

What am I Doing and Why? Empowering Pre-Service Teachers to Question Their Practice through Dialogic Reflection

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Abstract

This paper reports the positive influence of exploratory talk and dialogic interaction on post-teaching reflective discussions among pre-service English language teachers and their teacher educator. Consistent use of exploratory talk over the duration of the programme seems to deepen reflective thinking and build the self-efficacy of learner teachers.

Key words: Reflective practice, Teacher education, Dialogic reflection, Exploratory talk

Introduction

Reflective practice (RP) enjoys widespread acceptance in teacher education. Along with the use of lesson plans and teacher observation, teacher education courses include reflective journal writing as an integral way of assessing development in a teacher's ability to think reflectively. Dewey, one of the earliest thinkers on reflective thinking described reflection as the "sole method of escape from the purely impulsive or purely routine action" (1933, p. 15). Several studies have acknowledged that pre-service teachers carry memories and beliefs from their own school experiences and these have a significant impact on the pedagogical choices these newly qualified teachers make (Lortie, 1975; Larsson, 1986; Korthagen, 2004; Wall, 2016). Therefore, RP is essential in teacher education, as it serves the critical purpose of questioning the "mindless following of unexamined practices or principles" (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991, p. 37). However, it is often unclear to the teachers how to engage in RP. When learner teachers (LTs) sit down to reflect after a teaching session, what are the cognitive processes that guide their reflective thinking? Do they recall the critical incidents

from their teaching episode and wonder about the circumstances that led up to them? Do they think about and build a repertoire of strategies to deal with similar critical incidents were they to recur in future teaching sessions? Do they tie theory and practice effectively—can they see the connections? Do they examine the effect of a pedagogic decision that led to successful learning and form a hypothesis based on it? Answers to these questions are often not clear to teacher educators.

One of the reasons for this lack of clarity could be that RP is often done when the LT is not in front of the teacher educator as it is given as a home assignment. Since priming the brain of LTs to reflect in this manner needs expert guidance and complex higher order thinking abilities, RP can become a frustrating experience when pre-service teachers have to work on it unassisted. Walsh and Mann fear then that "practitioners quickly learn what supervisors/tutors want them to write" (2015, p. 353), and therefore they begin "faking it" (Hobbs, 2007). Since teacher educators "hear and see" what they want to in these RP assignments, they approve of the "reflection". This can perpetuate a vicious cycle. The National Curriculum

Framework for Teacher Education expresses concern over the inability of teachers to reflect, and the impact this could have on school education. While articulating the vision for teacher education, the Framework recommends that reflective practice be:

the central aim of teacher education. Pedagogical knowledge has to constantly undergo adaptation to meet the needs of diverse contexts through critical reflection by the teacher. Teacher education needs to build capacities in the teacher to construct knowledge, to deal with different contexts and to develop the abilities to discern and judge in moments of uncertainty and fluidity... (NCFTE, 2009, p. 19-20)

While it is important for teacher educators to encourage their learners to learn the pertinent skills and techniques for language teaching, it is equally important to inculcate in them the culture of inquiry. To do this, teacher education must supplement the culture of transmission (wherein the teacher educator transmits the “correct ways” to go about teaching) with the culture of talk (wherein the educator and the learners collaboratively explore ideas through discussions, challenge them, and inquire about ways to facilitate language learning). In this paper, I will present data from a recent study in which dialogic reflection was used to promote RP in pre-service teachers.

Dialogic Reflection

Sociocultural theory upholds the role of social interaction in an individual’s cognitive growth and development. Vygotsky states, “human learning presupposes a specific social nature” (1978, p. 88). Thus the theory simultaneously explains how individuals learn from social interactions, and how collective understanding is created from interactions amongst individuals. With the post-

method pedagogy, it becomes even more relevant for the teacher educator to listen to the LT, understand the teaching contexts and discuss possible strategies, rather than over relying on transmitting information. In this process, not only does the LT learn, but new knowledge is constructed for the educator, the entire learning cohort and the domain of teacher education.

