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Exploring student teachers' reflection skills: Evidence from journal tasks

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of developing reflection skills of Polish foreign language student teachers in the context of university training. Although the importance of fostering reflection in student teachers has been widely acknowledged, the complexity of the construct and difficulties to operationalize reflection in research calls for new studies, to which the present paper aims to contribute. The paper discusses the study in progress whose main aims were to explore the potential of journal tasks as techniques stimulating trainees' reflection and to investigate the nature of reflection demonstrated in students' journals. The results of the analysis of students' texts revealed different ways that the students adopted to approach the journal task. Three perspectives from which the students developed their narration were identified: teacher-focused, learner-focused and the one that focusses on external factors. Additionally, the analysis led to the identification of three types of writing, named in the study as Theorising, Describing and Discussing. The findings point to the effectiveness of journal tasks in stimulating students' thinking about their practicum experiences. They also stress the significance of fostering novice teachers' reflection skills as a way of socializing students into new roles they will play in their future professional communities.

Keywords: *teacher education; research skills; reflection skills; practicum; journal tasks.*

1. Introduction

This part of the paper provides theoretical background related to the issue of fostering reflection skills in foreign language (FL) teacher education. Teacher education is presented as a way of preparing students to enter new professional communities. It is argued that reflection skills are a prerequisite for developing research skills. The advantages of the written form of reflection are emphasised.

1.1. Teacher education as a way of socializing students into new roles

One of the aims of teacher education is to facilitate students' efforts to enter a community of practitioners, by some scientists called a discourse community. Swales (2011) claims that: "A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members" (p. 25). It "uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback" (Swales, 2011, p. 26). As a result, community specific genres (types of texts) are developed, which can enable every member of the group to contact other members. For example, in the group of applied linguists the most common genres are research papers, conference abstracts, research proposals, oral presentations as well as theses and dissertations. Another characteristic of professional discourse is that: "A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise" (Swales, 2011, p. 27), which implies that a discourse community consists of both novices and experts. Individuals who enter the community develop their knowledge by participating in the life of the community.

The FL teaching program organized by the university prepares students to enter two types of communities: a community of FL teachers and a community of academics (applied linguists). It is important to realize that in the two groups, students are novices. The teaching program provides student teachers with opportunities that will help them to develop new competences and at the same time enjoy the freedom to construct new roles in academia and future professional contexts. An important place in socializing students into these new roles should be taken by the activities that are conducive to facilitating students' research skills.

1.2. Research skills in FL teacher education

Unfortunately, there is not much literature that would define research skills in relation to the FL teaching profession, although advice about how to conduct research within specific disciplines at post-graduate and doctoral levels can be commonly found. For example, Nunan (1992) defines research as a systematic process of investigation consisting of three components: 1/ a question, problem or hypothesis, 2/ data and 3/ analysis and interpretation of data. However, he does not offer a clear explanation of research skills, i.e. competences that a person that conducts research should develop. In a similar publication devoted to conducting studies in FL education, Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik (2010) enumerate

three components of the competence that should researchers should demonstrate: 1/ discipline knowledge, i.e. being familiar with the specificity of what can be researched within a given discipline, 2/ research knowledge, i.e. the one concerning methods and techniques that can be applied in research and 3/ awareness of ethical issues that need to be considered by researchers when embarking on a study.

In reference to the FL teaching profession, a number of scholars, e.g. Zawadzka (2004), Targońska (2009), Bogucka and Grabowska (2018), discuss research-related skills, which they view as a component of innovative-creative competences (Pol. *kompetencje innowacyjno-kreatywne*). In the process of developing innovative-creative competences, teachers practice the following skills: reflection upon and critical approach to one's teaching practices as well as readiness to apply innovative solutions in educational settings. A necessity to develop skills of a reflective practitioner is also underlined in the guidelines suggested by European Commission (2012) in the document *Supporting the Teaching Professions for Better Learning Outcomes*. In the list of competences required for effective teaching in the 21st century, “reflective, metacognitive, interpersonal skills for learning individually and in professional communities” (European Commission, 2012, pp. 25, 26) are underlined.

1.3. Reflection skills

What are reflection skills in teaching? For Little and Perclová (2000), who discuss reflection in reference to learners and the process of learning a FL, reflection means “thinking about something in a conscious and focussed way” (Little & Perclová, 2000, p. 45). But as the scholars (2000) explain: “This deceptively simple definition covers a complex range of mental behaviour” (p. 45). Also in relation to teachers and teaching, reflective capacity appears to be a multifaceted notion. Schön (1983) distinguishes “reflection-on-action” and “reflection-in-action”. The first type happens some time after the action reflected on took place; the latter one occurred while the action was happening. Hatton and Smith (1995) observed the relationship between the type of writing and the type of reflection student teachers demonstrated in their texts. They identified three types of reflection: descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection and critical reflection. Descriptive reflection involves analyzing situations from the teacher's personal perspective and contains some sort of reflection. In dialogic reflection, one explores possible reasons and solutions that may be applied in a given situation. Critical reflection incorporates taking various factors into consideration and drawing reasonable conclusions. The scholars distinguished one more type of writing – descriptive writing – in which no reflection is involved but only description of a given situation. It is important to emphasise that the concept of reflection is “extremely difficult to render operational in questionnaires and other research instruments” (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 38). Therefore, it seems challenging for researchers to design studies in such a way that the data present the evidence of reflection.

