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On the Nature of Reflective Practice in English Language Teaching: Importance, Successful Realization and Challenges

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Abstract: The knowledge of the importance of reflection in the field of teaching is crucial for an understanding of teacher development. There has been a considerable amount of literature published on reflective practice highlighting the need for quality reflection in various fields of study. Questions have been raised about the challenges or obstacles which might occur on the way towards successful realization of teacher trainees' reflection. Factors found to be influencing its effectiveness and meaningfulness have been explored in several studies. Debate continues about the best strategies for meaningful reflection which would lead towards professional development of English language teachers. Despite the fact that the issue of reflective practice is widely recognised as a serious concern, research has consistently shown that many English language teacher trainees lack knowledge of meaningful reflection on their teaching. Therefore, the paper intends to focus on reflective practice in English language teaching, especially during teaching practice. In addition, it seeks to discuss its importance, successful realization and possible challenges in the process. Moreover, the paper presents partial research findings based on qualitative data obtained from feedback sessions conducted on a sample of pre-service English language teacher trainees.

Keywords: feedback; reflective practice; self-reflection; teacher development.

Introduction

When speaking of reflective practice, there is a great number of words which might come to our mind, such as observation, self-esteem, experience, change, feedback, improvement, criticism, development, experiment, learning, observation, self-reflection, etc. Reflection or reflective practice is an increasingly important area in different fields of study. Being able to reflect on one's teaching and learning is a dominant feature of professional development. Finding the "right tool" which would fulfil this function successfully has long been a question of great interest in a wide range of fields. A considerable amount of literature has been published on reflective practice. These studies deal with the concept of reflective practice from various aspects, e.g. in connection to self-efficacy, teacher development, designing reflective practice courses etc. One of the greatest challenges which might be encountered in the reflective process might be the issue of meaningful reflection which would lead towards teacher development. There is an increasing concern that student teachers lack the ability to reflect on their teaching. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address the problems which may negatively affect the quality of reflection in teacher training. This paper attempts to present an example of reflective practice in teacher training, especially during teaching practice, when students apply theoretical knowledge in a real classroom environment. Moreover, it tackles the issue of successful reflection, strategies and obstacles which may occur in the process. Speaking of pre-service teachers, according to Töman's (2017) "the development in their reflective thinking skills has made contribution to their professional developments" (p. 238). What follows is an example of meaningful reflection which can have a positive impact on professional or teacher development of student teachers.

Reflective Practice in Teacher Training Programmes

The reason behind doing reflection lies in the process of self-improvement. In teaching, reflection may be considered as a necessary learning tool that teachers continuously use in order to improve / adjust their teaching style, methods, materials etc., so that it can help them on their way towards their own teacher development. A large body of literature has investigated the impact of reflection on teacher development or self-efficacy (Murray, 2015; Töman, 2017; Li - Ye, 2016; Motallebzadeh - Ahmadi - Hosseinnia, 2018; Moradkhani - Raygan, - Moein, 2017; Babaei - Babednia, 2016). Based on these works, it may be assumed that reflective practice plays an important

role in teaching and has its place in teacher training programmes. According to Pretorius and Ford (2016), learning how to reflect at the very beginning of teacher training can be very beneficial for student teachers since it can make it easier for them when they finish teacher education and start their teaching career. Designing a reflective teacher education course has a positive impact on reflective teaching, as the study of Tajik and Pakzad (2016) shows. In addition, as Afshar and Farahani (2018) mention, “curriculum and syllabus designers, as well as material developers, should thus make efforts to design lessons, activities, practices and tasks which encourage students to have reflection on their learning and on their whole educational process and take responsibility for their own thinking and learning” (p. 62).

