

TEACHING TRAINEE TEACHERS TO REFLECT ON THEIR MICROTEACHING EXPERIENCES IN EFL METHODOLOGY COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Reflectivity is regarded as an essential part of teacher education. The paper is aimed at describing the existing language teacher training approaches to understand the notion of reflective teaching and the way they are reflected in the Core Curriculum for English Language Teaching Methodology Course (Bachelor's Level) designed by the team members of the joint project of Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and British Council Ukraine *New Generation School Teacher* (2013-2019).

The action research describes the procedures of introducing 22 trainee teachers of English at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, 2021-2022 academic year to the reflective model suggested by British Council with the purpose to guide them through their reflection on microteaching a fragment of a lesson on teaching language skills, prepared and given by them as their portfolio item for assessment in English Language Teaching Methodology and to analyse the trainee teachers' attitudes and readiness to the proposed reflective practice aimed at better understanding their own strengths and areas for development as a teacher. The author concludes that trainee teachers are exposed to diverse reflective practices throughout their training provided by the Core Curriculum for ELT Methodology but they need support and guidance to develop their reflectivity on microteaching experiences. The author suggests the ways for enhancing trainee teachers' reflectivity evaluated and ranked by the participants themselves.

Key words: EFL trainee teachers, reflection, microteaching, EFL methodology, The New Generation School Teacher Project, the Core Curriculum.

Анотація.

Здатність здійснювати рефлексію над власною професійною діяльністю є невід'ємною частиною підготовки вчителя. Одним із методів підготовки вчителя англійської мови на факультеті іноземних мов Уманського державного педагогічного університету виступає метод мікровикладання за допомогою якого майбутні учителі мають можливість набувати практичних умінь підготовки до педагогічної діяльності. У статті досліджено відношення та готовність 22 здобувачів вищої освіти третього року навчання здійснювати рефлексію над їхнім досвідом мікровикладання згідно моделі, запропонованої Британською радою. Студенти практикують мікровикладання в межах курсу «Методика навчання англійської мови» та навчаються за типовою програмою, розробленою робочою групою спільного проекту МОН України та Британської ради в Україні «Шкільний учитель нового покоління» для здобувачів вищої освіти ОС «бакалавр». Автор робить висновок, що навчання майбутніх учителів за

програмою методики ґрунтується на систематичному розвитку їхніх рефлексивних умінь, проте вони потребують допомоги при здійсненні рефлексії над мікрвикладанням як специфічної діяльності, спрямованої на розвиток професійних умінь вчителя та пропонує способи такої підтримки та оцінку їхньої значущості з позиції майбутніх учителів.

Ключові слова: майбутні учителі англійської мови як іноземної, рефлексія, мікрвикладання, методика навчання англійської мови, «Шкільний учитель нового покоління», типова програма.

Introduction. Reflective teaching has come to the forefront in mainstream teacher education since the eighties of the 20th century (Calderhead, 1989). The papers advocating the notion of reflective teaching in second language teacher education appeared very soon underlining the complexity and uniqueness of the field (Bartlett, 1990; Wallace, 1991).

There is no agreement between the writers about the notion itself, which creates the overlap between different conceptions as the number of attributes used by writers to define it, are repeated this or that way. Roberts (1998) comments on the vagueness of the notion of reflective teaching: "Reflection may be seen as conscious self-assessment according to the formal criteria of one's initial teacher education course at one end of the scale, to the exploration of tacit personal metaphors of teaching at the other" (p. 53). He contends that we should resort to the notion of reflection first put forward by Dewey (1933), who defined it as "the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it". Following Dewey's work, Schön (1987) developed his theory, reflective practice for practitioners to mean the way of recapturing an experience, mulling it over, then attempting to evaluate and reconstruct that experience (Loughran, 2002).

Microteaching is a teaching technique used in teachers' pre-service education and implies teaching peers. McGarvey and Swallow (1986) stated that microteaching focuses on teaching a particular skill in a short session with a small group of people to help the students improve their teaching skills and self-confidence. It is one of the effective ways to train trainee teachers before they face the real classroom situation. Trainee teachers can benefit from microteaching in a number of respects. They reveal teaching facts and roles of the teacher (Wilkinson, 1996). Microteaching helps pre-service teachers to see the importance of planning and taking decisions (Gess-Newsome & Lederman, 1990). It enables them to develop and improve their teaching skills (Benton-Kupper, 2001). It offers opportunities for discovering and reflecting on both, their own and others' teaching styles (Wahba, 1999).

