

**THE MOTHER- TONGUE- A FORBIDDEN TONGUE?
EXPLORING TEACHERS' COGNITION IN THE USE OF THE L1 (FIRST
LANGUAGE) IN MALAYSIAN ESL CLASSROOMS**

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Background of study

This paper forms part of a bigger research, which was aimed at establishing the extent to which the L1 was used by Malaysian ESL teachers, to investigate some of their patterns of L1 use and to seek explanations for their use of the L1. In a Malaysian multilingual context, teachers and learners in the ESL classroom may or may not share the same Mother-Tongue (MT) or the First Language (L1). The term L1 is used in this discussion to include all other languages used in the ESL classroom other than the target language (TL).

The main focus of this paper is to study how teachers' use of specific patterns of L1 is influenced by their knowledge, assumptions and beliefs about learning and teaching and their attempt to reconcile what they believe with competing internal and external pressures of their teaching contexts. This exploration is based on the assumption that teachers' decision making in the classroom is powerfully influenced by their cognition or belief systems (Clark and Peterson 1986 and Woods 1996).

A grounded approach to data analysis was adopted for the data obtained through observations of teachers' lessons, the outcome of which showed that teachers used the L1 mainly for translation purposes. The analysis of the data revealed specific categories and patterns of translation use. Subsequently an analysis of the interview data (over 2 phases) was undertaken in an attempt to seek explanations for teachers' use of the L1. Profiles of five of the fifteen teachers were drawn up with the aim of exploring the relationship between teachers' cognition and their use of specific patterns of translation. In this paper, I shall provide a descriptive and interpretive account of one of the five cases studied.

Teacher cognition and decision - making

In the field of language teaching and learning, research in classroom pedagogy has adopted the process-product view which regards teaching as a linear process relating teachers' behaviour to outcomes in students' learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1990). However, classroom-centred research has now acknowledged that any research account of understanding teaching should involve an inner exploration of teacher cognition-how teachers conceive of what they do, taking into account their knowledge, reasoning, beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning (Burns 1992 and Freeman 1996).

Woods (1996) and others researching on teacher cognition believe that teachers bring with them a store of knowledge, experience and beliefs which invariably influence their decision making in the classroom. This cognition is a product of the teachers' past learning and teaching experiences which they bring with them to the class and which could be acquired both from training or experience. Ulichny (1996:178) describes this 'cognitive system' as

“a product of an individual teacher’s past learning and teaching experiences, beliefs about teaching and learning from both professional training as well as her own folk wisdom gleaned from fellow teachers and her particular personality”

Freeman (1990) holds the view that the teacher has a ‘mental life’ which influences and directs what happens in the class. Like Ulichny (1996) he suggests that teachers’ mental lives’ do not begin when they enter teacher education programmes but rather they bring to this formal training, a background of tacit knowledge and personal theories about classrooms and what goes on in them. This view argues that knowledge resides within the teacher and is more personal, experiential and individual in nature. It suggests that teachers hold personal views of themselves, their learners, their goals, and their roles which influence the kind of learning environment they try to create in their classrooms. This cognitive system is also believed to be manifested in the form of ‘rational principles’ or ‘maxims’ (Richards 1998 and Tudor 1998) which tend to guide teachers’ decision making.

Premised on this view that teaching has a cognitive component and that teachers possess cognitive systems which influence their decision making, it is necessary to explore how teachers’ cognitive systems inform their decision making in relation to their L1 use. In exploring teachers’ cognition, this study also attempts to understand teaching from the perspective of the teachers themselves, to pay attention their often ‘hidden voices’ in order to understand the complexity of life in language classrooms (Richards 1998, Bailey 1996 and Freeman 1996)

Teacher Profile

A framework

This section of the paper traces the profile of one of the five teachers in this study. The profile begins with a description of the teacher’s practice i.e. the specific patterns of language use. It also provides examples of the categories used by the teacher. This is followed by an exploration of the teacher’s cognition describing his background (training and teaching experience and their own language learning experience) as well as his assumptions and beliefs about language learning and teaching. By providing the background of the teacher, I intend to show how this could have influenced his knowledge, assumptions and beliefs.

