

SELF-REFLECTIONS OF STUDENT TEACHERS ON THEIR PRACTICE TEACHING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of language teaching, there exists a body of knowledge that is drawn from long traditions of theory, research, and practical experience, and the student teachers who enter this specialized field are expected to acquire a solid understanding of the subject if they are to function as effective language teachers (Richards & Bohlke, 2011). In order to equip student teachers with necessary skills and experience, most teacher training programmes include practice teaching sessions under the supervision of a mentor. However, as Loughran (2002) points out, experience alone is not sufficient for a student teacher and reflection on his/her experience is essential if s/he is to become an effective teacher in the future.

Reflective practice is a means of professional development, which is done through a process of self-observation and self-evaluation of one's own teaching, that enables a teacher to identify and explore his/her own practices and beliefs. As John Dewey, the educational philosopher in the late 19th century defined, reflective thinking is active, persistent inquiry of one's own beliefs and actions, which should be combined with intellectual responsibility that takes into consideration the social and moral consequences of those beliefs and actions. According to Dewey (1933), when a teacher attempts to solve his or her problems through reflection, learning takes place.

Based on Schön's (1987) two concepts of reflective teaching (Reflection-in-Action and Reflection-on-Action), Zeichner and Liston (as cited in Bailey, 2012) identify five dimensions of reflection. The first two dimensions, Rapid reflection and Repair, are Reflection-in-Action that occur while teaching, and the other three, namely, Review, Research, and Re-theorizing and Reformulating are grouped as Reflection-on-Action, which occurs after teaching. A recent study by Toom, Husu, and Patrikainen (2014) analyzed reflective episodes according to their deductive and inductive dimensions, together with their static and dynamic features. These researchers note that student teachers can reflect beyond solely practical issues on teaching and articulate multiple concerns about practice, and also learn both from theory and from practice as a result of reflection.

In a survey that investigated language teachers' views on reflective teaching, Springer and Bailey (as cited in Bailey, 2012) found that statements related to appeal were rated higher than statements related to experience on reflective teaching. Bailey(2012) claims that "these respondents are open to the various ideas of how to carry out reflective pedagogy, even if they had not had personal experience with the particular procedures" (p. 26). Bailey (*ibid*) shows that even though reflective teaching has a few disadvantages, such as "discovering uncomfortable information of our own work", the advantages of it outweigh the disadvantages (p. 27). McKay (2000) studied five Japanese teacher trainees' reflections during their teaching practicum for a MA TESOL. The findings showed that teacher trainees were concerned about their lack of knowledge of English and the uncertainty of the methods used.

The study presented in this paper is part of a wider research project that aims to look in-depth at the kind of learning experiences gained by student teachers during the course of their

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teaching practicum of the BA in English and English Language Teaching at the Open University of Sri Lanka. The aim of these practice teaching sessions is to assist student teachers to achieve the relevant competencies in relation to English Language teaching. University academic staff members supervise the teaching practice sessions and give feedback and assess the performance of these novice teachers. In addition, students also engage in peer assessment of their teaching sessions, which provides informal, but, nevertheless, valuable feedback regarding their teaching performance.

The present study attempted to answer the following research questions:

What are the main areas focused on in the self-reflection reports of the teacher trainees?

To what extent do student teachers engage in critical self-reflection when writing their self-reflection reports?

METHODOLOGY

The data collected for the present study were qualitative in nature and took the form of written reflections generated by nineteen student teachers during their practice teaching sessions. In this exploratory study, the student teachers were asked to reflect on one of the lessons that they had taught and to write a report that presented their reflections on the teaching in which they had engaged. Prior categories were not prescribed and it can, therefore, be assumed that the reflections relate to what the student teachers thought were the most salient aspects in relation to their teaching. The qualitative data that were gathered through the written reflections were coded for broad themes and categories that provide insight into what the student teachers felt were the most important aspects of their teaching during the course of a single lesson.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The content analysis of the teachers' self reflections revealed a range of issues that were captured in eleven categories. These categories were related to diverse aspects on which student teachers had reflected in relation to the teaching in which they had engaged. Some of the categories were related to the student teacher's macro level reflections on the overall effectiveness of the lessons they had taught (self evaluation, lesson plans, and student engagement with lessons), as well as more micro level reflections on the components of the lessons (problems and self repair, activities, and materials). Student teachers also commented on the effects of the feedback that they had received that, in some cases, were translated to future plans and improvement. It is important to note that the student teachers also commented on their affective response to the classroom situation, which is an important, but sometimes undervalued and overlooked factor in relation to teaching.

Major Categories Identified in Student Self Reflection Reports

Several major categories were identified in the student self-reflection reports that gave insights into the dominant concerns of the student teachers. Some of the categories identified were linked to the content and delivery of the lesson prepared by the student teachers, which included reflections on *lesson plans* (evaluations of effectiveness of lesson plans and ability to execute lesson plans), *activities and materials* (appropriateness for age group and cultural context), *assessment* (effectiveness of tasks chosen for assessment), and *problems and solutions* (eg, self-monitoring and repair). Other categories were related to more general pedagogical issues that impinged on the lesson, which included *time management* and *classroom management* (dealing with mixed ability groups and questioning strategies).

Comments relating to *self-evaluation* (overall achievement in relation to lessons as well as micro level achievements in relation particular aspects of lesson) indicate that students self-monitor their teaching in terms of the overall success of the lesson and its individual components. The identified categories also shed light on the sources of feedback used by the student learners to aid self-evaluation, which included *peer comments* and *examiner's comments*. It is also important to note that students' self-reflections also included comments on *affective states/emotions* they experienced during the lesson that can impinge on the successful delivery of the lesson. The importance of the practice teaching component and its implications for future teaching was indicated by the category of comments that related to *plans for future improvement*.

The categories thus generated relate to a whole gamut of issues that were of importance to teaching. However, the findings revealed that the reflections on which individual teachers tended to focus were limited to three to four areas only.

Critical Reflection

The reports of the student teachers were also analyzed for evidence of critical reflection. It was found that some of these reports were mainly surface descriptions of the sequence of events that took place in the classroom and that there was no evidence of reflection. The reports showed no evidence of reflecting on issues regarding putting theory into practice.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The results revealed that students' reflections consisted of multiple areas that were cognizant with previous studies that have shown that teachers do not focus only on practical issues, but on multiple concerns that are salient for their teaching (Toom, Husu & Patrikainen, 2014). The study also showed that critical self-reflection was absent in most of the reports. It is expected that the categories identified in this study would help to create a framework to help student teachers engage in reflective practice systematically, which would enable their future professional development. Given the fact that some student teachers tended to focus on only a few areas and that their reflections did not go beyond mere descriptions of what happened, it is hoped that providing a more comprehensive framework for reflection would promote deeper and more extensive self reflections that would enhance their future teaching. This exploratory study also reveals the importance of praxizing (Sharkey, 2009) in order to develop student teachers' conceptual knowledge of theories and practices in language teaching and the necessity to provide them with more opportunities to try out and critically evaluate the theories and principles in language teaching in a variety of contexts.

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