

Student teachers' decision-making skills in relation to lesson planning: The impact of a practicum

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Abstract: This article reports the findings of a study that investigated student teachers' decision-making skills when deciding to depart from their lesson plan during their practicum. In an attempt to detect the impact of teaching practice on student teachers' decision-making skills, a questionnaire was administered prior to the course, inquiring about their potential course of action in relation to changes implemented in their lesson planning but also probed into the same issues at the end of their teaching practice. The findings indicate that student teachers diverted from their lesson plans when the situations called for such changes, and that the actual teaching impinged upon their decision-making skills.

Key words: lesson planning, changes, decision-making skills, practicum

1. Introduction

Research on language teaching has highlighted that student teachers fail to put into practice what they have been taught as part of a teacher education programme and that their teaching is informed by preconceptions held in relation to learning and teaching. Student teachers even upon enrolment in a practicum already hold beliefs which stem from their experience as language learners, what Lortie (1975) has called the apprenticeship of observation.

The role of beliefs in shaping prospective teachers' decision-making and instructional practice has given rise to the administration of numerous studies that have resulted in contradictory findings. To be more specific, Kagan (1992), based on a review of previous studies, advocates that student teachers' past experiences and beliefs act as a filter which reinforces rather than challenges their preconceived ideas (Powell 1992). The influence of teacher training courses in altering student teachers' beliefs has been questioned and it is advocated that teaching practice has a low impact on the development of their beliefs (Mattheoudakis 2007; Karavas and Drossou 2010). Some studies (Nettle 1998; Joram and Gabrielle 1998) have suggested that during teaching practice certain beliefs can change or remain unchanged; the key to change lies in challenging certain beliefs.

Teachers hold beliefs about: teaching, learning, English, the programme and the curriculum, and language teaching as a profession (Richards and Lockhart 1996); the same is true for student teachers. When the latter enter the classroom, they are actually expected to put into practice what they have been taught in theory and to undertake the task of making decisions related to the planning of a lesson. What is pertinent is that lesson planning is an essential constituent of effective teaching, and, while deciding on what works best in the classroom, student teachers are asked to contemplate upon various facets of lesson planning. What is of paramount importance is to uncover whether student teachers' decision-making is informed by their previous experience as language learners and knowledge of methodology-related material or by spontaneous reactions to a particular teaching situation. To ascertain what bears more importance, it is worth considering student teachers' insights into the potential and actual reasons for

deviating from their lesson plans prior to and after the teaching practice and to resolve the changes incorporated when deciding to alter activities, vocabulary and grammar teaching as well as instruction-giving procedures.

2. Lesson planning and decision-making skills

“It is in planning that teachers translate syllabus guidelines, institutional expectations and their own beliefs and ideologies of education into guidelines for action in the classroom” (Calderhead 1984: 69). It seems that teachers are guided in their planning and teaching by broad intentions, intuition, tacit knowledge, and lesson images (Calderhead 1989, Doyle 1990, Eraut 1994, John 2000). When planning lessons, the following points are worth considering: objectives and connection with the previous lesson, teaching aids, topics, activities, methodology, instruction-giving, feedback provided, organization of the classroom (i.e. pair- and group-work, whole-class instruction), skills, grammar and vocabulary teaching, use of the mother tongue, learner involvement and motivation, homework assignments and anticipated problems. Teachers have priorities when planning lessons, focusing mainly on activities, context, and subject content, whereas objectives are mostly hidden. While teaching the lesson, teachers may depart from their lesson plans to facilitate the teaching and learning process. The reasoning behind teachers’ decision to diverge from a lesson plan lies in (i) their attempt to serve the common good if several students share the interest in a student’s question, (ii) their decision to teach to the moment, making the necessary amendments, (iii) to further the lesson, by making a procedural change, (iv) to accommodate students’ learning styles, (v) to promote students’ involvement, and (vi) to distribute the wealth by keeping the more verbal students from dominating the classroom interaction (Bailey 1996).

Even in the case of lesson planning, novice teachers may find comforting familiar practices which they remember from their school days (Goodman 1986). As regards, research on decision-making, John (1991) concluded that student teachers develop their own modes of planning, which they consider appropriate for a given situation; such practices are responsible for subsequent changes in their understanding of what works best. However, it is recommended that student teachers have access to good models of planning so as to avoid many of the pitfalls of planning during their own teaching experience (John 1991).

