Learning About Teaching Foreign Languages Through Reflective Processes

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Introduction

This paper will refer to a research study on issues of professional development within a pre-service training programme in relation to the learning opportunities it offers. As I consider development, of any kind, to depend mainly on the individual ability to understand the learning processes one goes through, I focused on the individuals directly involved in and/or affected by the learning and teaching process, namely the trainees. It is assumed that teaching beliefs and attitudes are central to teaching behaviour, identifying them often becomes a starting point for teacher development programmes. I believe that more in-depth analysis of their beliefs and perceptions of the training could offer interesting insights into the learning strategies they apply and what they consider useful for their future professional development. A clear understanding of the trainees' needs could also assist in the design of alternatives for the existing courses.

Teachers' beliefs about themselves, about learning and its educational relevance and about learners, if consistent with their action, is vitally important for effective teaching. The literature brings evidence to support the hypothesis that teachers are influenced by their beliefs which are closely linked to their values, their views of the world and to their conceptions of their place within it (Williams and Burden, 1997). Beliefs determine how individuals organise and define tasks and problems and can be predictors of how teachers behave in the classroom. They influence the way teachers plan their lessons, the kind of decisions they make, and their general classroom practice. Teachers hold beliefs about their learners, about learning, about teaching and about themselves as individuals and professionals.

The study took place in a Romanian university, which offers pedagogical training to students who wish to become teachers of foreign languages. In the 3rd year, trainees studying English take a Methodology of Teaching English course. This course consists of two modules: theoretical and practical. Trainees are introduced to general principles of teaching EFL during the first semester, and attend teaching practice sessions during the second semester (observing a more experienced

teacher and peers, and teaching several lessons). These trainees hold firm and diverse beliefs about the teaching profession, based on their own schooling experiences long before they enter the classroom, and these persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. These beliefs prevent them from completely embracing the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn in order to become effective educators. As one of their co-trainers stated: *'In most cases, students keep in their minds the image of one of their teachers and they take it as a model. In my opinion, things have changed [...] and the teachers should reconsider their role and attitude. Accordingly, students willing to become teachers should have an idea about what being a teacher is like at present: the authoritative teacher has been replaced by the collaborative one; pupils themselves are different from what they used to be, so the mentor's role is to facilitate the adjustment of the student to the new background, to help him understand it and work on it'.*

In order to bring their beliefs to a conscious level, to articulate and examine their perceptions for a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers, trainees should be encouraged to examine through critical reflection, how the instruction they are receiving embodies what they are learning about teaching (Freeman and Richards, 1996). The study also analyses the opportunities of reflection trainee students have during the course because reflection outcomes can bring about changes in their perceptions and beliefs about teaching, as stated above.

The concept of reflection is seen as a facilitator for teacher professional development. It comprises any process that, in general, encourage an attitude of ongoing exploration and enquiry, that encourages awareness of the factors affecting teacher trainees' learning, choices made about the organisation of activities in the classroom, and the use of techniques and materials etc. The concept of reflective thinking and action adopted here is that employed by Dewey (1933) and Schon (1983): a tentative interpretation of given elements which comprises examination, exploration, introspection and analysis of all attainable considerations which will define and clarify the problem in hand (in Pollard, 2002). The perspectives of Dewey and Schön suggest that the term reflection can be used with three different meanings: (1) rational deliberative thought, drawing critically on diverse knowledge bases; (2) reframing, recasting problems to arrive at apt

solutions; (3) self-awareness, whether of one's own images of teachers, one's personal theories, or any current knowledge relevant to a new learning task. Subsequent work in reflective teacher education has recognised the need for self-awareness as a departure point for development (Schulman, 1988; Griffiths and Tann, 1992 in Roberts, 1998).

When referring to the function of reflection ('on what; and for what purpose'), the context particularly affects the way concept is constructed and used. In the context of the Romanian training programme the purpose of reflection was to uncover current routines and modes of thinking as they may influence professional development.

Methodology

The research study focused on the Methodology of Teaching course, in the 5th and 6th semester, when trainee students were introduced to general principles of teaching a particular foreign language and taught in schools. In the case of the 14 participants in this study, the pedagogical-content knowledge referred to English or German as foreign modern languages.

For the purpose of this paper, the study investigated the trainees' understanding of 'teaching' and professional development and their awareness of reflective processes in relation to their understanding of professional growth.

The sources informing this part of the study were three questionnaires given before the course started, at the end of the theoretical component and after the practicum, respectively. They were complemented by a final interview clarifying issues at the end of the course. Data from questionnaires and interview were prepared and coded for analysis. An inter-reliability test was performed by a second researcher.

