A Critical Evaluation of Teacher Development in a
Teacher Training Course

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Abstract

This article reports on the outcome of a teacher training session that covered four months. It assesses the impact of the training session on four in-service teachers teaching at different levels by identifying changes in their teaching behaviour, that had occurred after completion of the training period.

Key words: Evaluation, teacher, development, training, impact

One of the basic concerns of training programs is whether the participants in the program have been really trained. It is a known fact that after a training program, the participants soon slide back to their original practice once they join their workplaces. However the opposite is also true that teachers with training perform better than teachers who have had no training. The question is of impact of the training program on the trainees. As a factor of individual learner differences, each trainee will absorb different aspect of the training program and interpret it in their own ways according to their understanding background and nature of cognitive orientation. This article therefore attempts to assess the effects of a whole semester (4 months) of practice teaching sessions on a mixed group of in-service and pr-eservice teachers. It will look at training impact on a group of language teachers on their cognition and performance in practice teaching classes which were a necessary component of their Masters program.

Literature review

So far language teaching is concerned, a number of studies have reported on the relationship of a teacher training practicum and teacher behaviour. Almarza (1996) found that although training had a great influence on the way trainee teachers behaved during teacher education it did not significantly change the cognition about teaching that they had brought with them before the course. On the other hand Borg (2003) reports studies by Roberts (1998) and Cabaroglu & Roberts (2000) which confirmed that there is a positive effect on teacher cognition during teacher education. In his state-of the art article Borg summarizes the following key themes that emerge.

(1) Individual trainees make sense of and are affected by training programes in different and unique ways;

(2) Behavioral change does not imply cognitive change and the latter does not guarantee changes in behavior either;

(3) Work examining the processes and the structure of cognitive development, however suggests that significant changes do take place during teacher education.

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He therefore suggests that further research investigating these areas needs to be done with special attention on the structure, content and development process that are involved in cognitive change of language teacher trainees. Golombek (1998) talks about PPK i.e. Personal Practical Knowledge, which he further categorizes as knowledge of self, of subject matter, of instruction and of context which the teachers used in a holistic way. He reports finding that teachers PPK and classroom practices interact and exert strong influence on each other.

Hammerness et al (2005) report that studies have found teaching abilities directly related to the way teacher education is conducted. When such education is well supervised student teachers develop greater ability to relate theory to practice and are more comfortable to carry out what they are learning in practice. Some other studies (Cohen & Hill 2000, Lieberman and Wood (2003) in Hammerness et al (2005) suggest that:

"When teachers learn content specific strategies and tools that they are able to try immediately and continue to refine with a group of colleagues in a learning community, they are more able to enact new practices effectively."

While talking about the usefulness of conversation analysis of teachers, Seedhouse (2008) comments that in order to understand why classroom procedures succeed or fail it is necessary to look into the micro details of classroom conversations that would not be so noticeable in videos. Teachers' conversations in the class reveal a lot about how good classes are conducted, or what makes a certain process fail. Crookes (2003, p-13) comments that teacher development takes place through different ways of consciousness-raising. He finds this process having both interpersonal as well as intra-personal characteristics i.e. one needs to look back at their dealings with others as well as how they themselves handled it. He identifies the following ways of learning to teach:

(a) drawing on own teaching experience by observations of it or reflections on it;
(b) looking at other peoples' statements about teaching and learning and modifying or critiquing them to construct own ideas;
(c) do both the above.

Hofmeister & Lubke (1990 p-5) refer to a number of research literature and come up with the following points that characterize effective teacher characteristics:

(1) a concern for the use of teacher and student time;

(2) an emphasis on the curriculum;

(3) the careful introduction of new material in small steps, integrated with guided practice and followed by carefully managed independent practice;

(4) the careful monitoring of student progress with coordinated re-teaching

(5) attention to pre-requisite skills and frequent reviewing to ensure that new material is successfully introduced and coordinated;

(6) a set of classroom management skills that involve a strong instructional program and active teacher involvement with all students in all phases of the instructional process.

