Systematic reflective enquiry methods in teacher education

Dr. Camelia Tugui *

Postdoctoral fellow, The University of Bucharest, The Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, 90 Sos. Panduri, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of teaching the capacity to be reflective at earlier points of the professional development, so that teachers can be more receptive to change. Literature argues that in order to embrace the pedagogical practices that teachers need to learn in order to become professionals, they have to bring their beliefs about teaching to a conscious level and accommodate them with new knowledge acquired during the training. It presents the case study of 14 teacher trainees before and after the implementation of a systematic reflective enquiry method.

In conclusion it argues that this approach to teaching could facilitate in-depth reflection and lead to a more autonomous learner that can make sense of the way old beliefs interfere with new theories and that is able to make the right decisions for changing professional practice.

© 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.
Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Dr Zafer Bekirogullari.

Keywords: reflection, systematic enquiry, continuous education, professional development

1. Introduction

1.1. The nature and purpose of the paper

This paper discusses the importance of teaching the capacity to be reflective at earlier points of the professional development, so that teachers can be more receptive to change. Adapting to change requires not only adapting to new situations, but also understanding, accepting and implementing into practice of new ideas, concepts or approaches. Teachers as major players in a school need to respond to challenges posed by the society in which they live, work or develop professionally. Literature argues that in order to embrace the pedagogical practices that they need to learn in order to become competent teachers, they have to bring their beliefs about teaching to a conscious level and accommodate them with new knowledge acquired during the training. Therefore developing such abilities in teachers becomes highly relevant on long term for TE.

The present study is part of a larger-scale research which looks at different methods used by teacher training programmes to promote continuous professional development. It offers insights into trainees’ beliefs and perceptions about teaching before they started the training course. It also analyses the way courses are organised and delivered as it was hypothesised that the way courses responded to trainees’ needs and expectations (in terms of

* E-mail address: cameliatugui@gmail.com
content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and personal qualities) could influence the changes into trainees’ perceptions and beliefs about teaching, could contribute to developing a sense of self as a teacher and could facilitate further learning. This study suggests that through systematic reflective enquiry they could bring their beliefs to a conscious level. Articulating and examining their perceptions might contribute to a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers.

Teacher training programmes in general provide a practicum experience, but they operate under the assumption that their novice teachers will transfer what they learn in their courses into effective instructional practices once they enter the classroom (Johnson, 1996 in Tinker Sachs et al., 1996). Johnson (ibid.) argues that what novice teachers learn and how it is learned must be situated within contexts in which that knowledge is used and it must resemble the knowledge that is held by those who already participate in those contexts. She offers the examples of cases, teachers’ stories and practical arguments, as opportunities that can be created for novice teachers and teaching in ways that are similar to how real teachers use knowledge in real classrooms.

In second language teaching, teacher education programmes typically include a knowledge base, drawn from linguistics and language learning theory, and a practical component based on language teaching methodology and opportunity for practice teaching. Training experiences consist of teaching assistantships, simulations, tutorials, workshops, microteaching, case studies, while learning refers to activities and experiences which help the novice teacher understand and acquire the means by which the effective teacher arrives at significant instructional decisions (practice teaching, observation, self- and peer observation, seminars and discussion activities) (Richards and Nunan, 1990).

1.2 The background work and the practical applications

The present study was placed in a Romanian university, which offers a pedagogical training to the students who wish to become teachers of foreign languages. These students hold firm and diverse beliefs about the teaching profession, based on their own schooling experiences, long before they enter the classroom and they persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. These prevent them from embracing completely the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn in order to become effective educators. The challenge for the training programme is to respond to the needs of these students who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, which influence their teaching behaviour, and prepare them for the challenges they are going to face throughout their teaching career.

This study started from the assumption that through guided reflection the students could bring their beliefs to a conscious level. Articulating and examining their perceptions may contribute to a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers.

