

THE EFFECT OF REFLECTIVE TEACHING ON PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' LEARNING AND TEACHING DEVELOPMENT IN A LEARNER-CENTERED SITUATION

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ABSTRACT

This study is a detailed examination of reflection in pre-service teacher education. It focuses on the process of the promotion of reflective thinking in teacher education. Within this process, it considers pre-service teachers' perceptions on becoming reflective and their focus of attention throughout their practicum. This is a case study that was conducted in the form of an action research in qualitative research paradigm. The participants were 30 pre-service teachers in an undergraduate teacher education program of English language at Qaemshahr Islamic Azad University, Iran. Data collection consisted of reflective interviews, assignment microteaching, questionnaires and observations. The study revealed that there was a developmental process in pre-service teachers' reflectivity in this course. Towards the end of the course, they incorporated their theoretical background and considered contextual factors in reflecting on their experiences.

KEYWORDS: *reflection, pre-service teacher, practicum "practical teaching", microteaching, peer feedback*

INTRODUCTION

Dewey (1933), in his now classic works, elaborates on teacher education, and he presents the reflective approach as an alternative to the then existing models of teacher education. In these works, Dewey made a criticism that teacher education is dominated by technical orientation, in which candidate teachers were guided to acquire and master technical skills, and where utmost importance was given on how to teach, without considering principles or philosophy in their practice. It is interesting to observe that Dewey's diagnosis on this problem in teacher education at his time is still valid in our time as well. There is a concern that teachers are trained as "skilled technicians" who are limited in their behaviors and alternatives, and who base their actions on habit rather than careful thought. This fundamental shortcoming in teacher preparation is often related to traditional approaches to teacher education.

Furthermore, Korthagen (2001) elaborates on various studies on the change of novice teachers' attitude during their experience in the first year of their profession; so much so that what novices learned in pre-service education disappeared even during their field experiences. In relation to

this, he points out the gap between theory and practice that is created during teacher preparation by traditional teacher education programs. Korthagen also explains that practicing teachers regard theories as being incompatible with their practice, and therefore, novices who struggle to implement what they learn in university in practice schools are easily demotivated in this discouraging environment. Consequently, a novice teacher, having graduated from a traditional teacher preparation program, would face challenges in school environment, due to the weaknesses of his program and the influences of his colleagues.

Experiences and findings similar to the aforementioned studies have increased the attention towards approaches that provide opportunities for practice and create internalization in prospective teachers. In this respect, Korthagen (2001) voices the concerns for a more constructivist view of teacher education in which the teacher develops his or her own knowledge in a process of reflection on practical situations, which creates a concern and personal need for learning. Here, the emphasis moves from mastery of skills and of competences toward inquiry oriented activities, interaction among learners, and the development of reflective skills. Within this framework, drawing from the teachings of Dewey, concerns over the incorporation of ethical, empirical, theoretical, and practical principles were accepted to be crucial in inquiry.

Colton and Sparks-Langer (1993) describe future's schools as restructured communities of learning requiring empowered, reflective decision makers. In parallel to this, it was stated in a recent study that in changing times, important challenges are placed upon teachers, and therefore, on teacher education. Korthagen (2001) also stresses the importance of the promotion of critical reflection within school-based teacher education programs, since reflective thinking helps prevent prospective teachers from settling in traditional educational patterns that exist in schools. Calderhead (1987) relates reflection to the endeavors to professionalize teaching, underlining that reflective practice has a vital role in the development of professional skills, like in any other profession.

Further to this discussion, it was stressed that through reflection, it becomes apparent that teaching is a profession which entails artistry and intuition, together with technical skills. On the basis of the above discussion, it is apparent that reflection in teacher education has received considerable attention, and it is regarded as an alternative paradigm in teacher education. Especially in the last two decades, teacher education programs started to integrate this concept into their curricula in order to meet the requirements of the changing needs in the society, and to overcome the shortages in their applications (Korthagen, 2001).

According to what have been mentioned above, empirical research has remained vital and illuminating in understanding teachers' thinking and their experiences in reflective process. Hence, research helps us explore and understand their world better so that more effective teacher preparation programs could be designed on the basis of their needs. In Iran, teacher education is an important concern, and there is a constant urge to increase the quality of teacher education, which inevitably contributes to the quality of education, as a whole. In doing so, similar to the above mentioned forms of implementation, the education faculties in general and TEFL faculties in particular engage pre-service teachers in field experiences via school observations and

teaching practices. However, it is only until immediately before graduation when novice teachers gain the opportunity to conduct field experiences called “Practical Teaching”. In other words, their exposure to the authentic school environment is often delayed until their final year in teacher education program.

