learners control over the language they used, activated receptive

skills and explicitly supported interaction strategies (SA.3). Another task, in an assignment on materials design, represented a further development along these lines, in creating a more realistic context still, dealing more carefully with learners' authentic communicative needs, and providing materials that involved more speaking practice (SA.4). The lack of evidence of CTs in her observed lessons, then, might not necessarily reflect a lack of growth in her practical knowledge; as noted earlier, problems with time-management, for example, meant that in some lessons she was not able to cover all the activities she had planned.

Interestingly, an analysis of Omar's assignments does not reveal a similar pattern of growth. Indeed, his task for the materials design module late in the course (OA.4) is similar, in terms of its lack of complexity, to one of Sarah's tasks (SA.2) produced more than two years earlier. During this period, as earlier noted, she had grown considerably.

#### ***4 Which factors appeared to contribute to (or hinder) the practical knowledge growth of these teachers in designing and using CTs?***

We have established that over the course of the BA the three teachers varied in the extent to which their cognitions and practices developed in relation to the use of CTs. Growth in their practical knowledge of CTs, then, was variable. In this section we consider the factors which influenced practical knowledge growth in each case. We will begin with Omar given that he was the teacher who exhibited least uptake of CTs in practice.

As reported earlier, Omar was initially enthusiastic about new ideas picked up on the course. These included learner-centred error-correction techniques and the use of groupwork, important conditions, we have argued, if CTs are to thrive. He also indicated he could adapt curriculum materials, declaring, in the first year of the BA: "Now I'm not following the teacher's book, I can change anything I want to change" (OI.2). Rather, he claimed, ways of meeting task demands (central to Cameron's 2001 model) were now prominent in his lesson plans:

Last year before I entered the BA course I was just teaching, following the steps in the teacher's book, preparing my lesson and teaching only, I was not looking at the demands and how to support them... but now really I'm looking for these points and try to concentrate on them: "What are the demands, what sort of demands will I face in this task and will my pupils face ... and I'm trying to support them (OI.2).

However, despite his initial enthusiasm for new ideas, limited evidence of CTs was detected in Omar's classroom practices. While he did have the learners seated in groups, for example, when first observed in October 2003, subsequently (in the following four lessons over the next two years) the learners were always seated in rows. In October 2003, he complained about

how other subject teachers had the room set up, reporting that, in every lesson, he wanted to change the position of the learners (OI.1), which he did on that occasion. However, he then seemed to accept the prevailing classroom layout without transforming it before subsequent lessons (there was enough space in the classroom to move the desks around).

Contextual factors thus seemed to inhibit his growth. After one lesson, his regional tutor suggested he could have asked the learners to bring in photographs to create an information gap for a speaking activity, such as that used by Waleed (V3, above). Omar reported he had thought of this, but he felt the students would be too shy to ask for the photos of their sisters, mothers or fathers. If they went to their homes and asked: "Give me your picture, give me your photo", he felt their fathers would punish them, shouting "Why? What do you want from this?" (OI.1). It seems he felt that parents might misunderstand his intentions (and those of their children) and would respond negatively.

Omar was also anxious about his Ministry of Education supervisor's criticisms, and stated, in April 2004, that when observed, he would teach the curriculum material exactly as the teacher's book recommended to protect himself from censure (OI.3). In the same interview, he emphasised the importance of covering everything in the curriculum (OI.3). Then, after he was next observed in his school, he argued that introducing activities that involved communicative purpose was difficult and time-consuming (OI.4).

A combination of individual and environmental factors thus appeared to influence his development. Omar was concerned about the views of others and appeared to have uneasy relationships with supervisor, parents and other teachers in the school (where he seemed to feel isolated); all these factors may have affected his willingness to change his teaching practices.

Waleed was much more confident in the context he worked in. He had very positive relationships with parents and was in regular contact with them. He was also working in a school environment in which seating arrangements in groups were the norm (WI.1). Prior to joining the BA programme, he had learned various techniques of working with groups from the teachers of other subjects (WI.5), which suggests a collaborative school environment. Supported by the BA Programme, he felt sufficiently self-confident to take the lead in this environment, in providing, for example, in-service teacher development opportunities for colleagues late in the course which involved showing them how he used CTs (WI.6). He also grew in confidence in justifying adaptations he made to lessons when questioned by his supervisor (WI.4). Notwithstanding challenges posed by large classes and limited resources, his context, therefore, seemed to provide a suitable environment in which he could grow in practical knowledge while studying on the BA.