Trainees should be encouraged to examine through critical reflection, how the instruction they are receiving embodies what they are learning about teaching (Freeman and Richards, 1996). Thus, teaching the pre-service teachers the capacity to be reflective at earlier points of their teacher development becomes an important issue for teacher training programmes (Pollard, 2002). The question in hand remains the best method to employ for in-depth processes.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Reflection as a means for teacher professional development

This research approached the opportunities of reflection trainee students have during the course as it was considered that reflection outcomes can bring about changes into their perceptions and beliefs about teaching, as stated above. A starting point was the attempt to identify teaching beliefs and attitudes because it is assumed these are central to teaching behaviour. Teachers’ beliefs about themselves, about learning and its educational relevance and about learners if consistent with their action are vitally important for effective teaching. Literature brings evidence to support the hypothesis that teachers are influenced by their beliefs which are closely linked to their values, their views of the world and to their conceptions of their place within it. Beliefs determine how individuals organise and define tasks and problems and can be predictors of how teachers behave in the classroom. They influence the way teachers plan their lessons, the kind of decisions they make and their general classroom practice. Teachers hold beliefs about their learners, about learning, about teaching and about themselves as individuals and professionals.

The concepts of reflective teaching and learning are referred to as facilitators for teacher professional development. The concept of reflective teaching comprises any process that encourages in general an attitude of
ongoing exploration and enquiry, that encourages awareness of the factors affecting teacher trainees’ learning, choices made about the organisation of activities in the classroom, and the use of techniques and materials etc. The concept of reflective learning adopted here is that employed by Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983), a tentative interpretation of given elements which comprises examination, exploration, introspection and analysis of all attainable consideration which will define and clarify the problem in hand (in Pollard, 2002).

2.2. Systematic enquiry methods to promote in-depth reflection

The rationale for using a systematic approach to questioning trainees is based on the assumption that in order to embrace the pedagogical practices that they need to learn in order to become competent teachers, they have to bring their beliefs about teaching to a conscious level and accommodate them with new knowledge acquired during the training. Reflection processes are based on a similar type of reasoning where the analysis phase that any subject goes through would comprise Awareness > Acceptance > Action, therefore the association in this context.

The study also employed a concept of helping individuals to identify needs and adapt to change by means of questions developed from an extensive research study on effective sale skills, whose findings lead to the conclusion that successful change in opinion was made by asking smart questions in a particular sequence. This concept used previously in the business field was transferred to teacher education, as there were considered the similarities in challenges faced by professionals in any situation of change. The latter normally involves awareness of existing and previous experiences, their analysis that leads to the understanding and acceptance of the new situation/concept/process, that later make their implementation easier. The model is based on the conceptualisation of change situations in four stages: Situation, Problem, Implication, Need-Payoff.

Each stage corresponds to a set of questions which focus at different levels on identifying needs/problems and ways to meet/solve them. In the SITUATION stage questions may refer to facts or explore the trainees’ present situation and tend to be open questions. In the PROBLEM stage questions refer to problems or difficulties that the trainee experiences with the existing situation. The questions asked in the IMPLICATION stage refer to the consequences of a trainee’s experienced problems. The NEED-PAYOFF questions explore the effects of the solutions found. In other words by answering these questions one can explain how the solution they found could help them solve their problems. These types of questions are considered the most helpful and constructive. They are not about convincing trainees on the rightness or incorrectness of different methods, strategies or concepts, but about creating the right conditions to allow them to convince themselves of what works best for them.

![Figure 1. The SPIN model (Rackham, 1996)](image_url)

3. Methodology

The study has a qualitative approach. It investigates by means of questionnaires, interviews, observation reports the participants’ awareness level of reflective processes in relation to their understanding of professional identity and growth, before and after the implementation of a reflective enquiry method.

3.1. Participants

The participants were 14 teacher trainees who were introduced to general principles of teaching a foreign language (English or German) in their 5th semester of undergraduate studies and had their pedagogical practice in
3.2. Methods

The study used open ended questionnaires before, during and after the training, for both theoretical and practical components, individual interviews and observation reports. By means of open-ended questions, the first questionnaire intended to elicit information about trainees’ expectations of the course and their opinions on the types of knowledge and skills important for their professional development. The second questionnaire focused on trainees opinions about the course attended in relation with their understanding of ‘teaching’ and their further professional development and their personal involvement with reflective processes. The observation reports were analysed for different levels of reflection that trainees were able to show at the beginning of their training.