Both novice and experienced teachers formulate lesson plans prior to the lesson, but the difference lies in the type; novices, focusing on short-term planning, are expected to form detailed lesson plans that follow a rigid order of events, while struggling with objectives, class management, pace, time management and resources. However, experienced teachers (i) have a general lesson plan in mind when entering a specific classroom and leave detailed decision-making to a few minutes prior to the lesson or deal with it when the situation arises (John 2006), and (ii) use planning to foresee potential problems (McCutcheon 1980). On the other hand, student teachers are mainly concerned with scripting and preparing materials in the beginning of their teaching practice, which experiences a shift when they become more accustomed to the whole procedure: then, classroom management, flexibility and the organization of learning are the main points of consideration (Jones and Vesiland 1996).

Moreover, it seems that novice and experienced teachers’ decision-making varies in that they tend to make a quite distinct use of their lesson plans. To be more specific, in Richards’ study (1999; cited in Osam and Balbay 2004) less experienced teachers felt the need to follow their plans, while being reluctant to consider any deviations. What is more, both experienced and less experienced teachers made on the spot decisions to

respond to a given situation. However, the main difference between the two groups lies in the reasons for choosing to depart from their plan; experienced teachers chose to (i) modify activities to stimulate learners' interest, and (ii) add more activities. The pivotal role of experience in decision-making was also detected in the qualitative study conducted by Osam and Balbay (2004), where inexperienced teachers were more willing to divert from their plan due to timing and classroom management; in the eyes of experienced teachers discipline problems would be the main reason for such a choice. However, both groups of teachers were concerned with motivation, physical conditions and language skills, when opting for changes in their plan. This particular study has given rise to the one presented in this paper in an attempt to detect the impact of teaching practice on student teachers' decision-making skills when deciding to make changes in the course of the lesson.

3. The study

3.1. Educational context and participants

This study investigates the decision-making skills of 99 student teachers of English while undertaking their teaching practice as part of their undergraduate studies. To be more specific, as regards the educational context, the participants were in their last semester, while attending a four year education program at the School of English, at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

As part of their undergraduate programme, students are expected to attend a number of theoretical and English language teaching-related courses as well as literature and translation courses. Once having completed a number of obligatory and elective courses related to the English language teaching pre-service education programme, students are granted with the opportunity to undertake teaching practice as an optional course, which offers an 8-week allocation in a particular primary or secondary school. This particular course aspires: (i) to link prior knowledge with actual practice, (ii) to make prospective teachers positively inclined towards lesson planning and render them into reflective practitioners, so that they will adopt certain practices subconsciously in their future practice, and (iii) to enable teaching in a sheltered environment guided by the cooperating teachers – mentors and the University supervisor. It should be mentioned at this point that the participants in this study were allocated to state primary schools, teaching children belonging to the 9 to 11 age group. During their allocation, student teachers were expected to observe the cooperating teacher for the duration of one week and to fill in guided observation reports focusing on particular aspects of teaching. After having received direct teaching about its various constituents during the University contact sessions, they were expected to form detailed lesson plans and teach a particular group of students for 3 hours per week (i.e. the full teaching load for each of the grades 3-6). In addition to developing self-made teaching materials, they composed reflective reports while incorporating a high level of reflection for actions made during the teaching of a particular lesson and pointing to divergences from their lesson plan. While involved in the experience stage, student teachers worked closely with the cooperating teacher and their partner.

As regards the participants' profile in the present study, they were all in the final semester of their studies and had no prior experience in teaching English or any other subject in a classroom environment. A few of them had some teaching experience in private tuition, but their first contact with an official lesson plan was achieved through this particular undertaking. They were all female except for three.

3.2. Rationale of the study

The aim of the present study was to trace changes in student teachers' reasoning to deviate from their lesson plan both prior to and at the end of their teaching practice. In other words, the prospective teachers' decision-making skills were put under scrutiny to detect any changes undertaken as a result of attending a practicum.

The impact of the training undertaken and the contact with the cooperating teacher may inform prospective teachers' teaching practice and changes may occur. However, personal reading in ELT issues, in-class discussions carried out in methodology courses and personal experience as language learners may inform student teachers' decision-making as well. However, the teaching practice could lead to a different perception of the classroom experience and this is the pivotal undertaking of this study.

The current study sought answers to the following questions:

1. Does teaching practice have an impact on student teachers' decision-making related to changes made in a particular lesson plan?
2. What are the main reasons for departing from the lesson plan?
3. What changes are implemented in the lesson plan as part of teaching?