The literature provides us with a variety of definitions of the term reflective practice. In general, reflective practice can be described as a process of learning, through and from experience, leading to new insights regarding the professional and one's practice (Boud et al., 1985; Boyd and Fales, 1983; Mezirow, 1981, Jarvis, 1992; Finlay, 2008). Since reflection may happen during or after a certain event or situation, Schön (1983) uses the terms reflection-on-action (after-the-event thinking) and reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) to distinguish between the two types of reflection. Throughout this paper, reflection-on-action will be used in connection to feedback sessions, where student teachers reflect back on their lesson they had taught during teacher placement. In order for quality reflection to happen, Appleyard and Appleyard (2015) list the key features of reflective practice as follows: “cyclical, ongoing, multi-sourced, recorded, objective and logical, open mind and curiosity” (pp. 16-17). Moreover, the following stages of reflective practice are outlined: “1. Critically reflecting on an experience; 2. Working out what to do differently next time; 3. Trying out your ideas in practice; 4. Evaluating how those ideas worked out in practice” (p. 15).

Reflective Practice in Teacher Preparation – Strategies and Challenges

Eby and Kujawa (1998) draw attention to possible strategies which may ease the process of reflection and make it more effective. According to the authors, the strategies below are to be followed:

1. “Understand the process of reflection-on-action
2. Go beyond mere description of lessons (the what?)

3. Learn about reflection through interaction with teacher educators, cooperating teachers and fellow preservice educators (through journal buddy reading)
4. Learn to reflect on learners and the learning processes as well as the content
5. Learn to integrate ideas from others and experiences to improve teaching
6. Understand that reflective practitioners are active, persistent, careful, sceptical, rational and proactive”
(As cited in Lupinski K. - Jenkins P. - Beard A., Jones L., 2012, p. 84)

As to the point number five, integration of other peoples' ideas and experiences can be achieved through different tools, especially online tools, such as e-portfolio, digital reflective journals, online discussions, etc.

Gibbs' (2013) reflective cycle describes the reflective process as follows: “Description (What happened? → Feelings (What were your reactions and feelings? → Evaluation (What was good or bad about the experience?) → Analysis (What sense can you make of the situation?) → Conclusions general (What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these experiences and the analyses you have undertaken?) → Conclusions specific (What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal; situation or way of working?) → Personal action plans (What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time?” (pp. 49-50). Kolb's (1984) learning cycle starts with “Concrete experience → Reflective Observation → Abstract Conceptualisation → Active experimentation” (pp. 22-23). One of the things which both Gibbs and Kolb's cycle have in common is that they emphasise the importance of going beyond the mere description of an event. Moreover, Atkins (1994) claims that it is useful to “reflect on one's own practice and use feedback to assess and manage one's own performance” (As cited in Hinett & Weeden, 2000, p. 246).

Teaching practice is a time when student teachers perform what they have learnt from theory in a real classroom environment. Challenges and obstacles found to be influencing the quality of reflection have been explored in several studies (Afshar – Farahani, 2017; Davis, 2003; Raines and Shadiow, 1995; Smith – Clegg – Lawrence – Todd, 2007, Fook – Askeland, 2007; Šarić – Šteh, 2017). As Afshar and Farahani (2018) claim, “the obstacles and inhibitors to EFL learners' reflection can only be removed if we involve our learners and

let them play their part, acquire an inquiring and questioning spirit, and participate actively in the learning process (most of which were found to be lacking in the learning situation of our study), rather than regarding them as blank slates to be moulded by whatever is dictated to them.” (p. 60). According to Beauchamp (2014), the issue of context and the issue of identity, self and emotion play an important role when reflecting on an experience. Furthermore, Fook (2015) contends that there are also other factors which should be taken into consideration, such as:

1. critical reflection involves “deep-seated assumptions that are culturally held;
2. participants may not be ‘robust’ or resilient enough to expose their vulnerabilities in public;
3. culture and values of the reflective practice may not be compatible with some people
4. there may not be enough structure” (pp. 451-452).