Findings

Answers to the first questionnaire offered insights into students' understanding of 'teaching' and of their professional development.

Trainees' reasons for enrolling on the course referred to the acquisition of skills necessary for a good teaching practice. Some wanted to become efficient teachers, being driven by an intrinsic motivation. Others considered the training they would receive during the course as part of their future development as individuals, not necessarily related to teaching EFL. The trainees who chose teaching as a career option in the future had contrasting attitudes. Others did not consider themselves to be committed professionals, but regarded teaching as a temporary solution if having no other options after graduation. Other answers referred to a desire to improve their English language skills or to understand the process of a foreign language acquisition.

A very interesting set of answers focused on the low status of the teacher in Romanian society (*S5: I enrolled on this language teaching course because I want to find a reason for considering the teaching job other that low-paid, boring, distressing job.*').

The trainees' statements about their expectations came to complement their reasons for enrolling on the course. They revealed the aspects of their learning that they would like to improve or develop. The y expected to be taught about strategies and methods of language teaching that they could apply when entering the classroom. The idea of getting 'recipes' or 'tips' for teaching in different contexts was recurrent. Other trainees were hoping that by attending this course they would understand their preference for teaching, their own teaching or other teaching styles that they had experienced. They also expected that the course would offer them the confidence they needed in order to perform well in front of their students.

The trainees' answers about the characteristics of a good teacher offered more insights into trainees' understanding of professional development. They resulted in a complex portrait of a professional who needed to combine knowledge of the language he/she teaches and pedagogical content knowledge. Personal qualities such as patience and the ability to adapt to and understand any situation were regarded as a necessity when working with individuals of different ages. The most important of all was generally considered to be the enthusiasm and the passion a teacher brings into the profession without which he/she cannot enter the classroom. This characteristic was labelled as indispensable for a good teacher. It was interesting to notice the recurrent reference to some of the teachers they had in school whose lack of interest in teaching was

negatively characterized. A good teacher would also need to have management skills in order to organize the lessons, handle the students and keep them engaged, manage the time and the resources.

The trainees' answers about the types of knowledge they considered important for their future professional development were meant to reveal their awareness and their beliefs on the matter before any contact with English language teaching as trainees. Content knowledge was considered the most important for a teacher as they would teach content knowledge of English to their students. Pedagogical knowledge was seen as a compulsory requirement for all teachers who need to transfer the content knowledge to their students. Pedagogical-content knowledge was considered very important for the decisions made by teachers regarding the methods and strategies to be employed in the classroom when teaching a foreign language.

Knowledge of psychology was mentioned as important for two main reasons. First a teacher should adapt his/her teaching to the level of understanding of his/her students. Second, a good teacher would always be responsive and understanding to his/her students' needs. Knowledge of English was considered important as English is the language employed during the EFL classes, during which the teacher is seen as the source and the students as the receivers of information. Therefore the teacher should know the language very well in order to be able to transfer the information to his/her students and answer all their questions.

The trainees considered that lesson planning and preparation skills allow the teacher to structure the information to be delivered to students in order to reach their objectives efficiently. Lesson presentation skills were important in the trainees' opinion as teachers should present the information clearly and coherently to their students, adapting it to their level of understanding. They believed that language acquisition also depended on the way the information is structured and presented.

Materials design and selection skills became very important in the context of the great amount of information that needs to be filtered and adapted to the lesson aims by individual teachers.

Additional materials brought to the classroom were regarded as beneficial for the learning process.

Opinions on testing and evaluation skills were also expressed. They were among the most important skills that a teacher should have. Teachers must properly evaluate their students' level of knowledge acquisition in a way that is not perceived by the latter as stressful. This information could assist teachers in structuring their teaching according to their students' needs.

The second questionnaire revealed the trainees' understanding of 'teaching' and their professional development after attending the theoretical module of the course. Trainees considered the course to have responded to their expectations. They considered it useful for the teaching practice as they had learned how to plan a lesson and how to make a lesson successful (by being offered examples / suggestions of what to apply in practice, what methods/strategies to use), they had received information about classroom management, they discussed the factors that affect teaching.

Only a few trainees thought that the information provided was too general and that the practice of teaching was going to be different from the theory of teaching. The course also responded to their needs in terms of the knowledge provided. Pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical-content knowledge and knowledge of psychology of different age groups were previously mentioned by trainees as important for their professional development and key elements in 'good teaching'.

In the light of the information received during the course, trainees revealed that they had started reflecting on past school experiences, trying to put themselves in their teachers' shoes, observing them during the courses and making judgement about their teaching applying the knowledge they acquired. At the same time they tried to understand their vocation and the skills and knowledge involved in teaching, the difficulties of being a professional and the administrative issues related to teaching.