3.3. Instrumentation

Selection of the necessary information regarding student teachers' viewpoints about lesson planning was achieved through the administration of a specially-designed questionnaire, which sought to trace changes in their decision-making process prior to and after the completion of their practice. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: part A elicited student teachers' background information about previous teaching experience, gender, etc.; part B welcomed information about reasons for making changes during the course of a lesson to already decided actions or reasons for opting for a different choice, while incorporating activities or while teaching vocabulary, grammar and instruction-giving. Part C enquired about their viewpoints regarding (i) the format of a lesson plan, and (ii) the role of their partner and (iii) that of the cooperating teacher – mentor; however, part C is not dealt with in this paper. In part B participants were expected to rank their choices in order of importance; thus, 1 being the first reason for the changes undertaken, 2 being the second reason, and so on.

3.4 Data analysis

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences 16.0. In addition to examining percentages, descriptive statistics, and overall frequencies, the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test for related samples was applied in order to detect changes in the student teachers' decision-making skills in relation to diverting from their lesson plan both prior to and after their teaching practice. If student teachers rated significantly different the various reasons for diversion, this would be indicative of a change due to teaching practice. The significance level for all questionnaire data was set at $p < .05$.

4. Findings and discussion

As aforementioned, the participants were asked to rate in order of importance the reasons for choosing to divert from their lesson plans and the changes made on two occasions: prior to and after the teaching practice. The questionnaire offered eight reasons for diverting from a lesson plan (based on the qualitative findings in Osam and Balbay's (2004) study): (1) classroom management (i.e. responding to organisational matters and behavioural problems), (2) discipline (i.e. dealing with discipline problems), (3) specific advice provided by their partner, cooperating teacher, etc., (4) motivation (i.e. considering learner motivation), (5) decisions stemming from class-specific reasons

(i.e. number of students, size of posters, number of cards), (6) timing (i.e. being short of time), (7) student involvement in change of flow (e.g. misunderstandings), and (8) language skills (i.e. teaching particular vocabulary items or grammatical points on demand or as seen fit).

With regard to the findings that pinpoint student teachers' top three reasons for divergences from their lesson plan, it seems that quite distinct views are held prior to and after the teaching practice (see Table 1). Student teachers prior to their confrontation with the classroom situation foresaw that in their attempts to stimulate the learners, learner involvement ought to be their top priority, thus, prioritising modifications in their original lesson plan when necessary. Timing and discipline were considered quite important as well. However, in the end of the teaching practice course, due to their preoccupation with the lesson plan, student teachers held that decisive factors in changing the flow of the lesson were time constraints, followed by discipline and learner motivation.

Table 1. Student teachers' top three reasons for choosing to depart from their lesson plan

	Prior to TP ¹ %	After TP %
Motivation	36.4	13.3
Timing	21.2	40.0
Discipline	12.1	20.0

¹ TP: Teaching practice

The shift in student teachers' priorities is further corroborated by the Wilcoxon signed test, which has yielded significant differences in the case of motivation ($z=-4.985$, $N=69$, $p=.001$), timing ($z=-4.071$, $N=75$, $p=.000$) and discipline ($z=-3.409$, $N=63$, $p=.000$). It seems that while in the act of teaching, the need to go ahead with the plan led novice teachers to believe that what is of paramount importance is to incorporate the activities planned, regardless of the learners' motivation level. Furthermore, the feeling of responsibility towards the classes and the cooperating teachers made them more conscious of time limitations and had as a consequence their limited interest in learner motivation. Thus, this finding supports the student teachers' reasons for choosing to depart from their lesson plan as professed in Osam and Balbay's study (2004). What is noteworthy is that before embarking on the teaching practice, learners' motivation is of major importance, namely a perspective expressed by the experienced teachers in Osam and Balbay's study (2004). Our student teachers do not lack the knowledge nor do they hold inappropriate beliefs. Moreover, once exposed to the principles of lesson planning, they feel that their teaching should revolve around the activities planned. A possible reason for sticking to familiar practices is that they are more preoccupied with the lesson due to the fact that alternative ways of supporting learners' understanding would require a high degree of previous planning and flexibility on the part of student teachers' practices. Thus, structural influences at classroom level (Jordell 1987) are responsible for informing novices' teaching practice in the sense that the lesson plan is regarded as a set of activities that ought to be incorporated in the lesson.