In the research part of the paper, it was intended to follow the previous strategies during feedback sessions. The questions selected for the purpose of reflection aimed at helping the trainees narrow their focus and go beyond the description of the lesson they had taught. As Shadiow and Raines (1995) emphasise, true meaning of a reflective teacher can be more difficult than it may seem, when going beyond its literal meaning. A reflective teacher includes “respect for teachers' ongoing professional growth (beyond learning more “things to do”), a mutually beneficial dialogue between elements of one's theory and practice (beyond a simple recounting of one's success) and a potential for more critically deliberative classroom practices” (p. 271).

Data from the oral reflection of the trainees as a part of the feedback sessions were used for the purpose of this study. The interviews were conducted in the mother tongue (Slovak language) of the trainees. Subsequently, they were transcribed and translated into English and selected parts of the interviews are presented in the paper.

1 Research Aims and Methodology

The methodological approach taken in this study is qualitative. Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted on a sample of fifteen English language pre-service teacher trainees.

After the lesson taught by a teacher trainee, the following questions were addressed:

1. How do you feel after the lesson?
2. Did everything go the way you expected?
3. Were the students engaged in the lesson?
4. Did the students actively participate in the activities?
5. Why did you choose this activity?
6. Can you imagine modifying this activity? How?
7. What do you think would be different if the activity was modified?
8. If you were to teach the lesson again, what would you change?

The last three questions (questions 6-8), in particular, were asked with the purpose of future improvement, i.e. how could student teachers apply the possible adjustments and thus improve their teaching in the future. Therefore, the paper follows a qualitative approach, with in-depth analysis of the data obtained from semi-structured interviews with student teachers after the lesson they had conducted during teaching practice.

1.1 Data Analysis and Research Findings

Following data analysis, a number of categories emerged, these include: overall impression (how student teachers felt after the lesson); expectations vs. reality (whether everything went the way they expected, if not, why); reasons behind activities (based on what the activities were chosen); possible modifications (how the activities chosen could be modified to make them more engaging / motivating); students' perspective (to what extent the trainees think the students enjoyed their lesson); reteaching the lesson (if they were to teach the lesson again, what would be different).

2.1.1 Overall Impression

Based on the data obtained, the overall impression of the lessons conducted varies among the trainees. Most of the trainees had positive feelings with regards to their lesson, as they were satisfied, they felt good or relieved. A few trainees, however, felt disappointed with their performance, tired or they had mixed feelings after the lesson. One of the trainees admitted lack of preparation as a possible cause of not being satisfied with the lesson.

S8: "...pretty bad, I think it was the worst of all the lessons I have taught so far, I don't know, I was nervous and stressed and I think I did not prepare as much as I could have prepared... "

S6: "... very good, I did not have any big problems and I am satisfied with the way how it went"

S14: " ... I think I feel good. Even the students were engaged and they talked nicely ..."

All of the feelings reflected how the trainees perceived their performance as a teacher, either as positive or, in some cases, rather negative.

2.1.2 Expectations vs. Reality

When comparing the trainees' expectations before the lesson and the reality of what happened in the lesson, we could classify the trainees into three categories. The first category claimed the reality had met the expectations. The second category disagrees with the statement, presenting reasons behind it, such as time management (as they did not manage to do the work they had planned), participation (of the students in the classroom), improvisation (of a trainee) and students' level of English (below what was expected).

S11: ... "As to the content part, yes, we managed to cover everything, but I expected them to be more active ... because what happened to me was that some of the students did a little bit of sloppy work, they wrote much shorter feedback than I wanted from them. But I could have fixed it by adding more conjunctions, so that they had more of them to choose from and then there could have been some compound sentences, not only short sentences. ... "

S14: "... I thought it would last a bit longer, especially the discussion and at the end I was just thinking what to do with time, when doing the cross ... crossword, I also had a video from youtube prepared, about Columbus, but I wouldn't have managed to do it on time ... I decided to make the crossword longer, so that I would not mix reading and listening, etc. ... so that they did not have a lot of stuff to do during the lesson..."