Furthermore, pre-service teachers obtain limited exposure to the school environment – limited observation and limited teaching time. At this phase, the researcher of this study observed that most of the pre-service teachers floundered, and they had difficulties coming to terms with dilemmas they faced in schools as observers and/or practicing teachers. Besides these, often, both pre-service and novice teachers report the gap between theory and practice, complaining that what they learned in the faculty and what they experienced in real classrooms were dramatically different.

Early recognition of reflective thinking is identified in Platonic theory in the form of Socratic questioning and dialogues. Here, dialogue is regarded as the key to reflection, which entails deep interest and a genuine doubt in the topic of conversation (Brockbank & McGill, 2000). Furthermore, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of doing, i.e. the importance of practice in learning, by criticizing those people who “discuss virtue” instead of “doing virtuous acts”, putting emphasis on the latter. Rousseau, in Emile’s ideal education, brought a new dimension to learning by emphasizing the self rather than the institutional dogmas, and he presented ideas on experiential learning – learning by doing, and the positive effects of travelling on learning (Brockbank & McGill, 2000).

However, the concept of reflection owes its current place and importance in education to Dewey, and the origins of the concept are mostly attributed to him. At the beginning of the last century, he offered a new approach to education that accepts all humans as able to learn from experience, and he regarded life itself as education and growing, and he stated the true aim of education as making growth explicit (Dewey, 1933).

There is no doubt that these fundamentals that were put forward by Dewey provide guidance for teachers and instructional designers in promoting and developing reflective practices in novice teachers. He explained reflection as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1910). He emphasized the action and viewed it as an integral part of reflection. This forms to be the focal point of the concept of reflection, since the reflective practitioner is described to be someone who is active and determined, and someone who questions the grounds of his assumptions and practices. Indeed, the attitudes of a reflective practitioner involve “open-mindedness,” “whole-heartedness,” and “responsibility” (Dewey, 1933).

Following Dewey’s rigorous conception, Valli (1997) described a reflective teacher as the one who can look back on events, make judgments about them, and alter their teaching behaviors in light of craft, research, and ethical knowledge. Dewey’s conceptual framework forms to be the

basis for inquiry-oriented learning in which learners are encouraged to question and find solutions to problems during action.

Further, Schön (1983) views reflective process as fundamental to the artistry of practice. He elaborates on self-inquiry during action 'reflection-in-action' and after the completion of action 'reflection-on-action.' He mentions that most experienced professionals use their knowing-in-action most of the time in an unconscious way, and they are involved in reflection-in-action in order to understand the case in a better way. In reflection-on-action, the reflective practitioner has more time to reflect on the action, which is regarded to be an important aspect of reflection (Schön, 1983).

Cowan (1998) explains this as looking back on the action contained in past experience. This form of reflection involves the analysis and the summary of the past experiences that lead to the generalization on the basis of these past experiences, which will be retained for future uses. It should be noted that both of these dimensions of reflection are metacognitive processes that have future orientation for guidance of future actions. A further dimension to reflection is viewed as 'reflection-for-action,' or 'reflection-for-practice' which connotes reflection as an ongoing process as a result of aforementioned processes of reflection, and it is more directed towards awareness of metacognitive elements in experience and future actions (Collier, 1999). It is viewed that all these forms of reflection are essential components of reflective practice.

In sum, reflection is regarded to be linked to exploring and understanding of self, and it is viewed as an on-going effort (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993). Indeed, self-realization is accepted as an important ingredient for self-development (Beed et al., 2005).

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON REFLECTIVE TEACHING IN IRAN

Fathi and Behzadpour (2011) state that some recent changes in ELT and teacher education has led to the shift of attention and orientation from positivistic views of language teaching towards a process-oriented constructivist views in which learning is viewed as an active process where learners reflect upon their current and past knowledge and experiences to generate new ideas and concepts. One major ramification of this dramatic shift was the demise of method and the emergence of post method condition. In their paper it is proposed that in the quest for something in lieu of method, reflective teaching has been considered as a solution to the problems teachers face in the 'beyond method' era. Then, it is revealed that reflective teaching has its own drawbacks and deficiencies. And finally, the origin and the components of teacher reflection have been briefly touched upon.

