

Encouraging pre-service teachers to become involved in effective reflection, using a tool, to narrow the gap between learnt theory and practice

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1. Abstract

Reflective practice is a key component in teacher education around the world. But here in Sri Lanka, it has been given minimum emphasis. A wide gap exists between pre-service teachers' learnt theoretical information on ELT methods and what they actually practice in the classrooms during their practicum. This study was undertaken to inquire into the possibility of narrowing this gap making use of reflective practice, using a reflective tool, with the help of teacher educators. 15 English pre-service teachers, in their final block of teaching at two different schools were used as a controlled and an experimental group as the sample of this study. A reflective tool prepared by the researcher was used to support pre-service teachers to become involved in reflection after each lesson. This was essential as pre-service teachers' knowledge of what and how to reflect needed guidance. Pre, while, and post reflective guidance was provided by the teacher educator in the form of discussion groups, only for the experimental group. The controlled group was given the reflective tool only. The findings showed the experimental group was able to become involved in effective reflection both orally and written with the assistance of the teacher educator, and this supported them to narrow the gap between their learnt theoretical information and classroom practice. The controlled group used the reflective tool to involve themselves in written reflection only. 'How' and 'what' to make of their reflections was not clear to them. The experimental group showed a marked improvement in their classroom practice. Their reflective notes developed, and reflective discussions supported them to make connections with learnt theoretical information.

2. Sub-theme

The paper focuses on the sub-theme 'observation and feedback methods and techniques.' Reflection aligns with the stages of observation (Pre, while and post). Feedback is the post stage of observation, where reflective discussion / dialogue can take place between the supervisor, the teacher, the peer observer and the learner.

3. Story

Introduction and review of literature

Nolan defines reflection as 'a way of looking inside oneself or upon one's experiences in it' (Nolan as cited by Whitton et al (2008)). Harmer identifies reflection as 'holding

up a mirror to our own practice' (2007). Whatever the definition, it is easier said than done. Day argues that reflection is quite difficult for a pre-service teacher unless they are specially trained for it.' (Day 2013). Therefore, skilled facilitation, appropriate guidance and support from teacher educators is essential to make effective reflection practitioners out of pre-service teachers (Nolan 2008). The teacher education field worldwide employs reflective practice. Teacher educators load pre-service teachers with educational theories, but they also need to provide them with a suitable instructional medium to transform theory into practice through reflection (Good & Whang 2014). Therefore, to instil reflective practice in pre-service teachers, teacher educators need to provide support structures, and here a reflection tool can be used to support them to make connections between theory and practice. The reflective tool, according to Smyth (1992) as cited in Yost et al (2000) is a tool to promote reflective thinking: 'the teacher educator can promote reflective thinking by posing a series of questions to be answered in journal writing'. In line with the above idea, a set of ten questions that would assist student teachers to become involved in reflective thinking, was prepared by the researcher. By providing detailed answers to these, student teachers can be encouraged to become involved in reflection. (See Appendix One)

Sample

Fifteen English pre-service trainee teachers in their final block of teaching of 10 days at two different schools. Group A- Controlled group (07), Group B- Experimental group (08). The researcher was the supervisor/teacher educator.

Study

All fifteen student teachers were given the reflective tool, a series of questions to assist them to reflect after each lesson, prior to their block teaching. The controlled group A was not given any assistance other than the tool. All 7 students were found to be writing their reflections using the tool, but they were mainly descriptive. The observations of their lessons did not show a great development and T-3 and T-6 were observed using reading aloud and choral reading in reading lessons, T-1, T-4, T-7 were using detailed presentation of form in grammar lessons. Many of the classes were teacher centred; the black board was only used to paste their visuals. T-2 and T-5 had very poor class control and when assigned group work T-4 was not monitoring the work done. Almost everybody had an issue with realizing their learning outcomes. Post observation feedback was held, and they were not very reflective, as teachers were only 'reacting' to the questions asked, instead of being reflective;

Q: You got students to choral read with you. Can you explain why?

