Educational policy implementation (0116)

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Introduction

This paper presents research looking at policy enactment in a department of education within a university college in Sweden; more specifically it concerns changes made to courses designed for prospective teachers of English as a foreign language as part of teacher training (Baldwin,2013). The paper presents some of the teacher educators' and students' individual and collective voices and acting during a four year implementation of organisational changes designed to promote a transformative and student-centred learning culture.

Background

The changes made locally were inspired by the implementation of the Bologna process in Sweden. As part of the Bologna process, educational modules are required to be organized around learning outcomes. In policy documents learning outcomes are presented as representing a move towards a more student- centred approach to learning, a means to improved student learning as well as a basis for curricular re-organisation and a move away from traditional forms of teaching and learning.

As part of the changes made locally, learning outcomes based on the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) were adopted as the starting point for teacher educators to assess students' language proficiency in English. The CEFR, ddeveloped by the Council of Europe, aims to provide a reference work that presents language professionals a basis for language teaching and learning as well as assessment (CEF 2001). The communicative view of language learning behind the CEFR has influenced teacher education for EFL teachers in Sweden and how foreign languages are taught today in Swedish schools. However, its influence on higher education has been much less.

In a similar way to how Bologna policy documents present learning outcomes as a basis for curricular re-organisation, it has been suggested that the CEFR can bring about curriculum reform; arguing that the 'can do' descriptors of the CEFR offer to bring curriculum, pedagogy and assessment closer to one another than has traditionally been the case, challenging us to rethink each from the perspective of the other two (Little, 2009; North, 2014).

The changes made locally concern attempts to change examination and assessment practice, as well as attempts to make students more responsible for their learning. New examinations were added which attempted to introduce a more task based approach to teaching and learning. For example, a sstudent run lesson was included as part of testing the student's grammar knowledge, whilst an assessment and grading examination was included where students were asked to discuss and assess examples of pupils' written and oral ability in English. Changes to assessment practice concerned attempts to connect assessment and feedback of student work to the wording of the CEFR descriptors and the CEFR's 'can do' focus. Finally, a new system of teacher educator feedback on students' written proficiency was introduced with the intention of encouraging students to reflect on their work rather than simply rewriting their papers based on teacher educator corrections.

Results

From the teacher educators perspective the new examinations were seen as not allowing for the adequate coverage of content. Concerns were expressed that knowledge about the English language would not be covered adequately in the new examinations. In contrast, students were positive. They wanted more examinations like the student run grammar lesson, whilst the assessment and grading examination was described as being particularly useful and by one student as "a real learning experience" which had given them more than lectures.

As far as assessment practice is concerned, there were mixed opinions amongst teacher educators about using the CEFR descriptors to assess the students' language proficiency. It was felt that students would have problems understanding the descriptors and that it was difficult to apply the descriptors when assessing student work. A random survey of assessment forms shows that teacher educator feedback and assessment was more likely to focus on grammatical errors rather than other aspects of language proficiency, such as sociolinguistic and strategic language competence and the general 'can do' approach of the CEFR. Students felt they wanted more detailed and positive feedback on their written papers and that teacher educators were not using the same criteria when assessing student work.

As far as attempts to make students more responsible for their learning, the changes to how written proficiency feedback was given were not seen generally by teacher educators as an improvement to existing practice. It was felt that the new method of feedback made it difficult to carry out their responsibilities of passing on knowledge felt to be essential for the students to obtain before entering the profession. Students, on the other hand, were generally positive about attempts to get them to take more responsibility for their learning, and the majority felt that the feedback they had received on their written work had helped them improve their writing in English.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings presented in this paper show that while students were generally positive towards the changes made, teacher educators were more negative. Rather than using the CEFR descriptors to carry out their work, teacher educators resisted and mediated the change by continuing to use their professional experience and knowledge to judge students language proficiency. The reaction to using the CEFR descriptors can be seen as an expression of the cultural values and goals of the traditional liberal approach to language teaching and learning at university level (Quist, 2000) which has been shown to be in strong contrast to those represented by the CEFR's communicative approach.

The findings of this paper are similar to those of previous rresearch on the relationship between policy making and educational policy implementation (Maguire et al, 2010; Bailey 2012). Using Bernstein's (2000) theoretical concept of recontextualisation we conclude that the findings illustrate the strong role of disciplinary discourses in resisting change in education. The changes did not connect with the local concerns of practitioners and as a result they were absorbed instead into an existing field of practice containing discourses concerning appropriate curriculum knowledge and teacher and student identities.

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