The interviews aimed both at clarifying and complementing data from questionnaires and asking particular questions in a particular sequence. They were built on the SPIN model and were based on the data provided in the two questionnaires and the observation reports.

Data from questionnaires and interviews were prepared and coded for analysis. There was an inter-reliability test done by a second researcher. Quantitative information was considered to have less relevance for the purpose of this study and is not present.

4. Findings and discussion

For the purpose of this paper, the study investigated the trainees’ understanding of ‘teaching’ and professional development and their awareness of reflective processes in relation to their understanding of professional identity and growth, using a systematic enquiry method.

4.1. Trainees background knowledge about teaching and teacher education at the beginning of the course may influence the way training is perceived

Trainees’ reasons for enrolling on the course referred to the acquisition of skills necessary for a good teaching practice. They wanted to become efficient teachers, being driven by an intrinsic motivation. Others considered the training they would receive during the course as part of their future development as individuals, not necessarily related to teaching EFL. An opposite attitude had the trainees who chose teaching as a career option in the future. They did not consider themselves committed professionals, but regarded teaching as a temporary solution if having no other options after graduation. Other answers referred to the improving of English language skills or the understanding the acquisition process of a foreign language. A very interesting set of answers focused on the low status of the teacher in the Romanian society.

The trainees’ statements about their expectations came to complement their reasons for enrolling on the course. They revealed the aspects of their learning that they would like to improve or develop. They expected to be taught about strategies and methods of language teaching that they could apply when entering the classroom. The idea of getting ‘recipes’ or ‘tips’ for teaching in different contexts was recurrent. Other trainees were hoping that by attending this course they would understand their preference for teaching, their own teaching or other teaching styles that they had experienced. They also expected that the course would offer them the confidence they needed in order to perform well in front of their students.

The trainees’ answers about the characteristics of a good teacher offered more insights into trainees’ understanding of professional development. They resulted in a complex portrait of a professional who needed to combine knowledge of the language he/she teaches and pedagogical content knowledge. Personal qualities such as patience and the ability to adapt to and understand any situation were regarded as a necessity when working with individuals at different ages. The most important of all was generally considered to be the enthusiasm and the passion a teacher brings into the profession without which he/she cannot enter the classroom. This characteristic was labelled as indispensable for a good teacher. It was interesting to notice the recurrent reference to some of the teachers they had in school whose lack of interest in teaching was negatively characterized. A good teacher would also need to have management skills in order to organize the lessons, handle the students and keep them engaged, manage the time and the resources.
The trainees’ answers about the types of knowledge they considered important for their future professional development were meant to reveal their awareness and their beliefs on the matter before any contact with English language teaching as trainees. Content knowledge was considered the most important for a teacher as they would teach content knowledge of English to their students. Pedagogical knowledge was seen as a compulsory requirement for all teachers who need to transfer the content knowledge to their students. Pedagogical-content knowledge was considered very important for the decisions made by teachers regarding the methods and strategies to be employed in the classroom when teaching a foreign language. Knowledge of psychology was mentioned as important for two main reasons. First a teacher should adapt his/her teaching to the level of understanding of his/her students. Second, a good teacher would always be responsive and understanding to his/her students’ needs. Knowledge of English was considered important as English is the language employed during the EFL classes, during which the teacher is seen as the source and the students as the receivers of information. Therefore the teacher should know very well the language in order to be able to transfer the information to his/her students and answer all their questions.