Rahimi and Chabok (2013) stipulate that while most teacher educators and researchers have highlighted the importance of applying a reflective teaching approach and identifying Conceptions of Teaching and Learning (CTL), providing opportunities to achieve these goals is ignored by syllabus designers and teachers. The current study is an attempt to focus on the relation between EFL teachers' reflective levels and CTL. To collect the required data for their paper, a sample of 30 EFL teachers (15males and 15 females) were chosen randomly to

participate in the study. The data were collected via classroom observation and TLCQ questionnaire. Then the data were analyzed by SPSS software through descriptive and inferential statistics such as mean, percentage, Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The analysis of the data revealed that EFL teachers are at the medium level of practicing reflective teaching. Also EFL teachers' CTL are approximately in the middle of being teacher-centered and learner-centered with tendencies towards learner-centered conception. In addition, the more reflective the teachers, the more learner-centered they are. The outcomes of the study could facilitate and foster teachers' practice in the classroom for the purpose of professional development in effective teaching; therefore, teacher education programs and methodology courses can take advantage of reflective teaching approach for preparing more reflective and learner-centered teachers which will finally lead to the improvement of educational system of teaching EFL.

Sadeghi (2013) maintains that reflective practice is "the persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the ground that support it and the figure condition to which it tends". As teachers, we need to know what is actually happening in our classroom, what learners are thinking and so on. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the processes and procedures of conducting action research as a particular way of looking at our practice in second and foreign language contexts. It also examines some of the procedures of data collection which plays a crucial role in action research. He maintains that how action research can be conducted by teachers in any context regardless of their states or position.

Taghilou (2007) stipulates that reflection has been very fashionable in all parts of teacher education for a number of years. Despite numerous articles, there is little empirical evidence that supports the view that it results in superior teaching practices, especially in EFL context. The objective of the study was to explore whether there is a statistically meaningful relationship between the "reflective teaching practices" and the "learning outcomes" of the Iranian EFL students. For the purpose of the study two homogeneous groups of pre-university students were taught the same materials under similar pedagogical conditions by two teachers fundamentally different in their treatment of reflection on teaching practices. In fact, one was a strong supporter of the reflective pedagogy, and the other a total disbeliever in its use and effect on students' learning potential. The student's mean score was significantly lower ($p < 0.05$) in the disbeliever teacher category (control group) than the mean score of students in the believer teacher category (experimental group). Also, the student satisfaction and support were more significant in the experimental group. All in all, reflective pedagogy contributed significantly to the learning/learner effectiveness. These results demonstrate for the first time the potential contribution of reflection and reflective teaching to the ease and effectiveness of learning on the part of the Iranian EFL students.

Jadidi and Keshavarz (2013) state that what teachers can actually do to increase their students' learning and develop their creativity is still in need of more focus in second/foreign language education research. Needless to point out that reflection on actual practices inside the classrooms is a key to teachers' creativity and professional development. Their study is therefore an attempt to find out the relationship between Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers reflection and strategy-based instruction. Two Likert-scaled questionnaires – one on teachers'

reflection and another on teachers' views on language learning strategies – were administered to a group of 50 EFL teachers. Both questionnaires were based on five-Likert scale ranging. The participants were both males and females with 5-8 years of experiences. The results from Pearson product moment correlation revealed a high, positive correlation between teachers' reflection and their views regarding the incorporation of language learning strategies in instruction. The findings of the study is in line with the general consensus in the field that practicing teachers should be equipped with reflective skills to be able to deal with contextual instructional challenges.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do pre-service teachers perceive a reflective practicum “Practical Teaching” course?
2. What do pre-service teachers reflect upon?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The course participants consisted of undergraduate pre-service teachers who were in their final year of their bachelor's program of ELT. The total number of the course participants who participated in this study was 30. They were between 23-31 years old. Twenty three of the participants were females, and the remaining (eight) were males. Except for two of the participants, the majority of them (28) were from Mazandaran province, Iran. In the course, the participants formed two seminar groups on a random basis, group 1 which gathered on Wednesday evenings, and group 2 that met on Thursday mornings.