An environment where the learners and the educator are consciously and actively engaged in constructing knowledge by exploring new ideas, unpacking complex classroom scenarios, creating solutions to problems, listening to apprehensions, sharing joy, drawing connections to theories, and constantly inquiring, is more conducive for scaffolding RP. Mercer and Howe use the term “exploratory talk” for this kind of discourse. They say that “talk amongst teachers and students, if of the right quality, can be a powerful motor for the development of reasoning and the improvement of academic performance” (2012, p. 13). Through such talk, learners are more likely to see the relationship between the theoretical and procedural aspects of teaching.

Participants and Methods

This study was conducted over a period of one academic year. The participants were pre-service language teachers with no previous teaching experience. After each teaching session, the entire cohort of pre-service language teachers would meet for an exploratory talk and dialogic reflection. The cohort met a minimum of three times in a week and the teacher educator participated in almost all the sessions. The data was collected in the form of audio recordings of their conversations. These recordings were saved on a computer and relevant parts of the discussion were transcribed. The data was triangulated by observing the LTs’ teaching, studying their observations in their reflective journals, and reading their written assignments.

An Exemplar and Discussion

Here I will present an excerpt from a dialogic discussion between five LTs.

Context for the excerpt: Five LTs are teaching in a rural school. They are working with a group of students from Grade 5. These students have very limited fluency in English. The principal of the school has identified and allocated these students because she feels that despite two years of formal English classes, they have learnt "no English". The LTs have recently begun work with this cohort. It is their second meeting. They are using storytelling to teach English. They aim to eventually develop in these students the ability to write simple stories in English using their rural context. On the day of the current discussion, LT- J has taught the class, while the other four LTs have observed her class and possibly assisted her.

Notes:

Legend: LT: learner teacher; TE: teacher educator; the letters J, A, K after LT refer to the first letter of the names of the learner teachers; Letters P, R and F refer to the names of Grade 5 students.

[]: overlapping talk

...: pause

(): nonverbal communication is mentioned in brackets

Excerpt:

1. LT- J: Mm...wanted to teach setting [but... (small laugh)
2. LT- A: yeah]...the plan.
3. LT- J: That wasn't happening...went on to teach character...main character.
4. TE: Oh yes! You had a lesson plan for setting! [What
5. LT- J: I started] the class-told them the story. Suddenly I felt it was easier to ask them "who is the story about?"
6. LT- A: I know ... could have asked "where"...but [that...
7. LT- J: Yeah] it was my second class with them.
8. TE: And you wanted them to be comfortable.
9. LT- J: Exactly. Also standing there ... mm...I realized what'd they say if I asked "where"...
10. TE: Ok?
11. LT- J: There is the river, there is the house, the road... will they say "village"?...I...
12. LT- A: Yes...
13. TE: I see that. Is this reflection-in-action-changing your plan-thinking on your feet?
14. LT- K: This is! (laughter)
15. LT- J: Well... (small laugh)
16. TE: Yes...you're thinking this will work...this won't. I need to make them comfortable. If they like what I'm doing I can come back to them...eh?
17. LT- J: Yes...make them do bigger things may be,... but now...
18. TE: They could answer "who"?
19. LT- A: She asked "who is the story about?" P said "donkey".
20. LT- K: R was like, "washerman".
21. LT- J: That's the problem...I'm asking ...tell me "who is the main character" but...
22. TE: Be fair... isn't the donkey there in most parts of the story...(all laugh).
23. LT- A: I liked what you asked next ...that helped.
24. LT- J: Yeah...it did...thanks...I went like "is the story about the bundle of clothes on the donkey's back... and F said ["no"]" (uses gesture to indicate bundle).
25. LT- K: almost all] said "no".
26. TE: You think they understood the word "character", "main character"?
27. LT- A: Tomorrow I'm using this film story they know-then I'll ask "main character".

