'Being fair and showing care': the moral discourse of an English language teacher

In the English language classroom, process generally takes precedence over content, the interaction between teachers and students providing a rich environment for the instantiation of moral activity. The nature of this activity rests not on personal preference or the adoption of a technique or skill such as 'moral teaching', but on the quality of agreements between students, teachers, and institutions.

It is widely acknowledged that the practice of teaching is by definition a moral activity by virtue of its peculiar set of responsibilities and obligations. English Language teaching in particular offers a rich site for investigation in this regard as relationships are foregrounded and teachers routinely negotiate conflicting moral imperatives. At tertiary level, most participants in the English language class are adults and relationships are therefore more equal than in other education contexts; but, at the same time, teachers may be the administrators and assessors of life-changing formal assessments. Although neither teacher nor learner is able to completely disregard the different interactional roles they enact, the English teacher's goal is usually to stimulate interaction, which implies fostering provisionally equal, and therefore quasi-private, participant roles in the classroom. How do teachers accomplish this and resolve the ethical dilemmas they face along the way?

Of nine studies of morality in classroom discourse (2000-2012), three were concerned with aspects of justice vs care, but only one reports (mostly) on English teachers (Pantic and Wubbels 2012) and none on the tertiary sector or EAP teachers in particular. The interpretive methodology adopted here is shared with seven of the nine studies. Extracts from interviews with three EAP teachers illustrate the range of strategies and personae called upon by the informants. The accounts evidence occasional forays into more reflexive (critical) discourse that problematizes taken-for-granted values and facts, thus contributing to communicative rationality through discourse (Habermas 1984, 1990). All three EAP teachers reveal the countervailing aspects of their moral work: nurturing vs directing social life in the classroom. The study also contributes to the ongoing debate about the reliability and significance of informants' direct and indirect reported speech (eg Fox 2001).

References
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