Method (Including Participants, Instruments and Procedure). The action research is centered on 22 English language trainee teachers. They are all Ukrainians and English is a foreign language to them. There are 6 males and 16 female participants. They are 3rd Year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University. They obligatory take the course in English Language Teaching Methodology (Bachelor's Level). Their Pre-Service Teacher Training (PRESETT) curriculum at Bachelor's level is the result of the joint project *New Generation School Teacher* initiated by British Council Ukraine and Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (2013-2019). The Core Curriculum's main objective has been to raise standards of English teaching in schools and universities. On completing it the trainee

teachers are expected to develop further as reflective practitioners. Modern ways of learning and teaching suggested in the PRESETT curriculum involve trainee teachers in their own learning processes with high levels of interaction between themselves through task-based learning, the use of case studies, simulations, group projects, problem-solving and microteaching (Core Curriculum, 2020). The trainee teachers are encouraged to participate actively, to set their own learning objectives and to solve problems both independently and with others. Thus, they learn to reflect on their own learning process, experiences and feelings.

The curriculum is made up of six modules, each representing a broad area of methodology, and each module contains a number of units, each of which covers an essential specialist topic for English teachers in training. Each module is designed to be taught for a semester, starting in Semester 3. The six modules are arranged to reflect the pathway that trainee teachers embark on from being language learners to becoming language teachers by the end of the programme. Thus, the more basic content is covered in early modules in Semesters 3 and 4 and more challenging topics follow later. Each unit has an allocation of 18 hours of class contact time, backed up by a recommended number of hours of self-study, in most cases 12. The core Curriculum is penetrated by activities and innovative learning and teaching approaches aimed at stirring a need in trainee teachers for becoming reflective practitioners. Trainee teachers are gradually exposed to different reflective practices. In the first place, the entire training in the Methodology Course is organised according to the Experiential learning model which is an alternative to more traditional learning models favouring those learners with a good memory. Experiential learning theory supports the idea of learning based on a more holistic approach. It considers the role that all of a learner's experiences play in his or her learning, including emotions, cognition and environmental factors. It advocates for deep learning rather than surface learning. Deep learning normally involves learning about something using a number of different methods, from reading and experimenting to role-playing and discussing. These methods help trainee teachers to truly understand what they're learning by having them applying and discussing theories rather than just memorising them. Learning from experience involves a process of resolving conflict between contradictory ideas, known as 'cognitive conflict' leading trainee teachers to the possible change of old habits, to question old ideas and explore new ways of thinking. In particular, all face-to-face sessions within each Unit are designed following the four main stages of David Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984): concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The cycle begins with a learner having a concrete experience by either learning something new or experiencing something familiar but in a new way. The next stage of the cycle is very important, and it's all about reflection. After having a concrete experience, the learner spends some time thinking about what happened, or observing others doing the same thing and reflecting on what's occurring. Next stage involves making sense of the experience and reflections. It may require of a trainee teacher to think about next steps for improving, come up with a plan of action, or confide in literature or an expert who can offer insight. It allows forming new ideas, or modifying existing abstract ideas enabling a learner to take action afterwards. The last stage is about acting indeed based on previous reflections and thoughts. The learner at this stage applies what he or she

has learnt from the initial experience and sees if there are any modifications when he or she tries the experience for a second time. It is the time an opportunity to test new ideas.

Another reflective practice the participants have been regularly exposed to is observing English lessons followed by discussions of what they have learned from their observation. They undertake school practice throughout the whole methodology course. Guided observation took place in Semesters 3 and 4, i.e. once a fortnight (one full day of at least four class hours) throughout Year 2. It gave trainee teachers an opportunity to observe experienced teachers at work and to make connections with their learning during the first year of the methodology course. To help in this process they complete observation tasks. At the time this action research takes place, the trainee teachers are in their 5th Semester. They continue attending face-to-face sessions and enter the next stage of their school practice – Teacher assistantship, which, besides focused observation, requires of them to act as teacher assistants, planning teaching, undertaking microteaching and generally supporting the English teachers.

Microteaching is a technique which aims at preparing trainee teachers to the real classroom setting (Brent & Thomson, 1996). It helps them to experiment with main teacher behaviours and allows them to master teaching skills by breaking them into smaller parts. Wilkinson (1996) emphasizes that trainee teachers can experience real teaching and teaching rules with the help of this method. This method offers teachers opportunities for discovering and reflecting on both, their own and others' teaching styles and enables them to learn about new teaching techniques (Wahba, 1999).