Waleed's working context thus facilitated the growth of his practical knowledge in using CTs. He did, however, also seem to have certain personal traits which contributed to this growth. For example, he seemed positively disposed towards innovation, explaining that he had always sensed it would be good to make changes to the curriculum he was working with, without, however, feeling very sure about why exactly, and about what and how to change (WI.1).

The BA programme also supported the development in Waleed of knowledge and beliefs which supported his use of CTs. Earlier in the course he felt that the adaptation of materials might support learning (WI.3) and motivation (WI.5), but that he did not have "enough knowledge" for what could be done to adapt lessons, what should be focused on, and "the logical procedures" he could follow (WI.1). On encountering problems in materials design, he "gave up" because he "didn't have another choice, another thing to do" (WI.8). The knowledge gained from the BA about language learning, language teaching methodology and materials design allowed him to engage more productively and confidently in the task of adapting his curriculum by incorporating CTs. He reported that day release sessions that involved problem-solving were particularly helpful (WI.1), identified the value of particular modules, such as Tasks, which helped him "organize his teaching" (WI.2), and noted that by revisiting concepts across a succession of modules, the BA course helped deepen his understanding of them (WI.7). From being unable to evaluate his own teaching at the start of the programme (WI.1), he felt the course supplied the tools that allowed him to assess learning outcomes (WI.7). He found the course very practical.

The BA programme showed me what I should do with materials, gave me a good idea how to analyse the activities from the coursebook, also gave me some solutions to problems I faced before with pupils... it gave me some effective but simple ideas [that helped in] saving time and motivating and supporting the learners (WI.8).

Sarah benefited in similar ways from the BA. Unlike Waleed, she had not adapted materials before the BA course nor used groupwork. As a result, she needed to transform herself as a teacher to be able to use CTs. Her environment was conducive to this, in that she had a good relationship with the headteacher and supportive colleagues (SI.7). Though other subject teachers preferred to arrange the classrooms she used in rows (as in Omar's school), she insisted on rearranging the desks for groupwork at the start of each lesson (SI.5). She also overcame frustrations with a broken photocopier by getting learners to copy task sheets from the whiteboard, so that CTs could go ahead (SI.2). Furthermore, she had the self-confidence to justify new

learner-centred practices, such as using peer correction, in dialogue with her Ministry supervisor (SI.3). This self-confidence developed further as she learned how to research her own use of CTs, collecting data while teaching. Indeed, she identified a way in which she could help teachers who had “difficulties in observing their students” (SI.7):

As a senior teacher I can be very good for my teachers if I make a workshop about this... how to observe the students and how to identify your aims and how to see if the child achieves those particular aims or not (SI.7).

Developments in her beliefs and knowledge were also central to her growth vis-à-vis CTs. Her written methodology assignments, which typically involved the design and justification of a lesson, provided evidence over time that her understandings of CTs and associated background concepts developed. Her beliefs too, particularly about her role as a teacher, also underwent significant shifts. Starting from a basis of teacher-fronted grammar-focused language teaching practices at the start of the BA, Sarah’s views changed and she came to criticize

the teacher’s role in the classroom, the old role in the classroom. She is only speaking and doing everything. But let the children be the centre of learning! They have to ask, they have to talk, they have to express their ideas, everything (SI.4).

Sarah felt the BA course supported this development. Reflecting at the end of the course, she reported

After I attended the BA course, I could see that this book (the course book) needs a lot of adapting, a lot of changing, I mean, in the way that it is, it will not help the students to communicate in English... after using communicative tasks, I found that my learners became more interested in English, they like English more and they like to talk about themselves, because before they were talking only about characters in the book, they were not relating things to their lives, but after using these communicative tasks they tried to express their own ideas, speak about their experiences and share with their friends (SI.7).

## **VI Discussion**

Our primary concern in this paper has been to understand growth in language teachers’ practical knowledge in designing and using CTs. We earlier defined practical knowledge as being primarily experiential in its origins; it informs and derives from what teachers do, and exists in close relationship with other aspects of teacher cognition such as beliefs, attitudes, and propositional knowledge. It is thus evidenced in both what teachers do

and in the verbal accounts they provide of the thinking behind their work. We also highlighted CTs as a specific issue in contemporary thinking in language teaching which was particularly relevant to the context studied here – it was a key concept promoted on the BA TESOL programme and at the same time was not reflected in the centrally-defined curriculum the teachers studied here worked with.