S7: "... I did not manage to do everything, and I expected them to be more engaged, since I was doing a listening observation in that classroom and they were engaged more with the other professor that they know, so that's what I expected ...when I spend more time with them maybe in the third lesson, they will respond more. Therefore, on one hand, I understand that the feedback was not as I expected"

Moreover, a few students have come up with an alternative to what they did in the lesson, so that they would achieve the intended outcome. The last category of the trainees was not sure about whether the reality had met their expectations.

2.1.3 Reasons Behind Activities

There are various reasons why the trainees have chosen activities for their lesson. The trainees went for activities which would promote collaboration, creativity with the use of personalisation, real life content, internet.

S1: " ... I think it is good to enrich a lesson with their own opinions, because as a matter of fact, they keep learning something, keep receiving something from the lessons ... "

The purpose of the activities was to create positive environment (e.g. warm up activities), to make student come up with the knowledge rather than deliver the knowledge (so-called discovery learning), and thus implement learning through playing.

S13: "... I found it pointless to dictate them Slovak translation of each word, so I thought it would be more interesting if they searched for them by themselves ... "

It was important that the activities elaborated on background knowledge of the students. However, there are also a few trainees who got the ideas for activities from their tutor, textbook or previous experience.

S7: "...I did this activity also at primary school and out of what I have done, this one was the most interesting for them. So I thought they could find it interesting too and at the same time I could learn something about them and they could learn something about me ... "

S5: "... I wanted to practice listening with them. To practice listening, I wanted to practice those three phases pre-listening phase, when-listening phase and post-listening phase ... now I think that maybe I could have given them simpler words, because some of them were too difficult and maybe they did not understand and that's why it did not work ... "

2.1.4 Possible Modifications

With regards to the possible modification of activities, the trainees presented a great number of interesting ideas on how to improve the activities they conducted in the lesson, in order to make them more motivating, effective, encouraging, engaging, etc. The trainees offered a variety of activity modifications, such as creating more groups (and thus making it more dynamic and quicker), using real objects instead of pictures (to make it more interesting), incorporating more grammar / vocabulary in the activities (for the activity to be more challenging), dividing students into groups / pairs and mixing up the teams, pre-teaching vocabulary before doing an activity, making the activities funnier for the students, being more encouraging as a teacher, elaborating on students' background knowledge, using real context / situations (in order to make it more realistic), giving clearer instructions, using technology (e. g. Kahoot to make it funnier).

S15: "... Maybe with the use of some technological tools and ... For instance, I could work with Kahoot to make it funnier ..."

S10: "... I would ask them to make pairs, I would give them the cubes, and in pairs they would ... write in the exercise book the sentences and the first pair could be the winner. But it would be more time consuming ..."

Moreover, the trainees suggested working on error correction, making activities more personalised, summarizing activity results at the end, implementing something from total physical response approach (physical gestures, and thus making it more dynamic), doing more activities such as pick a pair, short stories, I speak, you draw; guessing games, songs, videos, role play, project work, brainstorming, problem solving, discussion, essay, pictures. On the other hand, some of the trainees would not necessarily change anything in the activities they have conducted in the lesson.

2.1.5 Students' Perspective

The trainees were asked to think about how their students felt during the lesson and how they think the students perceived the whole lesson. Some of the trainees noticed low participation of students, which could have been caused by the nature of the activities, personality of the students or the age group of the students. Moreover, if the trainees were students in the lesson, some of them reported they would have been bored, mostly because of the disparity between teacher talking time (TTT) and student talking time (STT).

In some cases, the trainees they did not give the students enough time to work. As to the participation of the students, a few trainees reported 50:50 participation, which could have been due to language confidence of the students.

S12: "... I expected more feedback. But it was like this during ... I know ... during all the lessons in this school, so I was not that much surprised ..."