The two research questions were formulated:

1. What do the trainee teachers think about the suggested model of the reflective practice on microteaching a fragment of a lesson?
2. What ways the trainee teachers' reflective practices on microteaching can be supported?

The following hypothesis was put forward: though the 3rd Year trainee teachers have been already exposed to and are knowledgeable about some reflective practices in their Methodology Course they would reflect on their microteaching with an aim to identify their professional development needs and find solutions to problems more readily if they are well-supported.

This action research used the following research instruments: observation, field notes, interview and group discussion.

The action research comprised two cycles. The reflection was done at the end of each cycle. The results were then evaluated to see whether the next cycle was needed or not. The decision to continue the action in the next cycle was made when the need to enforce reflection aroused.

On learning each of the two Units in their Methodology Course on Teaching Language Skills: Teaching Listening and Teaching Reading, the trainee teachers were to conduct their microteaching. Assessment in the two units consisted of Portfolio containing items. Assessment Specifications for each Item were announced to the trainee teachers at the beginning of their learning the units. The steps the trainee teachers undertook in the 1st Cycle were:

1. Develop a sequence of at least four activities to meet learners' needs and learning purpose using the template (they were given an audio text, and were provided

with the information about the learners' age group, language proficiency level, and purpose for listening to address).

2. Provide instructions for organising the activities in class.
3. Submit the script of the audio text and the materials used.
4. Deliver your sequence of activities.
5. Reflect on your microteaching following the suggested model.
6. Give feedback to your group mates' suggestions during discussion the microteaching.

In the 2nd Cycle the trainee teachers were given more freedom. They were asked to refer to a school class they know and choose the texts which would be suitable for them to develop reading skills. Then they followed those steps:

1. Write a short profile of the class you have in mind (age, level, needs in the development of reading skills and relevance of needs to the school curriculum).

2. Explain why you have selected this text for your target group. Mention: text topic and content area; level of language in the text; potential for the development of reading skills.

3. Anticipate and list any difficulties in the text for your target learners. Mention: content; structure; grammar; vocabulary; sentence complexity; cultural references.

4. Develop a sequence of activities sufficient for use in a single lesson to make the text accessible to your target learners. Include: activities to develop reading comprehension; activities to address some of the difficulties you have identified. Prepare handouts which can be used in class.

5. Make copies of the text and your handouts and try the material out with your peers. Take feedback from them.

6. Reflect on your microteaching following the suggested model.

7. Give feedback to your group mates' suggestions during discussion the microteaching.

8. Write a reflective account (maximum 150 words) on your learning through doing this assignment.

The trainee teachers' reflective practice on their microteaching a specific lesson involved critical evaluation of their actions, to better understand their strengths and areas for development as a teacher. They were instructed to look back at what they had done, consider carefully whether it worked or not, and if so, why. They were explained that that procedure would help them to pinpoint and develop successful practices, as well as identifying their professional development needs and finding solutions for problems.

The reflective practice described is suggested by the British Council and is in line with already familiar to the trainee teachers Kolb's experiential learning cycle. It is based on tips for trainee teachers on how to take a more reflective approach to their microteaching:

1. You have an experience. You microteach a fragment of a lesson.
2. You reflect on your experience. You think about what went well, or not so well in the fragment of the lesson given.
3. You critically analyse the experience. You identify what it was that made the lesson good or bad. Was it the activity, your instructions, your subject knowledge, or something else?

4. You plan future actions based on what you have learnt. Once you've decided what the problem was, you make a plan to improve and then try the same activity again with another class. This may include creating a new plan or brushing up on your knowledge.

Each cycle of microteachings given by the trainee teachers, followed by group discussions focused on their reflection on what they had been through. The trainee teachers were prescribed to perform roles, which changed with every next microteaching. Those roles included: a trainee teacher conducting a lesson, trainee teachers wearing the hats of learners, two trainee teachers-observers. The researcher who is their Methodology teacher was the observer and the leader of group discussion sessions where participants reflected on their experiences according to the prescribed roles following the reflective practice model. They were presented with the memo containing questions to answer:

1. How did you feel?
2. What went well? Why?
3. What went not well? Why?
4. What would you change to improve a sequence of activities?

