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Adult ELT Coursebooks

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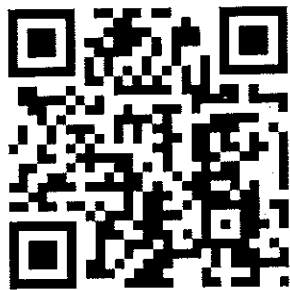
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Reflective feedback sessions using video recordings

Betül Eröz-Tuğ̃a

The practicum is one of the most important aspects of pre-service language teacher training. It introduces prospective ELT professionals to the real world of teaching where they have a chance to observe experienced teachers and put their theoretical knowledge into practice. This critical portion of pre-service training requires careful planning and consideration as to how this experience may be used to assist trainees in the most effective and efficient way. The aim is to help trainees become insightful and realistic about their own teaching practices by helping them to discover their own strengths and weaknesses in teaching and guiding them in finding ways to improve their classroom performance. This article presents the results of a qualitative case study investigating the contribution of reflective feedback, by means of video-recorded lessons, to the professional preparation of trainees.

Introduction

The practicum is an essential and indispensable component of ELT programmes that prepares teachers for EFL or ESL contexts. It is a transitional zone between pre-service training and in-service teaching. The experience of student teachers during this period has a strong influence on their perceptions of the ELT profession as well as their own capacities and capabilities as prospective teachers (Gebhard 2009). Shaping the perceptions of trainees involves helping them to realize their strengths and weaknesses in the classroom and to explore ways of improving their own performance. This case study offers insights about how self-reflection through the discussion of video-recorded teaching sessions leads to the development of a critical perspective into classroom practices.

Reflection in teaching

Reflection is a valuable practice that enables teachers to develop a better understanding of what teaching entails and how they could improve their own practice (Loughran 2002). Reflective teaching is a practice that has been suggested and adopted for effective language teacher training. As Edwards and Thomas (2010: 404) highlight, all teaching involves reflection that is 'context and practice-bound ... [and] does not occur in a vacuum'. This suggests that teachers constantly reflect on their practices by dwelling on classroom events,

recalling dialogues with students, or critiquing their teaching plans by looking at learning outcomes. Reflection is a regular, daily activity for ELT professionals who have certain standards, beliefs, and criteria regarding how a language should be taught. This everyday aspect of reflection, which makes it natural rather than mystical, is clearly described by Gün (2011: 127):

All teachers, in one way or another, 'look back' at their classes and from their reflections, draw implications for their classroom teaching. This reflection may be in the form of 'self-reflection', where teachers think about the positive and negative aspects of recent teaching ... or choose to invite a colleague and/or a teacher trainer to their classes for further feedback.

The critical point here is how to engage in self-reflection in order to address the needs of a specific teaching context without sacrificing practicality.

Although it is common to see self-reflection as a valued practice during in-service teacher training, it may not necessarily be a component of pre-service training. The organization of the practicum, willingness of university supervisors to spend extra time with trainees, and motivation of the trainees are all factors that affect the inclusion of self-reflection in the practicum. This case study aims to show that self-reflection is not just a valuable addition to the practicum; it is a vital and indispensable element of the pre-service training process.

The context

The context of this study was an undergraduate programme in ELT in a foreign language education department in a large state-run university in Ankara, Turkey. The students enrolled in this programme take courses in language skills, educational sciences, linguistics, teaching methods, and literature.

The Practice Teaching course

In the programme, students take a School Experience course in the first semester of their senior year; this course focuses on observing classroom teaching in local public schools and involves a small portion of classroom teaching. In the second semester of their senior year, they take the Practice Teaching class which is their main practicum experience. As a requirement of this class, they teach mini-lessons, prepare materials, and grade student papers, in addition to observing lessons taught by mentor teachers. When they teach mini-lessons, they get feedback from their mentor teachers, and, at the end of the semester, they teach a lesson, which is observed and assessed by their university supervisor (UnS, who in this case is the author).

Course supervisors from the department have identified a number of causes of student stress during the course of this programme. First of all, the assessed teaching that comes towards the end of the semester and acts as the main evaluation source for the practicum

makes students understandably nervous. They are uneasy because they have to teach in front of the UnS for the first and usually the last time. They receive feedback after they teach; however, they generally do not have a chance to apply this feedback to their teaching in order to improve their performance during, or their grade for, the course. Recent studies in teacher training contexts similar to this setting have reported trainee anxiety regarding the feedback and evaluation aspect of the practicum (for example Gömleksiz, Mercin, Bulut, and Atan 2006; Çelik 2008; Paker 2011), which parallels certain commonly reported problems experienced by some of the instructors and trainees in this context.