A: Many students do not know how to read. There were lots of difficult words. So, reading aloud was needed.

Another instance was;

Q: You went into a detailed explanation of the grammar form. Was it really helpful / needed?

A: They had no idea of the grammar rules. Without them they cannot write sentences of their own.

Q: The grammar activities were isolated sentences with fill in the blanks. Can these develop students' ability to use the structures on their own?

A: They were able to do the activities. So, I believe, they can use them.

The teachers showed very poor reflective ability, and many were not able to make connections with their learnt theories of teaching reading skills and teaching of grammar. Throughout the week the student teachers did not show any significant development in their lesson delivery.

With the experimental group, before they went for block teaching, a pre reflection stage was carried out. Each student teacher was asked to go through the supervisor's feedback given during their previous teaching blocks and then to identify their action points to be considered in future lessons. 07 out of 08 had issues with their learning outcomes. They were assisted to make connections with the learnt theory of writing learning outcomes by picking out verbs from Bloom's taxonomy. The student teachers were asked to reflect on their previous week's learning outcomes, to check whether they were SMART and to redo them if they were not. The previous week's written reflections were made use of in developing future lessons. Students were guided and supported to make connections between theories learnt and reflections in planning lessons for the coming week.

Lessons were observed, they were asked to write their reflections, and reflective feedback discussions were held. Three students were able to become involved in fruitful reflective discussions. Their reflective notes too were becoming more descriptive and showed signs of critical reflection. They also showed the trainees' reflections were connecting with the learnt theory.

*T-9 'Unfortunately, I didn't have a plan B'
'Luckily, I was able to alter the group activity.....'
'I was successful in implementing a sudden plan.....'*

*T-11 'I could motivate the students using scoreboards'
'I think I have to get students to use their thumbs up and thumbs down in discussing answers'*

*T-12 'I read only the main part of the dialogue- I think it doesn't work well'
'I was unable to manage my classroom properly'*

These ideas opened up good points for reflective discussions. The student teachers showed signs of making connections with the learnt theory especially in their discussions. Their lessons showed great signs of improvement towards the later part of the week.

The teacher educator's support and guidance in the reflective process is crucial. Asking the right questions, prompting the student teachers and encouraging them to reflect using the tool was important. Teacher educators having a clear idea of English language teaching methodology can be an advantage to the process.

4. Lessons and/or Recommendations

- Reflection should be made a compulsory study unit in the teacher education curriculum.
- Teacher educators need to be given a thorough knowledge on reflection and how to guide student teachers to be effective reflective practitioners.
- Teacher educators too need to be reflective practitioners.
- Reflective practice should be an ongoing process for pre-service teachers.
- Both teacher educators and student teachers should be exposed to the reflective tool, to use it effectively.
- Reflective tools should be made available for student teachers and continuous studies needs to be undertaken to update and develop them.
- Teacher educators need to provide extensive guidance for student teachers to be involved in reflection and making the connection between theory and practice.
- Pre-service teachers should be supported with reflective tasks during their academic sessions.
- At the end of academic sessions, teacher educators need to reflect on their session with student teachers using techniques like the mirror wall

5. References

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Appendix One

Reflection Tool- Guiding questions.

- (1) What task/ activity/stage of the lesson that worked really well for you?
Why?
- (2) How did the learners react to it? **Why?**
- (3) What parts of the lesson didn't work well for the learners? **Why?**
- (4) What was helpful for the learners? **Why?**
- (5) What part of the lesson you want to change and how are you going to change it, if you are given another chance to do it?
- (6) How could you have managed the class differently?
- (7) What were the outcomes of the lesson? **Were they the ones you planned initially?**
- (8) Why did things go badly or well in the lesson?
- (9) What were your thoughts and feelings during the task/activity?
Anxious, pleased, confident or frustrated. **Explain briefly.**
- (10) How did you feel after the lesson? **Why?**