Results. To answer the 1st research question about the trainee teachers attitude to the suggested model of the reflective practice on microteaching a fragment of a lesson the participants were interviewed. 100% of them pointed out the importance of having such reflective practice. Trainee teachers' comments conducting microteaching included: "It helps to see a plan of a sequence of activities in a different light", "Now I can see the drawbacks of my planning" and "I know how to improve my lesson" and the like.

The analysis of the field notes made from answers of the trainee teachers to the question on how they feel about their microteaching in the 1st cycle demonstrated the participants' preoccupation exclusively with their personal feelings of being excited, nervous or unconfident. The reasons for such psychological state included: "It is my first experience of microteaching, so it is natural to get worried", "I could not get rid of the idea that everything I did was evaluated by my group mates and it made me feel excited" or "I was not sure whether I did everything right that's why I got nervous".

While answering this question no single trainee teacher connected it to the materials designed by them for microteaching, their choice of activities, subject knowledge or the way they instruct their learners.

The discussion of the things that went well, or not so well was arranged with reference to three different perspectives: 1) the trainee teacher who gave the lesson, 2) the trainee teachers as learners actually doing the activities and 3) the trainee teachers who observed the lesson. It was noticeable that the thoughts presented from the participants from groups 2 and 3 reflected the suggestions made by the trainee teacher who gave the lesson. The researcher accounts it by the fact that the participants were unwilling to criticise their peer assuming to back up a trainee teacher conducting a lesson in this way. At that stage it was important to make the participants notice the things that might be improved which were of diverse nature beginning with appropriateness of activities and the instructions to do them and ending with some issues of classroom management. That part of discussion supplied the participant with

the grounds to consider possible alterations for improving a plan as well as conducting a lesson.

Having analysed the data obtained during the 1st cycle it was concluded that there was a strong need in Cycle 2. It was decided to further support the participants through their reflective practice. In the first place the grounded rules were developed by the trainee teachers based on their previous experience which included giving constructive criticism on peer trainee teacher's microteaching and making suggestions for improvements on the student teacher's own terms keeping an open mind about his or her style and decision-making among other rules. Then the participants were given the check list to keep them focused during the reflective practice on their microteaching and enabling them to see precisely where they need to develop professionally. Finally, the participants were asked to write the reflective account on their learning through doing the assignment. The introduction of such supportive techniques was called to answer the second research question about the ways to support the trainee teachers' reflective practices on microteaching.

Discussion. Parallel to the answers given by the trainee teachers in Cycle I about the value they attach to the suggested model of the reflective practice on microteaching a fragment of a lesson the participants unanimously highly appreciated it in Cycle II. The analysis of the data gained in Cycle 1 showed a glaring discrepancy between what they think about the importance of such reflective practice and what they say while reflecting on their microteaching. Diagram 1 shows the shift in the focus of their reflection from personal to more professional realm.

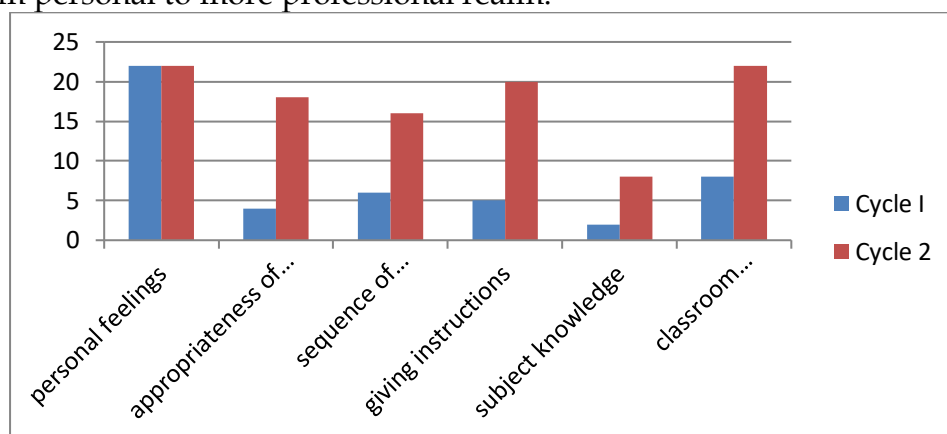


Diagram 1. The Issues in Focus of the Participants' Reflection.