Another reason why this course causes distress to many students is that the trainees may have an unclear or unrealistic perspective of themselves as teachers due to the fact that they are inexperienced and are not used to viewing themselves as 'teachers' until the practicum. Therefore, the feedback from the UnS and their mentor teachers may sometimes be disappointing or frustrating for them. Being unclear about the expectations and grading criteria of the UnS adds to their tension.

The need for research

The challenges faced by many student teachers I have met during their practicum have motivated me and some of my colleagues to look for possible ways of redesigning the Practice Teaching course to make it less frustrating and disappointing and more meaningful and useful for the students. For my part, I integrated reflective teaching as described by Cruickshank and Applegate (1981) and Loughran (op. cit.) into my practicum course. The aim was to help the trainees develop self-awareness regarding their teaching potential and shortcomings by giving them feedback on their videotaped teaching performance throughout the semester, rather than combining feedback and evaluation during the assessed teaching period at the end of the semester. The focus was on helping students learn to help themselves in teaching contexts, without the guidance of a supervisor.

Research design

Richards (2008) highlights the importance of Action Research in the teaching setting to ensure professional development. The current study was an action research project emerging from the immediate needs of my own practice. I used a qualitative case study methodology (Stake 2005; Creswell 2007) to find answers to the following questions:

- 1 Does reflective teaching increase trainees' self-awareness and self-perception of themselves as language teachers in the practicum?
- 2 Does receiving regular feedback on their teaching performance enhance the assessed teaching performance and experience of trainees?
- 3 Does watching video recordings help improve trainees' insights about their own teaching performance and increase the complexity of their comments regarding classroom events?

Participants

There were 18 senior students taking my Practice Teaching course. At the beginning of the semester, I announced that I intended to integrate critical self-reflection into the course, explaining that they would receive feedback on their videotaped teaching sessions before their final teaching performance. I emphasized that this voluntary activity would require an additional time investment and that their decision regarding participation would not bias their overall grades for the course. Eleven out of the 18 students enrolled in the class decided to invest time in the reflective teaching practice.

Procedures

The 11 participants were videotaped twice throughout the semester before their assessed teaching. After each recording, they had feedback sessions which involved watching their videos with the UnS and their training partner. During these sessions, the participant trainees commented on their own teaching and received feedback from the UnS and their training partner. They used a feedback form as a guide for what to focus on while watching the videos. This form concentrated on three general issues:

- classroom procedures and lesson planning
- self-presentation and classroom *persona*
- classroom management.

There were a number of related statements under each section for the sake of clarification. At the end of the semester, all participants taught a lesson that was observed and graded by the UnS; this session was the assessed teaching portion of the course. The trainees wrote self-evaluation reports reflecting on their experience in the practicum and the self-reflection practices.

Data analysis

Data were gathered by means of two sets of recorded feedback sessions of each participant and their self-evaluation reports. The reflections of the participants on the two videotaped lessons were analysed to see if there was a change in the depth, substance, and quality of their comments regarding classroom events. A similar content analysis (Creswell op. cit.) was applied to the self-evaluation reports to uncover their views on the practicum and their insights about their teaching performance. (All student names used in this article are pseudonyms.)

Results

The effects of reflection on trainee perceptions of self and classroom issues

Reflecting on their own teaching and commenting on their training partner's performance helped improve the participants' awareness as teachers. There was an obvious increase in their insightfulness about their own strengths and weaknesses in the classroom and their ability to constructively criticize their partners' performances.

After watching their first videos, they pointed to a number of common difficulties that caused classroom management problems. One issue that came up during the feedback sessions of almost all of the participants was classroom interaction patterns and language use in class. They observed in the videos that certain interaction flaws led to a loss of student attention and, eventually, the loss of classroom control. Ferhan, for example, saw that she was so busy trying to finish teaching

the lesson that she failed to check the progress of the students. During our feedback session, she commented:

I realized I didn't pay any attention to getting feedback from the students. I didn't really make sure whether they have understood or not, I just said 'Yes' and moved on ... So rather than focusing on my audience I focused on myself trying to do things right.

When she failed to communicate with the students, they began conversations among themselves and stopped following the lesson.