The trainees considered that lesson planning and preparation skills allow the teacher to structure the information to be delivered to students in order to reach their objectives efficiently. Lesson presentation skills were important in the trainees’ opinion as teachers should present the information clearly and coherently to their students, adapting it to their level of understanding. They believed that language acquisition also depended on the way the information is structured and presented. Materials design and selection skills became very important in the context of the great amount of information that needs to be filtered and adapted to the lesson aims by individual teachers. Additional materials brought to the classroom were regarded as beneficial for the learning. Opinions on testing and evaluation skills were also expressed. They were among of the most important skills that a teacher should have. Teachers must evaluate properly their students’ level of knowledge acquisition in a way that it’s not perceived by the latter as stressful. This information could assist teachers in structuring their teaching according to their students’ needs.

In terms of their opportunities to reflect the participants to the study declared that courses were based on information transfer methods and the questionnaires they answered in this research were the first occasion to express opinions based on their previous experiences as students in the classroom. Lack of depth of reflection could also be noticed when analysing their observation reports which were highly descriptive without comments, reasons or any kind of critical analysis also the observation sheets were built in an inquisitive manner.

4.2. Theoretical and practical training experience triggers reflection

The second questionnaire revealed the trainees’ understanding of ‘teaching’ and their professional development after attending the theoretical module of the course. Trainees considered that the course responded to their expectations. They considered it useful for the teaching practice as they learned how to plan a lesson and how to make a lesson successful (by being offered examples / suggestions of what to apply in practice, what methods/strategies to use), they got classroom management information, they discussed about the factors that affect teaching. Only few trainees thought that the information provided was too general and that the practice of teaching was different from the theory of teaching. The course also responded to their needs in terms of the knowledge provided. Pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical-content knowledge and knowledge of psychology of different age groups were previously mentioned by trainees as important for their professional development and key elements in ‘good.

During the interviews trainees were asked questions that were based on their previous answers in the questionnaires. Questions were organised in sequences based on the SPIN model, starting with the SITUATION stage they presented in their answers, moving towards analysis and finding solutions. During the interviews they started reflecting on past school experiences, trying to put themselves in their teachers’ shoes, observing them during the courses and making judgement about their teaching applying the knowledge they acquired. At the same time they tried to understand vocation and the skills and knowledge involved into teaching, the difficulties of being a professional and the administrative issues related to teaching.

Trainees considered that reflecting on their teaching practice helps them to understand the complexity of it making them aware of the weak points and assisting them in finding ways of improvement by continuous exploration and enquiry, to understand other teacher’s actions and their students’ actions, to make the right decision regarding their teaching and adapt to different contexts. Unfortunately, the opportunities of reflection during the courses were limited to peer group discussions on a specific topic and to discussions in larger groups on teaching/teaching experience. They also mentioned critical and productive conversations with a friend, colleague, family member etc. concerning the information received and the way it can be applied into practice. There was no guided reflection that could point the important issues to be considered.
5. **Conclusions**

It emerges from the literature that teacher trainees hold firm and diverse beliefs about the teaching profession, based on their own schooling experiences, long before they enter the classroom and they persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. These prevent them from embracing completely the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn in order to become effective educators (Kagan, 1992; Fajet et al., 2005). The challenge for a training programme would be to respond to the needs of these students who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, which influence their teaching behaviour.

The present study showed that the course provided relevant knowledge that responded to trainees needs within familiar contexts. Trainees recognized them and could report to them critically. But engaging in reflection about teaching or learning required that each of the trainees rendered as problematic what they had been taking for granted about what was happening in the classrooms, the origins of the schooling activities, and their consequences upon children and the society both in the immediate and longer-rage future.

Guided reflection was scarce. Though, the depth of the reflective processes they were engaged in depended on a practice of reflection they were not familiar with. The training programme failed in this respect to offer the trainee students guidance for effective introspection, therefore failed to affect in depth their initial beliefs about teaching and develop a defined self as a teacher. In the context of nowadays competitive learning teaching environments for teacher trainees who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, I affirm the necessity of a curriculum for teacher education that introduces reflective methods to all components of the training that could influence their further professional development.

**Acknowledgements**

This work is supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, the project entitled “Applied social, human and political sciences. Postdoctoral training and postdoctoral fellowships in social, human and political sciences”, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

**Bibliography**