Trainees thought that reflection helps them to understand the complexity of teaching making them aware of weak points and assisting them in finding ways of improvement by continuous

exploration and enquiry, to understand other teachers' actions and their students' actions, to make the right decision regarding their teaching and adapt to different contexts. Unfortunately, the opportunities for reflection during the courses were limited to peer group discussions on a specific topic and to discussions in larger groups on teaching/ teaching experience. They also mentioned critical and productive conversations with a friend, colleague, family member etc concerning the information received and the way it can be applied in practice.

The questionnaire answered at the end of the practicum enquired about trainees' opinions on the usefulness of the theoretical information received during the course for the teaching practice in the second semester, and on their experiences during the observation and teaching sessions.

They declared that they found observing their co-trainers and peers teaching to be most useful, as they could see how real teaching situations are dealt with. The discussions that followed their observations helped them to prepare for their own teaching sessions as they discussed particular issues that they might face when teaching certain classes. The lesson planning stages which were taught theoretically during the first term could be used in practice during the second term. There were more discussions than in the first semester, with co-trainers and peers, although they mentioned that the time allocated was insufficient to cover all aspects concerned.

It is interesting to notice that the focus of their reflections changed to more specific areas, closely related to their actions in the classroom. When observing co-trainers and peers they started considering the reasons why some of the activities proposed were efficient or unsuccessful, the strategies they could employ to maintain pupils' interest, the methods that could work better with different age groups, or the kind of relationship that should exist between teacher and pupils. At the same time they started analysing their actions as teachers. They were worried about loosing face in front of the pupils, so they were concentrating on not making mistakes or avoiding them in the future, or preparing for different kinds of situations when they were trying to remember what other teachers they knew/saw/observed did in similar contexts. They stated that before they had experienced teaching for themselves, they had focused more on their own learning experiences, but after that they tried to regard the learning situations from their pupils' perspective. They had a better understanding of the reasons they why they had learned more with

some teachers and less with others during their school experiences. They could compare their own teaching experiences with the ones previously encountered, what they have seen during observation sessions as trainees with what they have experienced as pupils. They also considered their performance in the classroom and the possibility of taking on or giving up the teaching profession.

All trainees considered the positive aspects of the reflective processes they have been through. Although we do not comment on the depth of their reflections, we could affirm that they were triggered by 'crisis moments' when trainees needed to reconsider what they knew about teaching or they had to find solutions to issues they encountered while teaching. These 'crisis moments' were not mentioned during the previous stages of their training. They stated that by reflecting on all aspects of their teaching they could identify their mistakes and the weak points that need improvement, but also what they considered good practice, they could better understand themselves and others (both teachers and pupils) and could change their opinions on different issues. They associated reflection on action with a kind of analysis and interpretation.

Conclusion

It emerges from the literature that teacher trainees hold firm and diverse beliefs about the teaching profession, based on their own schooling experiences, long before they enter the classroom and these persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. These prevent them from embracing completely the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn in order to become effective educators (Kagan, 1992; Fajet et al., 2005). The challenge for the training programme referred to was to respond to the needs of trainees who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, which influence their teaching behaviour, and to enable them to reflect on them critically. But engaging in reflection about teaching or learning required that each of the trainees questioned what they had been taking for granted about what was happening in the classrooms, the origins of educational activities, and their consequences upon children and society, both in the immediate and longer-rage future.

The study presented in this paper offered insights into trainees' beliefs and perceptions about teaching during the training course. It was hypothesised that the way trainees perceived that courses responded to their needs and expectations could influence changes in their beliefs about teaching and could facilitate learning of new pedagogical concepts. It was expected that through reflection they could bring their beliefs to a conscious level. Articulating and examining their perceptions might contribute to a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers.

The course responded to most of the trainees' expectations in terms of theoretical information and its applicability in practice. Trainees considered reflection a useful tool for raising awareness of different aspects of the teaching process, but the actual journey of enquiry was made individually. Guided reflection was scarce in the first part of the course. It seemed that in this context the 'reflective practitioner' needed to be naturally inclined to in-depth analysis. Though the depth of the reflective processes they were engaged in depended on a practice of reflection they were not familiar with. During the practicum, a strong driver for reflection were the 'problem-solving' situations trainees were put in. Guidance was offered during the post-observation or teaching sessions when trainees discussed their concerns with co-trainers and/or peers.

Although a shift from general to more specific topics for reflection could be noticed, it cannot be affirmed that the training programme managed to offer the trainee students the necessary guidance for effective introspection and in-depth reflection, due to a lack of practice of reflection or of situations that could facilitate reflection.

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