S4: "... if I compare them with the Friday group, it was much better there, and my activities were maybe a bit different ... that they were more engaged. Don't know if it was because it is Monday, but I can feel it ... it seemed to me they were less active than they had been before and ... Probably it was also the result of the nature of my activities, maybe it could have been something which would engage them more in the work ..."

In particular, the beginnings were perceived as difficult, according to the trainees. This could be avoided by proper sitting arrangement at the beginning of the lesson.

S7: "... It was gradual I think, that at the beginning they were not very interested, but later on they started to engage. At first, they were also making fun, they were speaking Slovak, but then they switched to English and it was ok ... I could have asked them to sit in the front row ...and I am planning to do so in the next lesson ..."

Some trainees think that the students were satisfied with the lesson, they think the students participated enough or they think if they were a student, they would have enjoyed the topic and participated in the lesson. The rest of the trainees are not sure about how their students might have perceived their lesson.

2.1.6 Reteaching the Lesson

The last part of the interview deals with the idea of reteaching the whole lesson, i.e. what the trainees would do differently (or not) if they were to teach the same lesson again. Based on what the trainees reported during the interviews, the following ideas emerged: giving clearer instructions in the future,

S6: "... I wouldn't change the activities, I would prepare more for giving instructions ..."

explaining in a more comprehensible way, regularly checking homework, introducing more activities,

S12: "... So for example, I would do the activity with the memory game at the beginning ... if they did the activity individually ... probably we would not have time for everyone to read their story. It does not necessarily have to be a long story, just five-six sentences, but this also takes some time ... so maybe they could do it ... depends also on the number of students in the classroom. For instance, this was a small classroom, so maybe it would be enough if they worked in pairs. But with a bigger group, maybe three-four. Maybe I would add something extra. I don't know, maybe instead of a memory game I could bring some figures ... plastic ..."

giving students more space to express themselves, implementing technology enhanced learning (however, equipment needed), not relying on a textbook,

S3: "... I would use more activities, different ones ... maybe would not depend on the textbook that much ... "

calling students by names (more personalised approach), enhancing competition among students, thorough preparation, encouraging active participation (student - student speaking), better time management, modification of some of the activities. Again, there are also a few trainees who would not change anything if they were to teach the same lesson again.

Taken together, the trainees were fully aware of the things which did not work as planned. They have come up with modifications of the activities conducted and also many new activities. They were able to shift their perception from a teacher's point of view to a student's point of view and evaluate their lesson while taking into consideration students' feedback and reactions to the activities. Some of the trainees, however, found it more difficult to reflect on their teaching (a possible subject for further investigation). To recap, the trainees reflected on the lesson they taught in detail. Most of them were critical about their teaching performance, however, they also presented a great number of ideas with regards to teaching methods, strategies and materials used. The trainees were aware of the fact that there is still room for improvement and are willing to implement the new approach in their teaching. Thus, it may be assumed that if the modifications and new ideas are to be implemented in the next lessons, this could lead

towards their development as future teachers. However, reflecting on one's lesson should not only be seen as part of the teacher preparation, but also a helpful tool towards continuous development of teachers as part of their lifelong learning.

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into the issue of reflective practice in teacher training programmes, especially English language teaching. It generates fresh insight into the matter by taking into consideration the importance of understanding the link between reflective practice and teacher development. This study aimed to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring the content of the trainees' reflection on their teaching during teaching practice. It emphasises the importance of detailed and quality reflection on trainees' teaching by providing an example of such reflection which took place face-to-face with a supervising teacher right after the lesson, when the memory is still fresh. Moreover, by asking certain questions, a supervising teacher may encourage the trainees to reflect on their lesson and thus direct them towards future improvement. Characterisation of reflective practice is crucial for our increased understanding of teacher preparation and thus it is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of this matter. Establishing the impact of meaningful reflective practice on teacher development of student teachers in teachers training programmes is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, considerably more work will need to be done to determine the extent to which successful reflective practice influences teacher development of student teachers. More information on reflective practice in teacher training programmes would help us to establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter.

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