Instrumentation

Perception Questionnaires

They were administered in order to obtain their views on the process of this reflective practicum course. Two sets of perception questionnaires were conducted: the mid-course and end-of-course perception questionnaires. The mid-course questionnaire contained seven open-ended questions aiming to seek the pre-service teachers' feedback namely on discussion questions, cases, working in groups in class, and their role and course instructor's role in the class. The end-of-course perception questionnaire consisting of eleven open-ended questions also aimed to obtain pre-service teachers' overall views on the course. It intended to seek the pre-service teachers' perception on the components and on the implementation of the course.

Reflective Interview

The interview was adapted from Pultorak (1996) and it was utilized in the post-observation interviews that took place in week 5 and week 6. This schedule consisted of ten open-ended questions along with alternative questions (14). Before the interviews, this schedule was pilot-tested and necessary alterations were made accordingly. The questions in the interview schedule focused on the following points of the lessons: strengths and problematic points, changes suggested, outcomes, learners' behaviors, content of the lesson, and moral and ethical concerns. The interview took around 20 minutes.

Procedure

The project started from week 5 until the end of the term – week 12 and the class interactions were recorded. In the first stage of the course, between week 5 and week 8, class interactions focused on class discussions in which the pre-service teachers reflected on cases, and on classroom observations. As the pre-service teachers commenced their observations, post-observation interviews were conducted between week 6 and week 8, in which they mostly attended in pairs, and each interview was recorded on their consent. The mid-course perception questionnaire was administered in week 7 and they were collected in week 8. Starting from week 9 until week 12, the pre-service teachers exchanged feedback on their performance in microteaching. Post-microteaching interviews were conducted together with the start of the microteaching period, between week 9 and week 12. The interviewees attended as pair or group and assignments were completed and returned starting from week 11 until the end of the final examination period. The end-of-course perception questionnaires were distributed in week 12, and they were collected at the end of the final examination period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of a Reflective Course

It focuses on how pre-service teachers perceive a pre-service practicum course in relation to its goals, processes, and outcomes. The data contribute to the development of a comprehensive insight on pre-service teachers' experiences related to a reflective course. The views of pre-service teachers were organized according to the emerging thematic categories that were developed following an inductive approach within content, analysis of qualitative research.

Authentic Teaching Experiences

Throughout the course process, the pre-service teachers were involved in a range of teaching related experiences such as observations, cases, microteaching, peer feedback, and teaching assignments and they found these experiences relevant to their professional preparation.

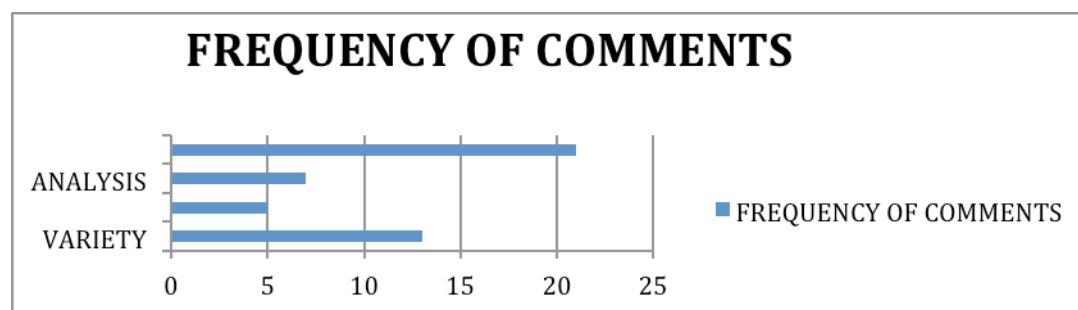


Figure 1: Number of comments according to each theme

VARIETY: The pre-service teachers stated that they had a variety of opportunities to engage in teaching related experiences, and this contributed to their professional development as teachers. They expressed that observations, class interactions, and microteachings exposed them to real

classrooms and these helped them learn about teaching and peer feedback after microteaching enabled her to develop herself by focusing on his weak points.

INTEREST: These experiences were found to be attracting and motivating, challenging and joyful, especially when they tried to find solutions to the problems posed in the cases.

ANALYSIS: Pre-service teachers stated that during classroom observations, they analyzed the teaching processes, the teacher roles, and learners' behaviors in class. They mainly focused on the weaknesses of the cooperating teacher's practice. So, they adopted the techniques they approved of and avoid the ones they disliked.

THEORY PRACTICE CONNECTION: In this reflective course, opportunity was provided for pre-service teachers to use their knowledge on teaching and their self-awareness was increased, working on cases as class-work helped them internalize teaching conception that this will prepare them for future teaching profession.