28. LT- J: Yes! They'll say Salman Khan (all laugh).
29. TE: How about your learning outcome? You could meet it, right?
30. LT- A: Mm...they were thinking, they were using English... words.
31. LT- J: Listening...they were listening.
32. TE: How do you know they were listening? They understood?
33. LT- J: They could illustrate ... see... this is [a] river, donkey, man...lovely colours! Gosh...(Shows illustration done by the students)

(Dialogic reflection continues)

One prominent finding that emerges from this excerpt is the ease with which ideas are being shared between the LT's. In defining exploratory talk, Mercer and Littleton talk about "a form of co-reasoning in language, with speakers sharing knowledge, challenging ideas, evaluating evidence and considering options in a reasoned and equitable way" (2007, p. 54). The present extract gives evidence of almost all these qualities. As the learners articulate their experiences and find validation of their pedagogic choices amongst their peers, from theories, and from the educator, there is clear evidence of improvement in their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to succeed (Bandura, 1994). The fact that the LT's trusted their instincts, their "feel" of the class, and quickly abandoned their plan and thought on their feet and came up with a new plan is indicative of their emerging confidence. In dialogues 26 and 27, TE and LTA mention using a more apt example to explain the idea of main character. In dialogue 32, they are able to evidence listening by the students. Despite knowledge of some conventional ways of ascertaining listening comprehension in the theory class (such as getting the students to choose an answer from a multiple choice

question, or getting them to write a response), here they use the students' illustrations as evidence. Further, the lessons seem to be planned and taught collaboratively. Using the same collaboration while reflecting aids the LT's in gaining deeper pedagogical insights. In dialogues 23 and 24, we see examples of clear feedback and support.

The LTs try to figure out together how to maximize the English learning experience for their learners. They discuss why learners would find it difficult to comprehend the abstract idea of "setting". They are able to reason that the learners will not be able to make the link that "the river", "the house", "the road", etc., were in "the village". Thus the LTs display reflecting-in-action (Schön, 1987) and reflecting-for-action (Killion & Todnem, 1991), as they analyse their students' language, and psychological and cognitive needs. They think on their feet when it comes to making their students feel comfortable; they constantly try to lower their students' affective filters (Krashen, 1985). There is a clear indication that they have an insight into how students from a rural school background might feel. They even discuss how it must not have been easy for these students when they could not keep up with their class in language learning. Thus the pedagogic decisions seem to be carefully drawn from a thorough learner needs analysis.

A study of the reflective journals of the LT's shows also evidence of consolidated careful thinking and learning. For example, LT J writes in her journal:

When P wanted to answer, I did not look at him. I know he was crushed [,] but he learnt I was not going to look at him if he spoke out of turn. My decision helped G. For the first time in two days [,] she spoke. P had monopolized all talk so far. Maybe, that's the way it is in their community—men talk, women listen.

I noticed, P began listening to her. I know he was listening because she used the word “wet” [,] and then he used it later. I had not used this word at all. It is not in the story.

In one of the theory classes, there was a discussion on turn-taking in classrooms. Clearly, LT J was implementing her learning from this class. LT J has, on several occasions, talked about her extremely conventional schooling. Hence this attempt to make her students take turns, to notice how vocabulary is “picked up”, to notice how her classroom was a microcosm of her students’ world, indicate deep reflection on her part.

Conclusion

Often dialogic reflection and exploratory talk for promoting reflective thinking are not explored in teacher education institutions because of time constraints or an emphasis on conventional assessment methods. Nevertheless, there appears to be some data available to understand how LTs’ develop RP when they are engaged in exploratory talk. While there is value in transmission talk, exploratory talk gives more opportunities to listen to the teachers-to-be and to address their fears, misconceptions and beliefs, thereby strengthening their self-efficacy.

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