The questionnaire also sought to shed some light into whether student teachers' perspectives about alterations in instruction-giving, activities, grammar and vocabulary teaching as part of their lesson plan remain unchanged or change due to the various influences (i.e. cooperating teaching, teaching practice experience, partner). As regards the changes incorporated in the case of instructions, the questionnaire offered several

options regarding the changes that could be incorporated in instruction-giving to render it more effective; these being, repetition, changing the wording, writing instructions on the board, offering examples, giving clues regarding the execution of an activity, repeating the instructions in the learners' mother tongue and providing further instructions. On the whole, student teachers' involvement in the teaching practice course did not have an impact on how instruction-giving should be carried out; no significant changes were recorded, reflecting that the course did not alter their original choices regarding changes in instruction-giving. Student teachers were apt to stick to the practices they were familiar with even after the classroom experience. Furthermore, in Table 2, it becomes apparent that the preferred practice for giving instructions is repeating the instructions in the exact wording, overlooking, however, that instructions may not be understood due to a multitude of reasons. Due to the exposure to the classroom situation, providing learners with examples received more attention as a possible option.

Table 2. Student teachers' first choice regarding changes in instruction-giving

	Prior to TP	After TP
Repeating instructions	36.4	36.7
Rephrasing instructions	15.2	10
Writing instructions on the chalkboard	12.1	-
Offering examples	12.1	33.3
Giving clues	9.1	13.3
Repeating instructions in Greek	9.1	3.3
Providing further instructions	6.1	3.3

Furthermore, it comes as a surprise that the option of repeating instructions in the learners' mother tongue did not appeal to student teachers as this practice could be considered a preferred option due to the familiarity with such practices as part of their tuition in the traditional language classroom. However, it seems that this option loses ground as a result of the theoretical component of the course, where student teachers are urged not to follow this practice due to the learners' reliance on receiving input in their mother tongue.

When it comes to changes related to tasks or activities, the teacher can opt for providing another activity, changing the activity to match learners' preference or to suit the physical conditions of the classroom, dropping an activity altogether, or even reordering the sequence of activities. In Table 3, it becomes apparent that dropping an activity was not the student teachers' first choice in any way; however, upon completion of teaching practice, when a situation calls for drastic measures, dropping an activity is considered as a viable option ($z=-5.502$, $N=57$, $p=.000$). A significant result was also rendered in the case of changing an activity ($z=-5.653$, $N=54$, $p=.000$). In this particular case, the teaching practice course informed their instruction in that student teachers no longer held such a strong view about the easiness with which a particular activity can be changed while in action. It seems that in principle, the idea of changing an activity seems quite an easy undertaking, but, in real practice, the flow of the lesson does not allow such changes to take place. Furthermore, early on in their training, student teachers realize that changing activities require previous planning, which, unless accounted for prior to the lesson, it becomes an impossible undertaking. The primacy of experience offers more flexibility in this particular aspect of teaching.

Table 3. Student teachers' first choice regarding changes incorporated in activities

	Prior to TP %	After TP %
Changing the activity	69.7	30.0
Providing another activity	18.2	20.0
Reordering	12.0	26.7
Dropping the activity	-	23.3

When it comes to making the teaching of lexical items more accessible to the learners, certain on-the-spot options are available to the teacher. As can be seen from the table below (Table 4), student teachers held quite distinct beliefs regarding what should be done to render vocabulary comprehensible to their learners. Thus, prior to the teaching practice, offering a synonym was considered as the best choice ($z=-5.242$, $N=60$ $p=.000$), which, however, upon completion of the teaching practice course gave its way to providing examples of use ($z=-4.567$, $N=70$ $p=.000$). As the target group were young learners who eagerly learn through experiential learning, this very practice of providing examples was probably considered as the preferred option in an attempt to make the lexical items more memorable in the learners' minds. Another option which received student teachers' attention as a result of their involvement in teaching was that while teaching certain vocabulary items, it is preferable to offer clues so as to prompt learners to deduce the meaning of lexical items ($z=-3.492$, $N=63$ $p=.000$). Making use of specific types of linguistic information (e.g. words, phrases, etc.) and nonlinguistic information (e.g. illustrations) could help unlock the meanings of unfamiliar words in a particular text (Baumann et al., 2003).