Another study by Phipps, S.: Borg, S.(2009) investigated the relationship between teachers' grammar teaching beliefs practices and the kinds of tension that this relationship highlighted. They found that beliefs were not always with their findings of practices but were more consistent with deeper more general beliefs about learning.

The Study

In the light of the above discussion this paper will report on the impact of a teacher development program in the form of micro-teaching (practice teaching with peers) sessions for a whole semester. The subjects of the study were five teachers who were studying for the degree of MA in English Language Teaching. They had completed all their theory courses and did the micro-teaching course in the last semester of the program. The rationale of keeping the micro-teaching component at the end of the program was that the students would make use of concepts they develop from the theory classes and make use of those in their practice teaching sessions.

The nature of the practice teaching session

This component comprises of a number of steps which are:

1. Making a lesson plan for practice teaching
2. Peer teaching according to the lesson plan
3. Reflecting on own teaching
4. Listening to observations on the quality of teaching from the peers and course supervisor and discussing on its negative and positive sides and making suggestions on how the teaching could have been improved .

Apart from this hands-on practice session, the student teachers are also sent to different institutions of their own choice to observe English Language classes and submit written reports on what they had observed. There is a requirement to observe at least seven to eight classes of different teachers at different levels i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary education. At the end of the semester the student teachers also need to submit a report on their own teaching as well as the teaching of their peers of which they keep notes after every class so that they do not forget what they had observed in each class. Each student therefore has an observation report of at least 35-40 teaching sessions. The format of the report is a standardized one where they have to comment on teaching qualities, quality of materials, use of teaching aids, negative and positive aspects of the class, nature of feedback, use of the board, teacher's ability to establish rapport etc. and an overall mark assigned to show how each student teacher rates the class. These ratings have proven to be very useful in assessing the evaluative abilities as well as mental orientation of the student teachers. For instance, a teacher who highly appreciated a class in his report gave only 5-6 marks on 10 which is quite low. On other occasions a class which was not considered so good by the peers was rated highly by a few others in the group because they were focusing on particular aspects only at the micro level and not on the global aspects or the learning outcome.

The five teachers under consideration were particularly selected because they were in-service teachers who were studying for the MA as well as doing full time jobs. Others in the class were either looking for teaching positions or had stopped teaching to complete their degree. These teachers were between the ages of 25-35. Two of them were

were females between 30-35 years, and two males who were also between 25-35 years of age. They were teaching at the following levels:
Secondary level - 2 teachers
Tertiary level - 1 teacher
Mixed groups - 1 teacher

This study reports on the development of these teachers that was evident at the end of the micro-teaching course and the impact this course had on their actual teaching practice, which was assessed by interviewing them three months after completion of their practice-teaching semester. Data was collected through a questionnaire given to them right after completion of their micro-teaching semester and a report they submitted after 2 weeks which was a critical evaluation of the classes they had observed (both of their peers and in institutions outside) and also of their own teaching.

Teacher A : who is a male is about 35 years old and teaches mixed groups of adults at a language teaching centre. He is fluent in English but talked too much in his practice sessions. Although his selection of materials was good and interesting they needed a lot of instruction that took up a lot of his teaching time. In the lesson plan of one of his sessions he was supposed to finish giving instructions in 3 minutes but actually took up 9 minutes which compelled him to rush through the feedback sessions although it was his 3rd supervised teaching session. Time management was thus a problem for him. He also failed to write proper learning outcomes He thought he was taking classes inductively (through examples and consciousness-raising activities)but his teaching style was actually quite deductive (i.e. rule teaching based). . There was thus a gap between intention and actual practice.

In his questionnaire he talks mainly about learning to teach inductively through the practice sessions but says nothing about the lesson plans. He commented that his peer teaching sessions and observation of classes have been useful to him. He vows in his response to the questionnaire that he will never resort to teach grammar through rule teaching again. Interestingly, in his reflective report he commented on his class as outstanding and that there was nothing negative about it. However his peers found the class less than average in quality and actually found his teaching very deductive, manner unfriendly and lacking in proper knowledge of grammar rules. In fact they had to correct his English in some cases. This reflective component of the course actually reveals that the teacher had failed to identify his drawbacks despite the detailed discussions after each of his teaching sessions.