By ‘knowledge’, I take to include professional knowledge derived from the teacher’s training background. This knowledge may take the form of declarative or content/subject matter knowledge, procedural knowledge (classroom routines) as well as contextual (knowledge of the context of the teaching situation). The more personal and experiential knowledge is derived from his teaching experience as well as his own language learning experience (apprenticeship of observation). I then go on to discuss the teacher’s assumptions and beliefs about learning and teaching with particular reference to English Language learning and teaching and how the teacher perceives the roles of teachers and learners.

The teacher profile is an attempt to encapsulate the thinking of the teacher in response to what he perceives about the use of the L1. This framework of the teacher’s profile also tries to capture the interplay of all the different factors within the teacher’s cognition which intertwine to influence and inform the teacher’s pattern of L1 use.

A Profile: Mr. Gopal(i) **Patterns of language use**

Mr. Gopal was one of the 15 teachers who made use of a substantial amount of the L1/Bahasa Melayu for translation purposes. The lesson taught was a reading comprehension lesson based on a text entitled 'Letter to the Newspaper'. Before engaging students with the text, the first half of the lesson was spent on the set induction where the teacher introduced the topic of 'Moral Values'. In fact in the lesson (a Form One class) that was observed, 90 % of the lesson was conducted using BM, the exchanges falling mainly into the following categories at:

Level 2.0: teacher poses question in Bahasa Melayu and students respond in BM. Teacher repeats students' code and

- 2.1 moves on to next interaction.
 - 2.2 gives a translation.
 - 2.3 asks for and gives translation
- (Refer Appendix A and B for Coding of Categories)

What distinguishes Mr. Gopal's use of L1/BM from the other four teachers is that instead of asking for a translation, this teacher uses BM/C-S (Code-Switching) **to pose questions** and when he receives a response from students in BM he either merely repeats the students' code in BM (sub-category 2.1) or goes on either to give an English translation of the word (sub-category 2.2) or asks for and gives a translation (sub-category 2.3). Here are some examples of Mr. Gopal's patterns of language use.

Example 1: [level 2/2.1]/Lesson 15

- T: **Lagi? (...)** *Lagi apa dia? Lagi satu, menghormat orang tua, jaga pertuturan kamu, jaga. . . lagi?*
[What else besides respecting old people?] [One more, respect the elderly and watch your language . . . what else?]
- S: **Tidak boleh memecahkan meja**
[shouldn't break tables]
- T: **Tidak boleh memecahkan meja**
[shouldn't break tabels]
- S: **Hisap rokok**
[smoking]

- T: **Ah hisap rokok.** Okay be responsible. . .
[smoking]

Here the teacher poses question in BM, student responds in BM. Teacher repeats student's code and moves on to the next interaction.

Example 2: [level 2/2.2]/Lesson 15

- T: **Bersih dalam kelas dan satu lagi apa dia?**
[Cleanliness in the class and what else?]
- S: **Hormati cikgu**
[respect teachers]

T: *menghormati cikgu*, respect teachers. Right, *menghormati guru*.
 [respect teachers] [respect teachers]

Here the teacher poses a question in BM and students respond in BM. Teacher repeats student's code and gives a translation in English.

Example 3: [level 2/2.3/Lesson 15]

T: *Lagi apa dia?*

[What else?]

S: *jangan cakap busuk*

[don't talk bad about others]

T: *Tak mau cakap busuk. Tak mau cakap busuk itu macam mana cakap dalam*

[don't talk bad about others. How do you say that in English?]

Bahasa Inggeris? Siapa tau? Dalam Bahasa Inggeris macam mana cakap, tak

[Who knows?] [How do you say that in English? Don't talk bad about others?]

mau cakap busuk Apa yang you cakap. Jaga-jaga. Bila you cakap, kepada you

[Be careful with what you say when you speak and to whom you're speaking]

cakap, to whom. Kalau awak cakap dengan bapak awak, boleh cakap...hei bapak

[If you speak to your father, can you say, 'hey dad, come here?']

mari sini?

S: *tadak*

[no]

T: Watch your words

Here the teacher poses a question in BM and the student responds in BM. The teacher repeats student's code, asks for a translation of the phrase '*tak mau cakap busuk*' [Don't talk bad about others] in English and goes on to give an example of what he means. He ends up by giving a modified translation of the phrase in the form of 'Watch your language' which is not an accurate translation.