1.4. The importance of the written form of reflection

A number of educators, e.g. Little and Perclová (2000), Czajka (2014) and Stańczyk (2010), emphasise the advantages of reflection written down. Little and Perclová (2000, p. 46) explain: "Writing things down is ... essential, partly because it provides a focus for discussion, and partly because it helps to clarify what we think and provides a stimulus for further reflection." Clark (1997, cited in Little & Perclová, 2000, p. 46) adds that although "[t]here is a natural tendency to suppose that we first have thoughts and then write them down ... some kinds of thinking become possible only when we write." The importance of the written form of reflection is also stressed by Czajka (2014), who claims that involving trainees in writing down their reflections prepares them for further discussions in class. An interesting conclusion drawn on the basis of an action research study was presented by Stańczyk (2010), who believes that "writing reconstructs awareness". In her study, student teachers were engaged in writing on-line blogs about their teaching practice and responding to other students' comments. In the author's opinion, the opportunity to express reflections in writing and exchange opinions with other trainees resulted in the enhancement of the students' metacognition skills.

2. The study: Exploring student teachers' reflection skills

In this section, the analysis of journals written by post-graduate students during their teaching practice is presented. The following will be discussed: the context of the study, a specificity of the journal task, the analysis of the texts produced by the trainees, the results and the interpretation of the findings in reference to the students' reflection skills. It is important to explain that this analysis is part of a more extensive project of an exploratory nature, whose aims are to explore techniques that lend themselves to enhancing student teachers' research skills and to find effective ways to evaluate student teachers' research skills.

2.1. The context of the study and the methodology applied

Twenty three trainees, the post-graduate students of English Philology at the Jagiellonian University in Poland, participated in this study. They had completed obligatory teacher training classes and were taking part in a continuous practicum organized in secondary schools. The students were asked to keep the teaching journal over a period of two months. One of the tasks (the one analysed in the present paper) asked the trainees to reflect on their students and identify the most serious problem that their learners experienced in their learning. Additionally, the trainees were required to design and conduct a remedial programme, and finally to evaluate its effectiveness at three different points in time. The students were also instructed to make references to professional literature that they found relevant to the topic of their journal.

Two research questions informed the study: 1/ Can a journal task stimulate students' reflection skills?; 2/ If so, what types of reflection skills can be identified in the texts produced by the students?

For the purpose of the study, reflection was defined as "deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 40). In the context of the study, reflection or reflection skills (the terms are used in the present study interchangeably) were viewed as thinking about one's teaching situations within one's practicum stimulated by the journal task. The term "narration" is used to refer to the way the students developed their arguments in the journal.

The analysis of the students' texts involved reading and rereading the texts against a set of criteria, which were formed as the following questions:

- A. What problems did the trainees write about? How did they write about these problems?;
- B. Did the students refer to the professional literature? If so, what role did this literature play in their narration?;
- C. Did the trainees report on the remedial program at three different points in their teaching? What role did this report play in their narration?

2.2. The results

All the students completed the journal task. The average length of the text was 800 words; however, there were texts that were quite long (2000 words) and texts that were rather short (500 words). The analysis conducted to answer question A led to the identification of three types of narration: Teacher-focussed, Learner-focussed (the names were coined by the author of the present paper) and one that focusses on external factors (see Figure 1).

It was very surprising to find that 14 trainees (the authors of Teacher-focussed texts) discussed the factors that made their teaching difficult, instead of focussing directly on their students' problems. The most common issues that this group of trainees wrote about were problems connected with keeping discipline and teaching speaking. Only 5 trainees (the authors of Learner-focussed texts) identified their students' problems, discussed them and only then did they relate them to their teaching. The following issues were discussed by this group: being too shy to participate in the lesson, lack of motivation and concentration in class, stress and anxiety that discourage students from speaking English. It is important to note that in this analysis the learner's problem and the teacher's problem could refer to the same issue, e.g. learners not willing to speak English in class. The difference between the narration of Teacher-focussed texts and that of Learner-focussed texts lay in the perspective from which a given issue was discussed – the first group wrote from the perspective of the teacher ("I find this aspect of teaching difficult") and the second group from the perspective of the

learner (“I think or I know it from some data that my learners find this aspect of learning difficult”).