In the interview taken after 2 months he reported that the teaching session had increased self-confidence a great deal and he had become much better at time management. In fact in his institution he was ensuring that subordinate teachers stick to the time-plan given in the lesson plans prepared by him for all teachers to follow.

The outcome of his training appears to be a heightened awareness of making lessons with proper time allocations and sticking to them. His concept of inductive teaching (based on examples rather than rules) appears to be more in line of consciousness raising activities for lower levels and public speaking activities for more advanced levels. However, he appears to be oblivious to the fact that the quality of his own English was in need of improvement.

Teacher B - is a female teacher teaching at the secondary level. In her classroom practice sessions she looked greatly relaxed and confident but always had problems with managing time according to her lesson plan , resulting in omitting parts of the lesson plan, or hurriedly ending the last part which was usually meant to be the feedback session. Her grammar classes were also more deductive than inductive, focusing on the rules more than on the meaning. None of her lesson plans mentioned any learning outcome although it was an important and compulsory component for the lesson plans. Consequently the aims of her lessons were not clear to anyone at the end of the sessions. In her self-assessment report although she admits that she couldn't manage time as she had planned, she thought her teaching session were good ones as the classes were interactive.

Other students in their report also acknowledged the facts that she could make her class interactive although there was no mentionable learning outcome. However she reported that her observation of her peers and other teachers gave her a lot of ideas about the negative and positive aspects of a class and helped her to reflect more on what worked well in a language class. In her written reflective report she put great stress on the ability of teachers to conduct the whole class without using L1 and also managing the class in an organized manner. However, she showed awareness of not being able to manage time properly and to ensure improvement in this area. Her peers found her classes more traditional in nature with a lot of grammar rule-teaching, with the exception that she put students into pairs and groups to discuss. The teacher had commented in her report that the learning outcome was visible in all her classes, however, her peers differed on the issue as they commented that there was nothing new for them to learn in her classes. Three months after the semester, she reported that the teaching sessions had helped her to become a lot more effective in managing her class time. She had also learnt the technique of giving effective feedback to large classes by making the learners find each other's mistakes, which her learners also found great fun. She happily reported that she was enjoying her teaching sessions a lot more now as the learners were not only enjoying her classes but were also doing quite well

Teacher C - is a male teacher of 25-30 year who also teaches at the secondary level. He is a bit shy but has a pleasant personality. He has a natural ability to explain things and tries to use a lot of examples to explain a grammar point. He claimed that he had developed this habit from the micro teaching sessions and had found it useful for his students. In his response to the questionnaire he wrote that from class observations in other educational institutions he had learnt to what extent teaching was not conforming to the required standards and from the teacher training sessions he had learnt how not to be shy but be more interactive, However, he failed to write practical learning outcomes in his lesson plans and thereby to understand the relationship between classroom practices and actual learning.

In his written report he unfortunately did not make any reflective comments on his own teaching. However, his comments on the teaching of other teachers reveal that he considered teaching more positive if the teacher did warm up activities to activate the schema of the learners, did group or pair work and allowed the students to discuss and be interactive. Giving clear and effective directions and using appropriate teaching materials were also areas that he found important in assessing the positive abilities of a teacher. These things reveal the nature of attitudinal development that has occurred in him as a

teacher. In the post training interview after three months he claimed that his students now enjoy his classes as he tries to make his teaching interactive by involving them through discussions. For reading activities also, he does a lot of pre-reading activities to activate the learners' schema. However, he admitted that he does not make any lesson plans as he has no time for them, although making lesson plans before every lesson was a compulsory component of his micro-teaching course. He had thus failed to appreciate the importance of lesson plans to make teaching more effective.