(ii) Teacher's background

Teacher's training, teaching experience and own language learning experience

In his mid-thirties, Mr Gopal was trained as a TESL optionist in one of the local teacher training colleges and had been teaching English as well as Moral Studies (a subject in the school curriculum) for the past ten years. Unlike many of his colleagues, he had not pursued any in-service or degree course since he left college. However when I returned a year later after my first phase of interview with Mr Gopal, he informed me that he had started on an off campus BA TESL degree with one of the local universities. He was the discipline teacher in an all boys' school (Gurney Boys' Secondary School) which had a reputation for being notoriously ill-disciplined. His interest in sports often took him away from the classroom as he was required to attend meetings and accompany students to various sports events.

Educated in a Mission school, Mr Gopal, recalled his own experience of learning English (when English was taught through English) and related the following experiences.

"English to be used in English classroom was passed on when I was in school lah. I was in a missionary school, I was in St Michaels'. So that time, the English teacher was one Reverend Brother Vincent O' Crocery. Being an Irish man, so English should be English (laughter). . . so

that thing lah, no mother tongue, so you're **forced to speak**...so for them, English was in English lah, it's not as if it's BM or mixture of language. . .”(T12/FW1: 170-178).

“When I was in school in St Michaels’, the brother, an Irish man, at one point of time, I just did not understand what he was talking about, you know with the Irish accent and everything. Oh God (laughter), finish lah, gonner lah myself, you know but then later on and after we approached him and tell him, ‘Sir, there’s a problem, okay, and then he was using a bit of Malaysian English, simple, he explained easy, **we got the message**” (T12/FW1: 272-277).

“I **walked** through that stage when I was in Primary school and I was in year three. Her name was Mrs Chin. I can still remember her very clearly. When she comes into the class, it’s all English. I’m not very exposed to the English language, mainly Tamil and I used to be very fearful of the teacher. She always stick to English. We had to ask permission to go to the toilet. . . There was another teacher, Miss Mah, this particular teacher has a craze for spelling and dictation . I was in the A group and was expected to score 10 out of 10. If you score less, you’ll get banged from behind and this made me learn spelling, dictation and use the dictionary” (T12/FW2:110-119).

His early experience with his Irish teacher was one where he was forced to speak English as “being an Irishman, he could only speak English”. He related how he had problems with the accent and was able to “get the message” only after his Irish teacher had used some Malaysian English. The second experience was one where the teachers instilled fear in him, both emotional as well as physical. Surprisingly, both these supposedly negative experiences had positive outcomes for him in terms of language learning.

(iii) Teacher’s assumptions and beliefs about learning and teaching

Getting the message across

When asked if the use of English only was something that was passed down from his training, Mr Gopal said that it was and went on to relate how he challenged his methodology lecturer in his training days who insisted that only English should be used in the ESL classroom.

“In college we had a very heated argument over this matter I remember. It was one of my methodology lecturer, her name was Miss Lum. She said, ‘Cannot, English should be in English’.. . she said ‘No’. When I did my practical, I was doing my practical in one very rural area in Penang where the boys, the lecturer came there and he saw me teaching English in Bahasa Malaysia. He said, no it’s wrong. I said, come on **Cikgu**, (teacher) I want the boys to **get the message**, that’s my aim here. I’m here to teach them, at least they **should know something**. They come to school, **they know** today I **learn about** moral values, today I learn about occupations, they **MUST know**, to **deliver the content** you know, not the skill. KBSM says you have to do the 4 skills, speaking, listening, reading, writing. That one is the don’t know lah. Dare not comment (laughter) I never believe in the thing a lot lah. . .” (T12/FW1: 178-193)
 “Teaching English in BM ah. Trial and error lah. was actually trial and error lah.. First day here, tried visuals in English lah but then when the monthly exam marks came out, very disappointing. **Change a bit here, change a bit there** and then did a bit of you know, **hit and go, touch and go, touch and go**, finally came to the conclusion that translation is the best. At least the message is put into their heads, They get the message.” (T12/FW1:36-41)

Here Mr Gopal states explicitly that his aim in teaching English is to get the message across to his students when he says “I want my boys to get the message”, “at least the message is put into their heads” and “they get the message”. On the part of the students, he says that “they should know

something”, “ they MUST know something” as if it is imperative that they do so. In this context, getting the message equals students knowing the content. By ‘content’ here, he is referring to the topic of the lesson such as learning about moral values, occupations etc.

