

Student “Resistance” to Reflection: Pre-service Teacher Training at the Mostar University, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract: Reflection is seen as an important contributor to teacher development, but many students offer resistance when asked to become reflective. Adopting the principled framework of Exploratory Practice, we investigated the student reaction when being asked to reflect on their own learning and teaching in the fourth and fifth year introductory foreign language acquisition and teaching methods courses at the Mostar University, (B-H). Some students showed resistance to keeping reflective journal and to examining their beliefs. This practitioner research is a contribution to current discussions on how to encourage students to become productively reflective. It is an attempt to help our understanding of reflection and its role in the professional lives of (E)FL teachers. It also suggests that the perceived resistance to reflection may involve personal and socio-cultural issues.

Key Words: practitioner research, teacher training, reflective practice

Introduction

In FL language teacher education, it is assumed that student teachers need to acquire the knowledge taught in introductory foreign language acquisition and teaching methods courses to become effective practitioners. The extent of impact of these courses on pre-service teacher beliefs, knowledge and practice is the subject of many debates and studies. Some even claim that teacher education courses seem to have little impact (Woods, 1996; Peacock, 2001; Lo, 2005; Busch, 2010) because students resist changing their pre-existing beliefs and position on learning resulting from their previous experiences. Therefore, they suggest that pre-service teachers should take into account the belief systems of their students in order to improve the outcome of training and promote reflective teaching since it seems to have a stronger effect on the belief systems than exclusive declarative knowledge teaching. Mann (2005, p. 108) points out that findings of several studies indicate that more reflective teachers are better able to monitor, make real-time decisions and respond to the changing needs of learners than less reflective teachers”.

Reflection, reflective practice or reflective teaching are all terms which are differently defined, but they encompass processes which involve “meta-thinking (thinking about thinking) in which we consider the relationship between our thoughts and our actions in a particular context” (Shkedi, 2000, p. 95)” or “inner dialogue” (Mann, 2005, p. 33). Loughran states that “for others, it [reflective practice] is a well defined and crafted practice that carries very specific meaning and associated action” (Loughran, 2002, p. 33). Reflective teaching can also be seen as „an approach to teaching which is based on a belief that teachers can improve their understanding of teaching and the quality of their own teaching by reflecting critically on their teaching experiences” (Richards, 2002, p. 23). They are to collect data on their own teaching practices by recording them, to reflect on their actions through journal writing and to review them by discussing them with their peers or by examining the recordings (Richards, 2002, p. 23).

Halbach (2002) reports in her research that all entries made by teachers in their reflective journals could be classified into three types: summarizing, exemplifying and commenting. Amobi (2005) discusses a framework for analyzing reflectivity. It consists of four categories: describing, informing, confronting and reconstructing. She asked the teacher trainers to direct their attention in their teaching journals to answering these three questions in order for her to be able to construct their “reflective thinking on their teaching practice” (Amobi, 2005, p. 119) according to the four categories:

- 1) What did I intend to do in this lesson? (informing)
- 2) What did I do? (confronting and reconstructing)
- 3) What would I do differently if I were to teach this lesson again? (confronting and reconstructing)

The subjects in Amobi’s study had minimal difficulties answering the first two questions, but some of them experienced problems in answering the third question related to confronting and reconstructing aspect of reflection.

Different personal, professional and contextual factors may contribute to problems related to the teacher's ability to reflect, and, therefore, Stanley (1998) introduces several phases in the development of reflective teaching which involve engaging in reflection, thinking, using, sustaining and practicing reflection.

Although many experts agree on the importance of reflection in pre-service teacher training, practitioners indicate that some students might find it difficult to reflect. One of the reasons stated was that some students could not see any value in writing reflections (Gunn, 2010, p. 218). We decided to explore the extent to which a reflective approach to teacher training is suitable for the students of English language and literature at the Mostar University (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

The Outline of the Study

The courses under study are the fourth and fifth year introductory foreign language acquisition and teaching methods courses at the Mostar University. These students study to become English teachers and it is expected that after these courses they will master basic theoretical postulates behind the second language acquisition and methods of teaching English. The practical experience of teaching in these courses is limited to peer teaching each other (microteaching experience) and the real classroom experience (field experience) is a separate course and left for the last semester of their education. The Mostar University is a public university, but due to the difficult financial and political situation, it is forced to find outside sources to support its operations. As far as the English teaching program is concerned, the lack of field experience is not felt in the long run due to the mandatory requirement that all graduates planning to work as teachers must pass a state teaching exam which among other requirements asks from students to observe, teach and study for a lengthy period of time with the state appointed mentors who are experienced elementary and/or secondary school English teachers.

Using the principled framework of Exploratory Practice (EP), we investigated the student reaction when being asked to reflect on their own learning and teaching in these classes in order to follow their development. We have decided to apply EP because it is an approach to practitioner research which is devoted to understanding the quality of foreign language classroom life. In teaching pre-service teachers to develop reflective habits of mind, it is recommended that teacher educators determine the content to be reflected on and the quality of reflection (Valli, 1997). The present study inquired into reflective practice of pre-service teachers when asked to revisit their experience in the observed classes, their teaching actions and peers' and teacher's evaluation in a microteaching experience. As Amobi (2005) successfully analyzed recurring themes of reflectivity, we have also decided to conduct the analysis of the themes of reflectivity but our analysis is based on the free participants reflective journals and their position papers after the observed courses.