Table 4. Student teachers' first choice for making vocabulary accessible to learners

	Prior to TP %	After TP %
Suggesting a synonym	57.6	13.8
Giving example of use	19.4	41.4
Using the chalkboard to explain	15.2	10.3
Offering context clues	9.7	31.0
Translating	3.0	6.7

Exposure to the reality of the classroom informed student teachers about more effective practices in relation to vocabulary teaching and challenged their earlier conceptions regarding what works best. Thus, the option of offering synonyms (57%), even though a rather appealing practice prior to teaching, fell down to 13.8% in student teachers' preferences at the end of the teaching experience. Providing quick definitions that use synonyms students are likely to know is a practice that is widely used (Graves et al. 2004). However, the fact that the target group is quite young with a limited linguistic repertoire could have led student teachers in considering alternative ways of making vocabulary accessible to young learners, namely those of giving examples of use and offering clues (Baumann et al. 2003).

Decisions related to the teaching of a particular grammatical structure were informed by the involvement in the teaching experience and changes did occur in an attempt to elucidate certain points in the learners' understanding. Whereas prior to the teaching practice, repetition was a rather favourable option, the classroom experience drastically impacted on student teachers' decision-making by raising second thoughts regarding the efficacy of such practice ($z=-2.069$, $N=51$ $p<.05$). The understanding of what works best in the classroom or even the comments provided by the cooperating teacher have

raised student teachers' awareness about more acceptable practices that would yield more effective learning outcomes. Thus, providing examples of use and highlighting grammatical points on the chalkboard were given prominence. Table 5 reflects the importance given to certain practices in relation to the teaching of grammar.

Table 5. Student teachers' first choice for changing the course of teaching a grammatical structure

	Prior to TP %	After TP %
Repeating a grammatical structure	39.4	20.0
Exemplifying the use of the grammatical structure	30.3	37.9
Giving clues to help the understanding of a grammatical structure	18.2	16.7
Giving Greek/English equivalent of a sentence	3.0	3.3
Using the chalkboard to help explain the grammatical structure	9.1	20.0

5. Conclusion

Throughout the teaching practice, an attempt is made to inculcate in student teachers the need to plan their lessons systematically, to question their practice, to ponder upon successful instruction-giving and appropriate selection of activities, to challenge their viewpoints in relation to teaching and learning and to improve their decision-making skills. Thus, the insights drawn from this study illuminate what happens when prospective teachers are called to put into practice what they have been taught in theory and how they perceive their own teaching practice. The results indicate that student teachers hold certain views about teaching and ways of organising their lesson plans. However, enrolment in teaching practice challenges some of their views regarding their way of teaching and student teachers adopt different priorities as a result of their teaching practice when it comes to making changes to their lesson plans. In addition, certain practices are replaced by others which are deemed more appropriate. The lesson plans offer safe ground upon which beginning teachers can stroll upon. However, deviations are welcome when confronted with time restrictions and problems associated with learner involvement and deviant behaviour.

Student teachers develop their own modes of lesson planning. Due to the classroom experience, some aspects of lesson planning are challenged, whereas some remain stable throughout. Lesson planning is viewed as an important constituent of organising the lesson as it helps sort out various aspects of teaching so as to render successful learning outcomes.

It seems that participants in a teaching practice course should be urged to adopt a critical stance towards lesson planning, to question teaching practices and challenge the decision-making process. It has been claimed that decision-making is not objective but rather intuitive, guided by experience and knowledge. This very intuitive part of the decision-making process should be questioned so as to raise student teachers' consciousness regarding the appropriacy or inappropriacy of certain practices undertaken during the course of action. Identifying the best course of action, which is the result of logic and experience, should be accounted for in the lesson planning procedure. Only then will the lesson plan be viewed as a record of interaction rather than a blueprint for action. This would result in viewing deviations from the lesson plan in a positive way rather than an indication of failure (Kagan and Tippens 1992, John 2000). Previous research has highlighted the need to make student teachers aware of when they ought to depart from the lesson plan, (i.e. the reasons for choosing to divert

from the plan), to highlight that the lesson plan should not be followed as a prescription, but that it should be viewed as informative of what could take place in the classroom. While being at the task of teaching a particular group of learners, changing the plan is the norm. Interactive teaching calls for adaptations that are made to suit learners' needs and interests.

The role of teacher education programmes is to challenge preconceived ideas about teaching and learning and within this milieu lesson planning could offer opportunities for engaging beginning teachers in reflective thinking to trigger self-development in teaching. Thus, lesson planning should not be viewed as an isolated procedure but rather as an undertaking that could be enhanced with the help of reflections made on the micro and macro dimensions of teaching (Ho 1995). Enrolment in teacher education programmes can instigate changes in future practice through direct intervention on practices that are amenable to improvement in teaching. Change can occur as a result of classroom observation, video recording sessions and implementing stimulated recall as well as using lesson plans and reflective reports.

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