In Cycle II the participants were still focused on their personal feelings as a starting point in their thinking over and interpreting what they did, the way they did it and why they did it the way they did, but more attention was focused on classroom management issues such as choosing and justifying modes of interaction, using grouping techniques, sitting arrangements etc. 20 participants (91%) in Cycle II analysed the way they gave instructions in contrast to 5 participants (23%) in Cycle I. The most urgent issues dealt with staging instructions and using the language appropriate to the learners' level. 18 participants (81%) referred to appropriateness of activities focusing mainly on the recurrence of vocabulary units or structures in Cycle II against only 4 participants (9%) in Cycle I. 16 participants (72%) commented on the sequence of the activities they prepared in comparison to 6 trainee teachers (27%) in Cycle I. Less attention was given to subject knowledge though the number of the participants addressing it in Cycle II raised from 2 (9%) up to 8 (36%). The general

tendency to evolve their reflection around the areas for development as a teacher increased from 23% in Cycle I to 76% in Cycle II.

To answer the 2nd research question the participants were asked to rank the ways they were supported through their reflective practice from the most to the less valuable ones. Diagram 2 shows the results of their ranking.

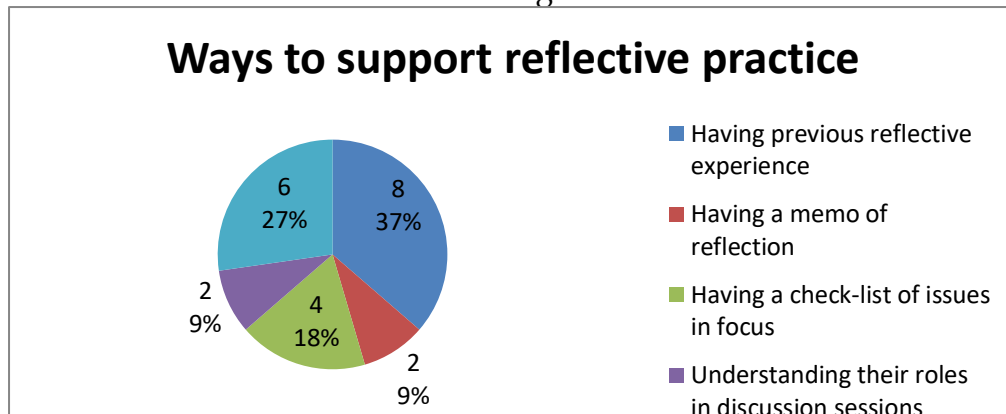


Diagram 2. The participants' evaluation of the ways they were supported in their reflective practice on microteaching

The diagram demonstrates the number of times each way to support the participants in their reflective practice on microteaching was evaluated as the most valuable one. Besides quantitative data the qualitative analysis of the data obtained via interviewing the trainee teachers and picking up information from their reflective reports was made. The participants appreciated their experience of reflective practice on microteaching based on the suggested model as they were knowledgeable about the entire procedure (37%). 27% of the respondents voted for writing a reflective account on the grounds that it was an excellent possibility to reconsider their microteaching experiences and estimate the suggestions for improvements made by other group mates. The 18% found having a check-list of issues in focus of reflection very helpful as it helped them to see clearly the areas they need to concentrate on in the first place. Indeed, the use of such check-lists at least at the beginning stage is justified and gradually might be eliminated. The trainee teachers did appreciate having a memo at hand that guides them through reflection as well as understanding their roles in the discussion sessions (2% per each way) but referred to them as to one-time event, meaning that it was sufficient enough to be introduced to them once but they "did not mind having the memo and ground rules on the posters in their classroom".

Conclusion. Becoming a reflective practitioner does not come along naturally as an inborn ability but reflective teachers can be trained. It is best done within a model of teacher preparation which represents a shift from the traditional approach to training language teachers always being more prescriptive in nature, to a more constructivist, experiential approach to preparing language teachers (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Wallace, 1991). As described in this article the trainee teachers of English at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University have already been exposed to different reflective practices and they are half way through their path from being language learners to becoming language teachers and more opportunities for developing their reflectivity await them including the last stage of their teaching practice - Observed teaching (Gembaruk, Panchenko, 2021) defense of qualification paper based on action research conducted by them during Observed teaching and Unit

on planning their continual professional development. This action research demonstrates the change the participants undergo in their ability to reflect on microteaching within two cycles. There are firm grounds according to the data obtained to state that being given the opportunity to reflect on microteaching, on their own learning through it, on what they observe in the language classroom on regular basis with the appropriate guidance and support will eventually result in becoming a truly reflective English teachers.

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