Educational research: A study on teachers’ professional practice

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Abstract

This study reports work-in-progress (University of Bahrain/Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) Research Project Hassan & Saravanan, 2012/49),on BTC Initial Teacher Education programmes engaged in professional development at the Bahrain Teachers College, Bahrain, which has been given the national task of reforming educational practices and develop professionalism in government schools www.btc.uob.edu.bh/index/html . www.bahrainedb.bh (Bahrain Education Reform, 2006).

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1. Introduction

Research Focus: Teachers’ Current Needs

Educational research is required on professional development that link teaching practices in order to plot students’ learning trajectories. “Craft” knowledge that focuses on practitioners’ knowledge, linked to curricular changes provides a basis for developing professional development (Hierbert et al, 2002, Lierberman, 2009). The paper reports on the processes of teachers’ thinking, their epistemological knowledge, pedagogical and content knowledge (PCK, Schulman, 1986, Darling Hammond, et al, 2005,) teacher beliefs and Bahraini values. Data on lesson planning, teachers’ PCK is analysed.

2. Research Questions

The following research questions were analysed:

What were the processes used to develop planning, to improve instructional strategies?
What were the strategies used to execute teaching?
What was deemed as effective in establishing learning outcomes, students’ learning?

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2.1. Data Collection: Analysis of teachers’ epistemology (PCK): observations

How were lessons planned, how was content knowledge constructed? The processes were based on BTC teacher education framework for teaching practice. The framework for observations and analysis included a model of teacher competencies: Competency Knowledge (planning), Pedagogical Knowledge (teaching), Knowledge of Learners (organizing learning environment & meeting students’ needs), and Assessment/Evaluation.

2.2 Classroom Observations

The following classroom observations were analysed by the BTC supervisor. The first weeks of observations consisted largely of tracking teachers’ content knowledge. Inputs included textbooks, feedback from BTC supervisors and consultation with co-operative teachers (CTs). Typically it consisted of traditional language content as the teacher’s planning expressed practice based lesson objectives, and learning outcomes. The selection of content knowledge was based on practice based learning in language skills lessons. This in a sense reflected teacher beliefs with skills related to an accuracy model, with mastery of grammar. The textbook input for vocabulary selection, a random list of items confirmed the model based on teachers’ own classroom learning experiences and a familiar text book approach. Feedback given by the supervisor reflected the need to develop confidence, to adapt from textbooks, and to develop pedagogic approaches to teaching and learning. Teachers need content and pedagogical knowledge to shift to a lexical approach where linguistic input enables processing of lexical patterns based on frequently occurring sequences.

Figure 1. BTC Competency

Figure 2. Teachers’ Planning, PCK
3. Pedagogical Knowledge: Teachers’ Understanding of Pedagogy

As the teachers’ concern was with mastery of discrete grammatical structures, learning approaches tended to be teacher centered, with direct teaching that led to a teacher dominant environment. The attempt to use ICT approaches with videos provided a context for learning.

Figure 3. Teachers’ Understanding of Pedagogy

3.1 Knowledge of Learners: Organizing learning Environment - meeting students’ needs

What was not exploited were the opportunities for learner centered teaching through the use of ICT, use of visuals, video scripts which would encourage student interest in learning. This would have led to generating strategies to provide for effective learning environments.

3.2 Lesson planning: Feedback & Instructional Strategies:

During the second set of observations though there was greater elicitation of students’ responses, there was little wait time as the teacher concerned over time and classroom management rushed to answer with little expansion, that led to lack of student sharing. The need to involve students in their learning, to develop confidence and a positive learning environment was observed. While most teachers are eclectic, that which is gained with a variety of activity types, knowledge in the classroom remains inactive or inert, “inert knowledge problem” (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Good links were made to topic links through good use of ICT video activity but again the purpose was not clarified and participation was not extended. The use of Arabic to translate and explain activities is a strategy most teachers use in this site. But it provides some limited input as there was little attempt to consolidate a bilingual approach to teaching and learning. This is an area that requires further development and input for a systematic use of language resources.

3.3 Content knowledge (PCK):

There was discrete selection of topics largely textbook driven that led to teacher dependent, teacher centered approaches which showed the need to encourage more interactive participation. The feedback given was positive but that the teaching needed more interactive approaches.

4. Assessment/Evaluation: practice, practice, practice

Typical classroom assessments tend to be pen and paper tests. Traditional ways of assessment reflect narrow learning outcomes of language structures, assessing performance of practice based skills. Diane Larsen Freeman, in
Grammar to Grammaring (2003) offers several perspectives to how a conception of language learning and acquisition has led to theories of language teaching and learning. These approaches range from a Chomskian cognitivist rule based learning approach to sound and sentence patterns, to inductive/deductive grammar exercises, to familiar practice and drills to a communicative meaning based approach, to an interactionist view of learning, for interpersonal communication - pragmatics, social functions, speech acts to discourse patterns within a social context.

Teachers PCK will have to be developed to shift from a priori grammar of discrete set of rules verses real time activity that investigates strategies for constructing a variety of genres- texts. While classroom teaching tends to be led by focusing on both top down and bottom up approaches, from discrete textbook units of teaching to activity and task based approaches, the need for a more interactionist approach to learning is recognized. It signaled the need for further professional understanding of content knowledge of the linguistic attributes of language and language learning processes and the development and use of pedagogical strategies that will lead to effective learning.

Figure 4. Adapted from Grammar and Grammery, D.L. Freedman (2003), Paul Hopper (1988)

4.1 Shared knowledge and frameworks for practice


4.2 Community beliefs about students and structures

Teaching is a collaborative effort to design courses, to actively select and adapt resources (Lieberman, 2009). Professional learning, professional development is required to develop professional growth in teachers’ knowledge, professional community resources, teaching-learning resources. Shared knowledge and frameworks for practice are based not only on school based knowledge but on their existing community based knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991), as a supportive environment for teaching and learning to take place is necessary given that it is consistent with their philosophy based on Bahraini beliefs and values.
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