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STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Research Article

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Abstract

The present study aims at engaging ELT student teachers in reflective teaching practice through the use of reflective diary during their school internship and finding out their perceptions about this reflective teaching practice that they were engaged in. The data were collected through the qualitative research instrument. After the student teachers were involved in reflective practice through the reflective tool, they were asked to keep reflective diaries during the twelve weeks school internship to learn their perceptions of reflective practice. The data obtained from the qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The results of the study put forward that the student teachers benefited much from the current study and were pleased with having participated in this reflective teaching practice by means of reflective diary. Engaging in reflective practice was found as an important opportunity for gaining awareness about teaching skills and practices, increasing self-evaluation and professional growth. The student teachers also stated that reflective diary use fostered the growth of reflective practice by encouraging them to engage in examining what was being done in the classroom. This process persuaded the individual to look for strengths and weaknesses and thus actively seek improvement in recognized areas. Though the growth of reflection and reflective practice, the student teachers used personal experiences and connection with classroom theory to grow and develop as professionals.

Keywords: Reflective teaching, reflective diary, self-evaluation, professional development.

1. Introduction

Language Teacher Education (LTE) has been perceived as fundamental in academic and non-academic researchers at different dimensions. As outlined in an ongoing survey (Borg, 2011), LTE has been portrayed by teacher knowledge base, teacher cognition, teacher knowledge of the language, teacher-researcher, teacher educator development, teacher reflective practice, novice teachers, teacher expertise, and the practicum. Accordingly, numerous studies have been made to consolidate the accompanying topics into the field's researching agenda around the world (e.g. Bigelow & Ranney, 2005; Farrell, 2011; Gebhard, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2014).

Along with this query, we study reflective practice, as one of the most widely promoted features in LTE literature (Kullman, 1998), by assessing the perceptions English teachers in Kazakhstan hold about reflection and the way how they use it in practice. The emphasis on the study of reflective practice in this paper is stimulated by the fact that reflection has proved to be an important instrument for professional development of teachers. In addition, studies state that reflective learning has a beneficial effect on teacher knowledge and attitudes (Kabilan, 2007).

Many studies have been conducted on reflection practice. The earliest scholar on reflection theory is John Dewey. Dewey (1910) was among the first to advance reflection as a way of professional development as in teaching. Dewey suggested that when teachers reason, speculate and reflect, using responsibility, sincerity, and open-mindedness, they will not base their actions on tradition, motivation, or others; rather, teachers will act with planning and foresight.

Schön (1983), expanding upon Dewey, proposed that one's capacity to reflect on actions is a defining feature of professional practice. In this way, Schön (1987), characterized reflection practice as a basic procedure in enhancing one's masterfulness or specialty in particular. Taking three ideal models of learning into consideration, Van Manen (1995) identified three levels of reflection as experimental diagnostic; hermeneutic-phenomenological, and basic persuasive. As indicated by this, the observational explanatory position is installed in a specialized instrumental comprehension of instruction and educational plan. Here, the accentuation is on viability, effectiveness, and efficiency. Thus, in teacher education, the focus is on enabling the teacher to "learn to apply a variety of techniques to the curriculum and the teaching-learning process, so that a predetermined set of objectives can be realized most efficiently and most effectively" (p. 210). For instance, Choy and Oo (2012) investigated reflective thinking and teaching practices. In this investigation, 60 participants responded to the survey to determine the level of their own pedagogical practice as their indicator of critical thinking. It was founded that most of the teachers did not reflect on their pedagogical practice. It seems that they have not used the four learning processes: contextual awareness, imaginative speculation, assumption analysis, and reflective incredulity which were indicative of reflection.

Fatemipour (2013) studied the efficiency of the tools used for reflective teaching in ESL contexts. 10 teachers and 234 students ESL in Iran participated in the study. Analyzing the results obtained from the data, the researcher concluded that the most productive reflective tool was the teacher diary. The correlation coefficient between the data obtained from this tool and the average value of all data is 0.84.

Azizah, Nurkamto, Drajati, and Tosriadi (2018) had the descriptive-qualitative method study in which the data were gained through survey and interview to an in-service EFL teacher of Junior High School in Indonesia. The aim of the study was to examine teacher's perceptions about the teacher's journals. The findings of the study revealed that the teacher's diary or teacher's journal has a great benefaction for the teacher of English to be more skilled and professionally prepared to teach. The contribution of this study might assist in raising awareness of student teachers of the significance of reflection in instructing English. In particular, it might be beneficial among student teachers in terms of professional development through thinking about those perspectives which are straightforwardly identified with efficient instructing.

2. The study

2.1. The Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study was to engage ELT student teachers in reflective teaching practice through the use of reflective diary during their school internship and finding out their perceptions about this reflective teaching practice that they were engaged in. In this study, the following research question was addressed:

What are the perceptions of ELT student teachers about the reflective practice they are engaged in through the use of reflective diary?

2.2. Participants

The study was conducted at the English Philology Department at Faculty of Philology, Khoja Ahkmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University, Kazakhstan. 35 (5 males and 30 females) fourth year ELT students were involved into the study. Mean age of the participants is 22.

2.3. Data Collection Instrument

In this study, the reflective diary was employed in order to explore and understand the topic that is studied. Writing a reflective diary is an ongoing process of keeping written records of teacher's thoughts, experience, and observations. Trop (1995) stated that diary writing is an explanatory can of writing that can help student teachers to mirror their attempt, distinguish their responsibilities, analyze choices, and develop an exceptionally customized sort of new information.