Mr Gopal sees his role as that of ‘a deliverer of content’. Thus English language teaching here is conceived of as one that is topic based and not skill based. Although Mr Gopal expressed his cynicism and rejection of the English Language syllabus, that he “never believe in the thing a lot”, he exercised caution in commenting further when he said that he “dare not comment” and laughed it off. Here he is verbalising his fear of expressing an opinion.

Creating comfort in learning and teaching

Concerning his present state of thinking with regards to what constitutes successful learning and teaching, Mr Gopal expresses his concern over the following issues:

- (a) the importance of eliciting a response from his students when he is teaching
- (b) the need to create a comfortable context for his students learning English.

Both these concerns are expressed in the following comments.

I mean as teachers, when we go into a class, blah, blah, blah, blah, we don’t get any. . . . There was no response . I . . . I normally think that lah, if I were to teach and there was no“ response, something is wrong, either something wrong with me or something wrong with the pupils. I think I have done my part. Something has to be wrong with the pupils. When I ask them individually, they say *Bahasa Inggeris* (English) is a bit of a problem for us, even market English is a problem for us, what more when you talk to them correctly and then you know, stress here and stress there¹, they are at a loss. . . (T12/FW1: 75-81)

. . . response, it’s very frustrating, **when I was in school I was taught like that**, that kind of teaching, I thought when I teach my boys must respond back. How they do it is immaterial as long as there is RESPONSE, I’m happy. Then later you try to bring them back to English and tell them this is the actual thing and then **nilai murni** (moral values), at least they know lah, moral values, these are moral values” (T12/FW1: 146-153)

“I may get back some negative response from them you know. ‘Another English Day, Oh my God!’ That kind of thing , they don’t feel comfortable in English, and then if you get someone to do something you don’t get good response, you know, defeats the purpose. I’m actually against English day. If you look at the background, we’re talking about laymen here, fathers are labourers, mothers are, odd job workers. **Whatever they are comfortable in let them be lah.** We can have English day once in a while, but we shouldn’t make it a routine lah. Monday English, Tuesday English day , then talk only in English..” (T12/FW2:102-110)

Firstly, we see that Mr Gopal holds the assumption that the use of too much English will put students off and hence result in a “negative response” from students (here meaning no response). He quotes from his own experience of teaching where he gauges success in his teaching in terms of whether he receives a response from his students. Therefore, in order to get a response, he is prepared to allow his students to use BM (‘how they do it is immaterial’) and he himself would

¹ Here Mr. Gopal is referring to Standard British English as a stressed timed language as compared with Malaysian English which is syllable timed.

use it too in order to obtain a response. It suggests that Mr Gopal feels uncomfortable when he gets none or little response from his students.

Mr Gopal also talks about the importance of creating a comfortable context for successful learning and to him, a comfortable context would be one which allows learners to use their L1 (BM in this case) and he himself would use BM or 'market English' if necessary. For Mr Gopal, successful teaching and learning involves being able to create this comfortable context for learning (regardless of whether there is learning). He seems to think that a failure to get any kind of response from students (quotes example of his own teacher) means "something is wrong, either something wrong with me or the pupils". He comes full circle when he concludes that finally "the actual thing" that is important in the teaching and learning of English is that students learn moral values. Again this brings us back to the teacher's earlier comments on the teaching of 'content' by which he means the 'topic' of the lesson.

Acquisition of facts and knowledge

Mr Gopal seemed to hold certain assumptions and beliefs about the nature of language learning and teaching as evidenced from what he said and the language he used to mediate his thoughts. One of the views of language learning that emerged was the assumption that learning involved the acquisition of facts and knowledge as seen in the following comments in the first phase of interviews I had with him.

"Yes, you see if they understand the content, means they know what is language all about, you know and they will understand something lah. They'll get to know something lah, if we're talking about occupations you know, they understand 'lawyer', 'doctor' they might know lawyer, engineer....that means when they know they slowly build up their interest in English.. . ."