While watching her own video, Esra realized that she had trouble with speaking in English. She observed that she would 'start a sentence with one structure and continue with another or say something at the end when [she was] supposed to say it at the beginning'. Her mixing of structures and sequences, especially when giving instructions, resulted in confusion among the students and diverted their attention from classwork. Similarly, Meltem noticed in her video that she paused too much while interacting with the students, and when she 'tried to construct the sentences spontaneously in the classroom, [she] wasn't successful, and the students realized it too'. She felt she lost the respect of the students as well as the control of the class due to the gaps in her speech and consequently decided to prepare her questions ahead of time.

Their physical presence and body language in the classroom was another issue pointed out by the majority of the participants as a threat to classroom management. Seda, for example, was very critical of her tone of voice and her lack of active motion in the classroom. She observed a problem in her classroom management and her reinforcement efforts due to her low voice:

The students were active and loud at times, so some of my positive reinforcements weren't heard ... I thought I spoke up, but still my voice wasn't high enough. I didn't use much body language. I just walked around in the front; I didn't move on to the back sides.

When the students did not hear or see her, they stopped listening and there was chaos in class.

Didem also realized that moving in class was essential for checking and controlling the students, but it was not an easy task. During her feedback session, she highlighted that she had trouble with her 'posture and walking around the classroom. [She] had difficulty with eye contact, [and] couldn't walk away from the blackboard'. As she was standing in one place for an extended period and not directly looking at the students, some of them lost concentration and began chatting among themselves.

After their second video feedback sessions, the participants seemed more reflective and critical about their own performance and more insightful in commenting on their partners' performances than they were in the first sessions. They showed improved self-awareness and displayed a conscious effort in trying to fix the problems the UnS

warned them about in the first feedback meeting, as well as the ones they noticed themselves. They were able to make comparisons between their first and second videos, pointing to improved aspects of their teaching performance as well as lingering weaknesses. Ferhan, for example, tried to work on her interaction and response patterns and movement around the class:

I tried to walk around more, I didn't go to the very back, but I tried to cover the left and right wing. My reinforcement, again, constituted of 'Yes' and 'OK' only. I had studied before going in, memorized some of them from the list, but I forgot in class.

Even though she did not get the result she was aiming for, she displayed awareness of her limitations and sought solutions.

Seda, who had difficulty speaking up and getting herself heard by the students in the first taped lesson, was more satisfied with her performance in the second lesson. She observed that her 'voice was higher and [her] reinforcements were more effective'. She expressed a feeling of improvement in her classroom management except for 'a few students talking in the back, which [she] ignored because the majority of the class was engaged in the task'. She realized her need for better time management, which was something she intended to implement in her assessed teaching.

Meltem, who had been critical of her spontaneous interaction skills, prepared questions for students ahead of time. She was determined to use more positive reinforcement and be more responsive to students in her second recording. However, she was still not completely satisfied with the result:

During the lesson I didn't praise the answers effectively. When a student answered [my question], I passed to another one and I think this discouraged them to participate.

Meltem left that student standing after he gave the answer. She did not tell him to sit down nor did she give him feedback about his answer. The student eventually sat down with a puzzled look on his face. Meltem did not notice this during the course of the lesson, so she was surprised and disappointed to see it on tape.

Didem and Esra, who were teaching partners, sounded more confident and content in their second feedback session. Esra indicated that she 'paid more attention to grammaticality' and that she found her speech to be more fluent and accurate. She detected some pronunciation problems on her own and suggested that 'some of these mistakes were due to anxiety, some because of carelessness, and the others from lack of practice'. The fact that she identified the source as well as the mistake may be interpreted as an improvement in reflection. Didem displayed more confidence and variety in her body movements; she made sure to walk around in class more and use hand gestures while delivering the lesson. She used humour and remained in close proximity to the students. She suggested that there was a 'positive learning atmosphere

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feedback sessions
on teaching
performance

in class and the students seemed relaxed throughout the lesson' as a result of this. These two participants observed an improvement in student attention and a decrease in classroom management problems. They also mentioned a difficulty with time management and delivery of instructions, which they aimed to improve in their final teaching performance.