We approached the study by following three teachers throughout their three-year programme and collecting evidence about their understandings and use of CTs from a range of sources. They were observed teaching and interviewed about their work and the thinking behind it; written work they produced as part of the BA TESOL was also analyzed. Collectively, these data allowed us to examine qualitatively and in a longitudinal manner the extent to which their practical knowledge in relation to CTs developed. We were also able to explore factors which may have influenced this development.

Our analysis was presented in relation to four research questions, each of which provided particular insights into how teachers were thinking about and using CTs as they progressed through the in-service programme. We feel that several key points emerge from this analysis, and we will now comment on these.

The first point we make is that this study does indicate that in-service teacher education can impact the development of teachers' practical knowledge. Evidence provided above, in the teachers' reports of their changing cognitions, includes allusions to course content and to the processes of the BA programme. Though we have not had space in this article to explore in detail how specific aspects of the course influenced different dimensions of their practical knowledge growth (see Wyatt, 2009b, for a fuller treatment), we would argue that constructivist elements of the programme highlighted earlier (in III) may have facilitated teachers' deeper understandings of CTs and an improved ability to implement them in the classroom. These elements included theoretical input on language teaching methodology, opportunities to experiment with new ideas through practical assignments and non-assessed teaching practice, and space for reflection during individual tutorials, and post-lesson observation discussions. In addition, the programme was conducted for the most part in the teachers' context. As Mann (2005, p. 108) argues, "where a teacher [on an in-service programme] is able to stay in their teaching context, enriched by reading, reflective teaching and action research the experience usually leads to sustained development". We believe the BA TESOL provided opportunities for such development.

However, and this is our second observation here, it is clear that the teachers in this study did not develop uniformly in their practical knowledge of using CTs. From a constructivist perspective, of course, such variations in teacher learning are not surprising, though the limited development evident in one of

the cases here is certainly interesting. The CTs of Waleed and Sarah (on the basis of her written assignments) became progressively richer, more complex, more learner-centred and more carefully thought-through; thus, these teachers' tasks became more characteristic of expertise in task design (Johnson, 2003). There is evidence, limited though in Sarah's case, that both teachers grew in their ability to implement a 'weak' form of TBL successfully. This was consistent with the aims of the BA.

Omar, in contrast, developed to a much lesser extent, and our analysis points to a number of factors which limited the growth of his practical knowledge. There were *contextual* factors, such as other teachers' unwillingness to leave the desks in groups rather than rows and *relational* factors (such as Omar's relationship with his supervisor, which he felt constrained his ability to diverge from the prescribed curriculum); there were clearly *attitudinal* factors (such as Omar's negative disposition towards the feasibility of integrating CTs into his lessons) and *cognitive* factors (to do with how sophisticated his own understandings of CTs and associated concepts were); there were also *pedagogical* factors (i.e. it was not clear to what extent Omar had the practical skill to design CTs and to translate his reported learner-centred beliefs into practice). Completing the curriculum in a set order was important to Omar and given this rather narrow focus in his work, Omar's practical knowledge regarding the learners and learning processes remained limited. This suggests that, to develop, he needed considerably more support – particularly in creating spaces to manoeuvre in what he felt was a constraining context. Clearly, while the BA TESOL programme did support the growth of individual teachers, its impact on, for example, school cultures and the work of Ministry officials such as supervisors, was, inevitably variable.

In contrast to Omar's, Waleed's case provides a more positive outlook on all of the above factors (which resonate with but extend those highlighted by Carless, 2003 in his study of the implementation of TBL in Hong Kong); it is therefore not surprising that he was the teacher who demonstrated most growth in his practical knowledge of CTs. Sarah's profile was also positive in relation to the above factors. However, while developing her pedagogical skills in relation to learner-centred methodology, she had problems with time management, which was a key reason for the absence of CTs in some of her observed lessons. Yet, she demonstrated resilience and creativity in the way she responded to the contextual factors which hindered the use of CTs in her classes; this highlights the role that such personal characteristics play in shaping the extent to which teachers will not just engage with but, more importantly, persist with, innovations in their classroom practice.