(T12/FW1/198-201)

"... as the days go on, you guide them on their way lah. Hopefully when they reach the year end, they've understood something." (T12/FW1: 214-215)

"More of er translation of ideas lah, to make them understand the thing better lah, whatever I'm teaching, to make sure that they really understand. Next week maybe I'll be doing it already lah when it comes to parts of speech. When I tell them nouns, conjunctions, they are just blank, you know, they just don't know what it is. *Penghulong ayat* (conjunction) ah, then they know better, *Nama am* (proper nouns) then they know the thing better you know. So when you explain to them in English it is not because we cannot do, we can but then it's a longer journey to reach . . .at then end of the day, you want the boys to understand what is a noun, what is a conjunction and everything. . . teaching grammar and certain important things, I want the boys to know lah, which I feel they MUST know it, and then I use a bit of Bahasa lah" (T12/FW1: 44-50)

(iv) Teacher's assumptions and beliefs about teachers' and learners' roles

Teacher as guide, builder and deliverer

Mr Gopal used the metaphor of a 'journey' when he talked about the learning process. He views his role as that of a 'guide' and a 'builder', "guiding them on their way" and "slowly building them up in English". He used the words 'message' and 'understanding' recurrently when he referred to students' learning when he said that 'at least the message is put into their heads' and 'they get the message'. He stresses that his students 'must know' what is being taught. He refers to the content as "the thing" and "it" (suggesting something that is concrete and tangible) and the process of delivering the content as that of a journey (idea of travelling to a destination) and

of guiding his students along this journey. He also uses the metaphor of 'delivery' when referring to the process of learning and teaching. He says that the "message is put into their heads" suggesting that the teacher's role is to deliver the content and the students' role is to receive it. The use of these metaphorical expressions reflects a belief that the teacher's role is to transmit knowledge and the learner's role is to receive knowledge..

Producing results

In the second phase of interviews with Mr. Gopal justified his use of BM on the grounds that he had to produce results.

"I use a lot of BM in my teaching, that I know very well. I believe in that because my pupils score, they understand what I'm trying to teach them, that's good enough. During the mid term I was trying to use as much English as possible. I didn't want to use BM because I was doing the course (referring to the B.ED TESL course that he was pursuing). Out of fear for me, they said that they understood everything. When the exam results, I was very disappointed, only one passed. Come to the third monthly test, I code-switched, used BM and English, I got six passes." (T12/FW2: 130-135)

When asked if he measured success by results, Mr Gopal said,

"Because the school is results oriented so I have no choice. Not important that students master the language, If they can use simple English, good enough. How often will they use English? In government departments, all talk to you in Malay" (T12/FW2: 137-139). . . "Syllabus is one but when the school is results oriented what else can you do? You need the results. . . (T12/FW2: 255-256)

For Mr Gopal, his role as a successful teacher includes that of producing results and improving scores in the examinations. He is aware of his own use of BM and tries not to use it but says that he is constrained by external pressure of the school and authorities to produce results.

Discussion

Studies on teacher cognition in the classroom reveal that teachers' pedagogical decisions can be influenced by their over-riding concerns with the curriculum (e.g. concerns with covering the syllabus, producing results, delivery of content etc) or with social and managerial concerns (e.g. concerns with classroom management, rapport with students, teacher's role as an instructor etc). In the case of Mr. Gopal, he seems to be concerned with curriculum issues as seen in his concern for delivering the content of the lesson and checking on comprehension of the topic i.e. "Moral Values". His concern for delivery of content could be influenced by his perception of the role of the teacher as a transmitter and deliver of knowledge as well as that of a guide and builder.

Mr Gopal's pattern of L1 use seems to suggest a view of teaching which is very knowledge-bound. His perception of teaching and learning seems to be influenced by that of the transmission model when he emphasizes the need to 'deliver content' and 'at least the message is put into their heads...they (students) should know something'. Teachers like Mr Gopal tend to think of successful language learning in terms of getting the messages across, of students understanding the content of the lesson and acquiring a body of knowledge.

The analysis of Mr Gopal's articulated beliefs reflects a professional as well as experiential view of knowledge. Some of this knowledge stems from his own views about language learning and

teaching as a result of training and his interpretation of the syllabus. Part of this knowledge comes from observing how he was being taught and in his case, he chose to reject 'the model of apprenticeship' (Lortie 1975). The reason for Mr Gopal using more BM than English in his lessons could probably be linked to his own language learning experience in that he did not want his students to have to go through the same experience that he himself underwent in learning English. For him, getting a 'response' from students and creating a comfortable state for learning and teaching was important. From his own 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975), he chose to reject what was negative in his own learning experience and to create the positive instead. According to Freeman (1996), the knowledge that comes from the 'apprenticeship of observation' is not always positive and some teachers may wish to replicate aspects of their teaching received whilst others may not.