Participants and Instructional Procedures

Participants (N=35) were students enrolled in the fourth year second language acquisition (SLA) course and later as the fifth year students in a general methods (GM) course in 2010. They ranged in age from 22- 26 with no prior teaching experience.

These courses met for 135 minutes once a week for 15 weeks. The SLA course did not include any microteaching. Students were required as a part of this course to write a journal which might include reflections on their experiences in the class, content and issues covered in the course, assignments they had to complete or in general to contribute to the class through their own critical thinking. The GM course did not include any field experience, but one microteaching activity. The students prepared a micro-lesson to teach to their peers exclusively using one of the 10 selected modern methods. This activity was commented on by the peers after the lesson, but was evaluated by the teacher.

Data Collection and Analysis Processes

We gathered the data during the courses from the participants' journals and in the GM course also from the post-course reflection in the form of 5-6 page long assumption paper in which they were asked to present their personal/philosophical perspective on the conclusions they were drawing about a particular assumption of teaching and learning based clearly on their readings, their experience in the course and their past experiences as a learner. Halbach (2002, pp. 245-246) writes that the type of reflection the students are able to produce and whether they comment on the course methodology indicates the effect of the course on their ability to be reflective and think critically. She distinguishes three degrees of reflection:

- Summarizing – Students do not show any significant degree of introspection or reflection, but simply summarize the ideas and content covered in class.

- Exemplifying – Students show a certain degree of introspection supported with their own experience as students.
- Commenting – As a result of meaningful reflection on the issues presented in the class, students comment and pose questions clearly indicating critical thinking.

Findings and Discussion

Judging from the type of reflection students were able to carry out at the end of the SLA course, only three students produced entries which reflected their own critical thinking. The rest of the students stayed at the level of exemplifying, with ten students staying at the level of summarizing. Only three of these students had struggled with the course material, and eventually needed more time to complete requirements and pass the course later than the other observed students. The puzzle area was that none offered any comments in relation to the methodology used in the course, except for offering comments which can fall in the category of evaluation. We supposed that their awareness towards methodological questions has not been raised sufficiently as a result of their first encounter with such requirement.

Nevertheless, the journal entries students kept for the GM course did not change. They were primarily made as a reflection to course readings and included limited introspection, although the classroom participation of the majority of students indicated active involvement and critical thinking. In discussion with them, we found out that there were several reasons for their limited journal entries. The first one was that they found that reflective and critical approach to writing consumes time which they decided not to spend on a requirement which carried only 10 % of their final grade. They also pointed out that they felt more comfortable to comment participating in classroom discussions, rather than to write their comments in the journal. When asked to explain this position they agreed that they would not be able to be direct and open, as they were when participating in the classroom discussions, because of the problems of how to put their comments in writing and also because these comments are a written record of their position. As one student said, they wanted to complete assignments to pass the course and they did not want to risk “offending” the teacher if it turns out that their position is opposite to one presented by the teacher or if it questions the position of the teacher. In some other courses, they might risk having their grade lowered by being openly reflective.

The advantage of the GM course in comparison to the SLA course was that students were required to write an assumption paper which would indicate whether attitudes to language learning/teaching changed as a result of the work done in the course. Halbach (2002) following the same group of students during two academic years found that rate of change was quite low and about half of her 23 students produced final paper which did not reflect communicative language teaching methodology the course was oriented towards. Unlike the students in the Halbach study, all students in our study reflected on the modern methods in their assumption papers. One could suggest that all students changed their attitudes towards learning/teaching upon completing this course. But, further analysis of their papers revealed that only six students offered reflective comments which would indicate critical thinking on selected aspects of modern methods, while 11 of them did not move beyond the first degree of reflection – summarizing. The others exhibited the second degree of reflection – exemplifying and reflected on their personal experiences. Only four students reflected on their experience related to the micro-teaching activity in the class.

The students who were highly reflective were also the students whose English skills were more advanced in comparison to those who stayed at the level of summarizing. The Bologna reformed higher education allows English students to transfer courses which they do not successfully complete into next academic year, so it might happen that students are completing even 10 courses at the same time. If their English proficiency is not up to the requirement to freely reflect, the cause might be in low university entrance requirements and a system which allows students to combine courses, collect points and pass courses with minimal effort. Throughout their education from elementary school up to university in Bosnia and Herzegovina, students are not encouraged to critically think and reflect. Although the higher system of education got reformed, it is still heavily founded on the transmission of knowledge and students are required to reproduce it to prove that they have mastered it.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This short study points to similar results as Halbach found in her study. These English students in Mostar are not fully prepared for and open to reflection. Socio-cultural issues involving the educational system which does not encourage critical thinking and personal perspective which indicates that the objective is to complete the requirements to pass the course might suggest that reflective practice should not be encouraged. On the contrary, reflection should be used as a means to help the English students become aware of their teaching practice and themselves as learners and future teachers (Farrell, 2004). Discussion proved to be a successful

instrument for finding the causes of resistance to reflection and teachers should not hesitate to use any means which would help their students become independent life-long learners and being reflective is just one of them.

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