The participants had very encouraging remarks about the feedback sessions because of the positive effects on their graded performance and their self-perceptions as future teachers. As unanimously expressed in the self-evaluation reports of the participants at the end of the semester, receiving feedback on their videotaped lessons before their graded performance eased their anxiety and boosted their self-confidence. Vahit, who was a timid and insecure trainee at the beginning of the semester, highlighted the helpfulness of feedback in his report:

These feedback sessions worked so well with me and I was so comfortable in my assessed teaching ... They helped me correct my mistakes in class and now I have a clearer perspective about teaching to a class.

Vahit's training partner, Nazan, who was nervous and unsure of herself earlier in the semester, also acknowledged the usefulness of the feedback sessions:

Based on the feedback provided by our teacher we had a chance to alter some of our weaknesses and get a consciousness on how to be an effective teacher. When I had a chance to observe myself I could see my skills and the points I need to improve.

As these reflections illustrate, feedback sessions empowered and motivated the teacher candidates. As expected, they did not get to work on all of their weaknesses in one semester, but seeing their strengths gave them self-confidence.

In addition to improving the performance and decreasing the anxiety level of the trainees in assessed teaching, the feedback sessions also contributed to their awareness as prospective teachers. They became more sensitive and more conscious about classroom events as they watched themselves on screen; their dependence on their peers and the UnS for feedback and reflection seemed to decrease throughout the semester as they watched and reflected on taped lessons. In the first feedback session, almost all of the participants were somewhat reluctant about criticizing their own and their partners' performances; they mainly listened to the feedback of the UnS and took notes rigorously. Their comments predominantly focused on obvious classroom issues like tone of voice and body language, and they often overlooked critical issues, such as teaching inaccurate forms or time management. However, after the second video viewing, they were so expressive and accurate in their reflections and comments about the videos that the

UnS did not need to go over all her notes; her points were all already covered by the students or their partner trainees.

The advantage of videotaping

As suggested by Rosaen, Lundeberg, Cooper, Fritzen, and Terpstra (2008), watching video recordings of one's own teaching helps self-reflection practices, so during the feedback sessions in this study, the videos of the trainees were the main focus of reflection. As was commonly stated in the participants' self-evaluation reports, watching their videos enabled them to have a critical perspective on their own teaching and become more conscious of classroom issues. An excerpt from Ferhan's self-evaluation report exemplifies this:

By the help of taping, I could see my mistakes ... It also gave me chance to evaluate myself more effectively as I couldn't focus on my performance while presenting the lesson.

Clearly, the participants became conscious of their own difficulties with different aspects of teaching, such as classroom management, posing questions, responding to students, using body language, and pronunciation. Therefore, they had a chance to purposefully work on their specific difficulties both for their assessed teaching and future performances. Derya, Didem, Esra, Mehmet, and Seda left the second feedback session with the realization that they had to manage their classroom time more efficiently after seeing that spending too much time on warm-up activities caused them to rush through the lesson, consequently leaving the students confused. Melis, Meltem, Nazan, Serkan, and Vahit observed that a low tone of voice, a stern face, and lack of movement may result in a loss of student attention, and, therefore, control of the class.

The videotapes also helped the UnS demonstrate to the trainees exactly what she meant by her feedback and comments rather than just telling them and risking ambiguity. Having a clear idea about the expectations and criteria of the UnS, therefore, led the trainees to prepare effective and successful lessons for their assessed teaching. This also prevented any conflicts between the UnS and the trainees with regard to feedback and evaluation, as the UnS could actually point to the weaknesses and strengths in the taped performances.

Conclusion and implications

The results of this study lead us to a number of implications for the practicum in this particular context. Regarding grading and evaluation, it seems important to clarify the expectations and assessment criteria for the teaching performances. The trainees should know the criteria by which their classroom teaching will be evaluated. These criteria should be realistic, keeping in mind that the trainees are still learner teachers. Sharing grading rubrics or evaluation forms with the trainees before they are assessed would be helpful in guiding them and, to a certain extent, helping them overcome their anxiety.

Giving regular feedback about teaching performances to trainees as often as time allows is another recommendation that may be taken

from this study. Feedback given to trial performances before the assessed teaching may help lower the stress level of trainees. It may also help the UnS detect crucial problems with the teaching practices of the trainees and assist them in exploring ways to solve them.

When it comes to reflecting on teaching performances and giving feedback, the results clearly signal that 'showing instead of telling' enables the trainees to see their own classroom presentations. Although it may be somewhat disappointing for the trainees to see themselves on tape and time consuming for the trainer, watching videotaped recordings is a beneficial component of the practicum.

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