Teacher D - is a female teacher between the ages of 25-30 years. She teaches at the tertiary level and is very fluent in the language. Although she is not very outgoing in nature, she can still be quite interactive in the class and make it sufficiently lively. She had the ability to select appropriate teaching materials, and pair off weaker students with stronger ones during group work and pair work for more involvement in the lesson. However, before starting the practice sessions she had no experience in preparing lesson plans. She considered the practice sessions useful when peers pointed to her mistakes and indicated better ways of doing things. She considered her observation of classes in other institutions contributing to her professional development by revealing to her the weaknesses of other English teachers, and making her realize what was wrong with their teaching. For her therefore, these training sessions had increased her ability to identify inappropriate teaching in relationship to the classes being taught. In her written report, reflections on her own classes were well balanced and showed awareness of both her strengths and weaknesses. She showed a growing awareness about her inability to manage class time properly. In her post training interview three months after the sessions she reported getting more particular in developing lesson plans for her sessions and also found increased ability in innovating ideas to make her classes more interactive. There was another marked development in her teaching behaviour when she reported that she had started making lesson plans for better class time management although she was not officially required to do so.

The impact of the training on her was therefore a heightened awareness of what makes classes successful and the usefulness of lesson plans in making teaching more effective.

Discussion

The above mentioned cases of 4 teachers who were students of a Master degree program in English Language Teaching, doing their final semester in classroom based practice teaching reveals a picture of a gradual development that is not uniform in nature. Although all of them attended the same sessions, each of them looked at it from a different perspective.

Teacher A did not develop so far the manner of explaining things were concerned. However, he seemed to have developed the ability o make the students speak more. He claims to have improved in time management, which was something he actually had problems with in the practice teaching sessions. A visible outcome was his diligence in making lesson plans and insistence on following them carefully during teaching sessions.

Teacher B also had consistent problems in time management, but after the sessions she developed the ability to evenly conduct her teaching sessions without time pressure. Although she was already in the practice of producing lesson plans before joining the practice sessions she had never bothered about giving them due importance before.

But after the practice sessions she learnt to take her lesson plans more seriously, and found them very useful. She also improved in her teaching techniques by making the students work in groups and pairs and actively participate in giving feedback and error correction after any practice session.

Teacher C had never bothered to develop lesson plans before but after the practice sessions found making lesson plans very useful. She also learnt to be more innovative in making her students interactive by shifting her teaching style form lecture based to a more interactive one.

Teacher D did not usually face problems in managing time in his practice sessions but could not focus on the learning outcome. He seems to have learnt the importance of warm up activities for involving his learners, and the usefulness of activating their schemas for active participation in the class. He however failed to see the importance of making lesson plans.

From their classroom activities outside as well these teachers appear to have developed differently. Teachers C and D claim to have learnt from these observations what makes teaching in-effective. However for teacher B the effect of these observations was more positive as they gave her ideas about new and useful techniques of teaching. Teacher A had also found outside observations useful but did not mention in what way.

The area in which all of them seem to have made positive development is how to incorporate interactive teaching in their pedagogy by making the learners participate more actively in their classroom activities.

An important element that comes out of this discussion is that each teacher applied his/her learning experience to his/her classroom in whatever way it was feasible. Adaptability then turns out to be a very important element of teacher development. Peer teaching can never match actual classroom teaching, but -adapting ideas from these sessions to actual classroom situations is a very important ability which these teachers seem to have been able to successfully implement in varied degrees.

Conclusion

This study reported on the development of a small number of in-service teachers. The fact that these teachers were in-service is important because it enabled them to relate their experiences directly to their actual classroom environments thus bridging the gap between training sessions and actual classes. However, this was not the case with their other non-practicing classmates as they could not immediately experiment with whatever they were noticing in their micro-teaching sessions. Perhaps this is an important element that should be taken into cognizance whenever teacher training sessions are evaluated. For pre-service teachers, new ideas are things that are to be kept in store until the time comes when they could experiment with them in real class room situations and thus missing out on the opportunity of assessing to what extent the training is useful for them and reporting on them for practical suggestions during the training session. Similar studies on a larger number of practicing teachers could probably throw more light on the impact of teacher training and actual teacher development on a wider range of classroom behaviour.

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