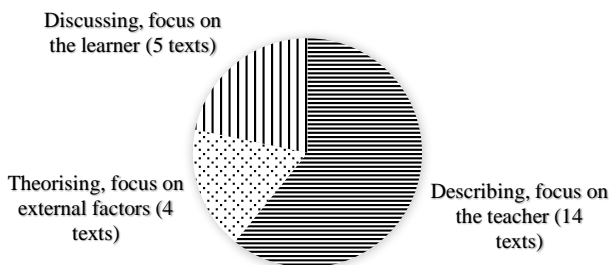


Figure 1. Different ways of writing identified in the trainees' journals. Source: own study.

There was one more group of trainees – 4 students – who decided to write about the manner in which their teaching practice was organised. The trainees complained about too numerous classes, poor equipment at school and no possibility to prepare teaching materials.

The further stages of the analysis conducted to answer questions B and C revealed some other characteristics of the texts. Three different ways the trainees adopted to complete the journal tasks were identified, named by the author of the study as Theorizing, Describing and Reflecting (see Figure 1). In “Theorizing”, the trainees identified problems in their teaching and found solutions. However, in their texts they very rarely referred to their teaching. Most of the report involved discussing the literature the students found useful in reference to their problems. There was no report of the progress in developing ways of dealing with the problems. In “Describing”, the trainees identified problems in their teaching and found solutions. They referred to their lessons and described them in detail. There was no report of the progress in developing ways of dealing with the problems. Not all the student teachers in this group referred to professional literature. Those who did drew on literature in order to describe the materials or techniques they applied in their teaching. In “Discussing”, the trainees identified problems in their students' learning and related them to their teaching; they also found solutions to the problems. There was a clear report of identifying problems, finding and applying solutions, as well as reflecting on the effectiveness of the remedies at different points in the teaching practice. The trainees referred to professional literature when writing about the remedial program they had introduced in their teaching. “Theorizing” was found in 4 (18%) texts produced by the students who in their journals focussed on external factors, such as classroom equipment (as specified at the earlier stage of the analysis). “Describing” was identified in 14 (60%) texts written by the students who adopted a teacher-focussed perspective; “Discussing” was found in 5 (22%) texts produced by the students

who in the previous analysis were named “learner-focussed”. See Figure 1 for the summary of all the results.

2.3. Conclusions

In reference to research question no 1, which concerns the potential of the journal task to stimulate students’ reflection skills, the results indicate that the task was an effective technique in encouraging trainees to think about their teaching situations. The data elicited from the students during their practicum are rich and demonstrate evidence of the students’ reflection skills (in the study defined as deliberate thinking about one’s teaching).

As regards research question no 2, which concerns types of reflection skills elicited by the task, the data obtained imply that the journal proved to be a sensitive elicitation instrument which allowed to discriminate between the students. The findings indicate that the group was not homogenous in terms of their approach to the requirements of the task and their skills to reflect on their lessons. What could be the main reason of the students completing the task in this way? It is possible that the trainees, who belonged to the same group and attended the same teacher training courses, could have been at different stages of reflection skills development. According to Woods (1996), in their professional development teachers go through a series of stages. At the stage of technical rationality, teachers tend to pay more attention to teaching techniques (thereby to their role as a teacher in the classroom) than to their learners. It is at the stage of critical reflection when teachers start to develop their own personal theory, which involves developing “deeper” reflection and self-evaluation. These abilities enable teachers to pay attention to the role of the learner and to look at their own style of teaching in a more critical way. The results of the present study seem to indicate that most of the trainees (60%) who participated in the research were at the stage of technical rationality, where, as Woods (1996) explains, teachers are more concerned with mastering basic teaching techniques than thinking about their students’ learning.

The author of the study believes that these results should not be treated as something negative. All the types of reflection identified in the present study are necessary components in one’s development as a teacher trainee. Drawing on professional literature and discussing it (theorizing) can be a valuable task as it enables a novice teacher to learn from the masters of the discipline by relating their theories to his/her own teaching situation. Describing one’s teaching is also important as it helps the trainee to concentrate on his/her job, i.e. what he/she does in the classroom. A natural step further is a more elaborate reflection of the trainee on him/herself and also his/her learners; at this stage, the student realizes that he/she is not alone in the classroom – there are other participants who he/she should take into consideration. All the types of reflection seem important in socializing novice teachers into new roles they will play in their future professional communities.

The paper presents the findings of the study that is still in progress. The next stage of the analysis will have a closer look at how the trainees drew on professional literature and what role these sources played in their narration. This will allow the author of the study to gain more insight into the nature of reflection demonstrated in the student teachers' journal tasks.

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