Mr. Gopal's use of a substantial amount of BM in his lesson seems to suggest that his procedural knowledge is one that has been learnt implicitly as seen in the explicit, routine and automatic like manner in which Mr Gopal uses BM for translation and posing questions. Mr Gopal's profile seemed to suggest that his use of mainly BM in posing questions (level 2/2.1, and 2.2) to his students as well as giving translation may have been driven by this concern for delivering the content of the lesson and checking on comprehension of the topic concerned i.e. 'Moral Values'. We also see that this concern for 'delivery of content' is influenced by his perception of a teacher as a transmitter and deliver of knowledge as well as that of a guide and builder.

In Mr Gopal's case, we also see that he was trying to reconcile the competing pressures of teaching the content of the lesson, of getting response from his students as well as producing results in the examinations. Mr Gopal said that he arrived at the use of BM as a strategy of teaching after he had tried other strategies like using "visuals in English" and related how he had to "change a bit here, a bit there, hit and go, touch and go" before resorting to using translation when he found that it helped him to achieve his ends in terms of producing results and putting the message across. The tenor of his comments seems to suggest that he was in a hurry to achieve the goal of his lesson and hence the "trial and error" and "hit and run" process. For teachers like Mr Gopal, the use of BM for translation, for posing questions and checking on comprehension may be one way of reconciling these different pressures.

From this discussion, it appears that the teacher's use of the L1 and patterns of translation is very much dependant on what his priorities are on his own teaching agenda. We also recognise the fact that the teacher makes interactive decisions, adapt and modifies his practice based on the concerns which he holds to be most important or pressing in his teaching situation.

Implications and Conclusion

The profile of Mr Gopal shows that among some of the concerns of the teacher were those related to that of students understanding the meaning of words, a concern for covering the syllabus, teaching of content or topic and a concern to elicit response from students. We also see that in the process of trying to reconcile what he believes with competing internal and external pressures of his teaching contexts, the teacher often resorts to the use of the L1/translation to achieve a state of equilibrium which he is most comfortable with. Hence, we see that a teacher may have different priorities or goals in his teaching agenda which are not always pedagogically driven in nature.

From the exploration of five teachers' cognition in this study, it was found that teachers' cognition also interacts with various contextual factors to influence their use of the NTL/translation patterns. Some of these contextual factors include those within the classroom

(e.g. language and socio-economic background of students and discipline problems) as well as those beyond the classroom (e.g. social and cultural expectations about teachers' and learners' roles) which are unique and specific to the Malaysian classroom context. For this study to have an impact on the teaching and learning on English (and more specifically teachers' use of the L1), in the context of the Malaysian ESL classroom, it entails an understanding of all these different contextual factors that teachers struggle with to make sense of their teaching.

The aim of this paper is not to provide a solution to the teacher's dilemma of whether or not to use the L1, nor does it aim to prescribe the 'right' strategy or methodology involving the use of the L1. What is more important and needful is for teachers to reflect on their own practice in the use of the L1. Given the impact that teachers' cognition have on their practice and decision making with regards to the use of the L1, it is crucial that teachers are aware of their personal theories so as to be able to make informed decisions about their use of the L1.

The sources of data (both classroom and interview data) from this and other studies can provide teachers and student teachers with authentic accounts of teachers' thinking and action which allow teachers to examine, reflect and question their own practice in the light of their own theories. The teacher-educator on the other hand, has an important role to play in encouraging teachers/student teachers to articulate their 'implicit theories' about the use of the L1 in order that these theories and beliefs can be examined and challenged (Calderhead 1987)

Finally, a study of teachers' use of the L1 needs to take into account not only of how much or in what ways teachers use the L1 but more importantly an understanding of why teachers use the L1 in the way they do. How effectively teachers use the L1 will ultimately depend on how they construct their own models of teaching in the light of their knowledge, assumptions and beliefs, (cognition) about teaching and learning.

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