## **VII Conclusion**

Our focus here has been on practical knowledge in using communicative tasks, but we feel that this study highlights issues which are of broad relevance to in-service language teacher education generally. It is often the

case that in such contexts teachers are being encouraged to consider new ways of working with learners, and a common observation about such initiatives, as noted earlier, is that they frequently seem to have minimal impact of teachers' cognitions and/or classroom practices. On the basis of this study, and more generally of the larger teacher education project it formed part of, we would suggest that in-service language teacher education is more likely to promote growth in teachers' practical knowledge when the following conditions apply:

- teacher education is distributed over time rather than intensively;
- teachers have opportunities to experiment with new ideas in their own classrooms during the in-service programme;
- regular space for teachers to analyze and reflect on their beliefs and classroom practices is provided;
- teachers engage with relevant theoretical input and are encouraged to interpret this in relation to what happens in classrooms;
- supportive tutoring, supervision, and mentoring are available;
- teachers' classroom practices are not formally assessed;
- teachers' working contexts are conducive to the new ideas they are being encouraged to adopt;
- teachers are positively disposed towards change and are ready to persist in the face of adverse conditions;

This is not presented here as an exhaustive list of conditions for successful in-service language teacher education; there was evidence in our study, though, that these elements did shape the extent to which the teachers developed productively in their practical knowledge of using CTs. As we have acknowledged, the degree of such development varied across the individuals studied and can be explained with reference to the contextual, relational, attitudinal, cognitive and pedagogical factors discussed in VI above. In absolute terms it might seem that the overall uptake of tasks in the work of the teachers studied here was limited; however, relative to their starting position and considering the changes in the teachers' work implied by the use of communicative tasks, we would conclude that in two of the three cases there were encouraging signs of practical knowledge growth here.

Certain limitations must be borne in mind in interpreting the conclusions we have derived from this study. We studied three teachers from a specific geographical context, working with a particular curriculum, and engaged in what was in many ways a unique in-service teacher education programme. Additional research in different contexts would be required to further test some of the assertions we have made here about ways of enhancing the impact of in-service language teacher education. The overall database we worked with here was substantial (23 interviews, 15 observations and 12 pieces of written work), and we are confident that collectively these data support the conclusions we have reached here; we do also acknowledge,

though, that the analysis of the teachers' classroom practices would have benefited from a more detailed observational element, and any findings which draw solely on observations thus need to be interpreted with this limitation in mind. Nonetheless, we feel that the longitudinal approach adopted here was beneficial in providing both a sense of how the teachers' practical knowledge in using CTs developed over the BA programme and of the factors that influenced this development. More generally, too, this study hints at the role in-service teacher education can play in supporting the implementation of educational policy. We leave the last word to Sarah, reflecting, at the end of the course, on what she had learned about CTs: "I didn't imagine that teaching would be in this way, that one day in Oman teaching would be like this and learning would be like this, and we would have this opportunity to communicate, to talk in English!" (SI.7).

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## Appendix 1 - Information on data collection

### List of observations

<i>Date</i>	<i>Code</i>
6/10/03	SO.1 (Sarah Observation 1)
12/10/03	OO.1 (Omar Observation 1)
18/10/03	WO.1 (Waleed Observation 1)
21/3/04	WO.2, SO.2
12/4/04	OO.2
10/10/04	WO.3, SO.3
25/10/04	OO.3
18/4/05	OO.4
25/4/05	WO.4, SO.4
12/9/05	OO.5
24/9/05	WO.5
2/10/05	SO.5

### List of interviews

<i>Date</i>	<i>Code</i>
6/10/03	SI.1 (Sarah Interview 1)
12/10/03	OI.1 (Omar Interview 1)
18/10/03	WI.1 (Waleed Interview 1)
22/11/03	WI.2, SI.2
23/11/03	OI.2

21/3/04	WI.3, SI.3
12/4/04	OI.3
10/10/04	WI.4, SI.4
25/10/04	OI.4
1/2/05	OI.5
6/2/05	WI.5, SI.5
18/4/05	OI.6
25/4/05	WI.6, SI.6
12/9/05	OI.7
24/9/05	WI.7
2/10/05	SI.7
30/1/06	OI.8
9/7/06	WI.8

**List of assignments referred to in this paper**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Module</i>	<i>Code</i>
26/3/03	Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)	SA.1 (Sarah Assignment 1)
22/10/03	Tasks	SA.2
26/5/04	Teaching Speaking and Listening (TS&L), Part 1	SA.3
12/11/05	Materials Design and Development (MDD)	SA.4, OA.4 (Omar Assignment 4)

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