Self-awareness

SELF ANALYSIS: Pre-service teachers conducted self-analysis in this course, especially in microteaching assignments, which was completed after microteaching. They found this experience as unique since they could self-observe their own teaching for the first time.

SELF-EXPRESSION: There was communication throughout the course, and this communication was implied to be a journey within themselves a communication with the inner-self that they could write more effectively and express their ideas through reflecting every week.

TRANSFORMATION OF ATTITUDES: The pre-service teachers were aware of the progress they made throughout the course. They could analyze their attitude at the beginning and at the end. They feel at ease with feedback and found it beneficial for their progress.

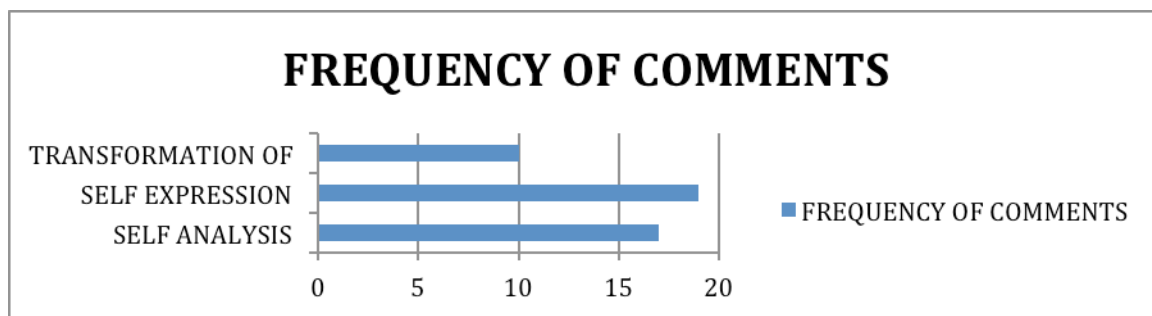


Figure 2: Number of comments according to each theme

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

These aspects that were derived from the findings were organized into the following major themes:

Collaboration: Collaboration is a vital ingredient for reflective courses and collaborative nature of this study was crucial aspect of this course. In this collaborative atmosphere the pre-service teachers could reflect on their experiences, give feedback to each other and improve themselves. By collaborating each other, they felt self-confident since they could share responsibility and develop their teaching.

Self-awareness and construction of professional identity: Zeichner and Liston (1987) highlight that self-awareness is an important element in becoming a reflective teacher. They explain that in the process of self-awareness, pre-service teachers become aware of themselves as teachers and of their environments which consequently lead to transformation in perception towards teaching. Throughout this reflective practicum course, self-awareness was regarded to be one of the vital qualities promoted. It was emphasized by the pre-service teachers that they developed awareness towards their own actions as well as towards others' actions, through microteaching assignments and peer feedback. It was underlined that understanding their own progress in teaching and in self-articulation were important achievements.

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APPENDIXES

MID-COURSE PERCEPTION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you think that discussion questions help you to improve yourself? If yes, why?
2. Do you think that observation help you to improve yourself?
3. Do you think that microteaching help you to improve yourself?
4. How do you feel about the assignments in this course? Please explain why.
5. How do you prefer to work in the sessions in this course (individual or pair or group)? Please explain why.
6. How do you see your own role in this course? Please explain why.
7. How do you see your instructor's role in this course? Please explain why.

END-OF-COURSE PERCEPTION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How did you feel about working in pairs in observations?
2. How did you feel about working in pairs/group in class discussions?
3. How did you feel about working in pairs in micro-teaching?
4. How did you feel about the overall discussion atmosphere in this course? Please explain.
5. How did you feel about interviews in this course? Did you find them effective in your learning? Please explain why/why not.
6. How did you feel about feedback that you received? Did you find it effective? Please explain why/why not.
7. How did you feel about writing lesson plans in this course? Did you find it effective in your learning? Please explain why/why not.
8. How did you feel about peer feedback in microteaching? Did you find it effective for your learning? Please explain why/why not.
9. How did you feel about the reflective meetings in the microteaching process? Did you find them effective in your learning? Please explain why/why not.
10. How did you feel about teaching assignment after microteaching? Did you find it effective in your learning? Please explain why/why not.
11. Think back your expectations from this course. What were they? Do you think that this course has met your expectations? Please explain