The participants in the study were asked to keep a regular reflective diary about a lesson that he taught. Through the use of a reflective diary, participants were engaged in reflective practice by looking back and thinking about their teaching experience. They were instructed to write diaries after each lesson they taught during a twelve-week period. More specifically, reflective diaries were used in the present study for the following purposes:

- To assist participants to critically reflect upon their teaching experiences, record reflections on what went good and what did not.
- To assist participants to rethink their teaching styles, beliefs, decisions.
- To assist participants to analyze their strengths and weaknesses.
- To assist participants to identify the effectiveness of their classroom materials and feelings about their teaching performance.

2.4. Data Analysis

The opinions of the participants were organized in accordance with emerging themes that were developed after an inductive approach as part of a thematic analysis of qualitative research. These themes are: teaching experience, the relationship between theory and practice, future training, constructive feedback, and classroom management. It should be noted that during the analysis all these topics turned out to be interconnected, and not a single category was independent of the other.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study stated that the participants perceived the reflection diary as a tool for teaching experience, theory-practice connection, future preparation, constructive feedback, and classroom management. Throughout the practice at school, the participants were involved in a variety of teaching-related experiences such as classroom observations and peer feedback. The analysis revealed that they stated that these experiences as effective and useful for their professional development. Overall, they expressed that they were exposed to a different teaching-related experiences, and they found these experiences relevant to their professional preparation in this course. It turned out that this course helped them to expand their training repertoire and prepare for the future. For example, the following excerpt is a good illustration of how participants expressed how reflective diary helped them in teaching experience.

(1). "The reflective diary writing helped me a lot to evaluate myself in details as a teacher. I could find out that the materials I am using are enough or not enough. I could take my time thinking about how I teach, what I should do and what I should not do. (P7)

(2). “[...] reflective diary writing helped because I evaluated myself, and the way of teaching step by step. I described what happened in the lesson and what the important points (P3)

(3). “reflective diary writing allowed me to revise my teaching methods [...] I could review my teaching methods and materials”. (P8)

The participants perceived the reflection diary as the theory-practice connection. They argue that participation in various experiences helped them to combine their knowledge of the instructional concepts with their experiences. This process was useful for their development. For example, in the following excerpts, participants emphasized that reflection practice they could combine theory and practice.

(4). “I feel I understand new ways to go, new methods to implement in language teaching. Reflective teaching practices showed me how to use theory in practice”.(P4)

(5). “I dealt with some issues more effectively. For instance, my two students had an argument during their presentation but due to my interference and advice, the matter as settled [...] I've become more tolerant and observant and I am using the theory which we taught in practice. (P6)

(6). “Seeing things clearly enabled me to improve my skills and methods. I reflected on the materials I applied when I encountered some events in the classroom. I saw how I handled the issues and how I should and how I shouldn't”. (P1).

The abovementioned extracts indicate that in the reflective practice, participants have been given the opportunity to apply their knowledge of teaching. At the same time, their self-knowledge has increased, and has contributed to the future teaching profession.

Along with it, the participants perceived reflection diary as a tool for future preparation. They regarded that engagement in various authentic experiences in this course helped them prepare for their profession. In other words, they perceived that these experiences represented their future experiences in teaching; therefore, they viewed the exposure to various teaching experiences as a way of preparation for the future. For example,

(7). “To my mind, keeping a diary is a great way of improving oneself. It helps a person become more disciplined and focused on what is happening around him. It also helps to build a strong character in a person especially when self-reflecting is a gateway to self-development. (P21)

(8). “In my point of view, reflective practice is a process which enables to achieve a better understanding of yourself. It is a way of studying your own experiences to improve the way you work”. (P11)

(9). “After writing the diary, I began to think about how effective I was and what to do to be more effective...It was an opportunity to strengthen myself [...] I questioned myself and that helped me improve my qualities”. (P33)

It also assesses the constructive feedback and has contributed to self-development. For example, some participants paid special attention to the impact of feedback from in-blog tutorials on their self-development. Some of the participants explained their comments during the daily writing. The pre-service teacher says that feedback is useful for her:

(10) "...because if I do not get feedback, I can not see my strengths and weaknesses and can not write effective journal"(P30).

(11) "Yes, I consider the feedback that I received in my journals were very productive. The teacher explains us that we don't only keep a journal to just to write our experiences that we get from both in-class discussions and in observations. ((P9)

In terms of feedback, pre-service teachers focused primarily on overcoming their weaknesses.

(12). "By using reflective diary, I could have the chance of seeing and correcting my mistakes". (P28)

(13). "Being engaged in a reflective practice, I found my strengths and weaknesses". (P17)

(14). "It is not always possible to realize what is going on during teaching, so with the help of diary I was able to see my weak sides". (T4-Reflection on keeping a diary)

This applies to the instructor and the peers. As for the study, the participants believe that they felt comfortable about writing the journal, and the reflection of their diaries has contributed to their own development. The participants focused on classroom management, and they elaborated on learners' misbehavior and how they were treated. Obviously, they placed importance on establishing control and discipline over the class. Participants were deeply concerned about the behavior of the class that they had noticed and explained the behavior of the students and their attitude towards the teacher and the lesson. In different situations, they explained that they did not have interest in the topic and were loud in the lessons they observed. The pupils reported that they did not pay enough attention to the subject and talked to their neighbors or that they were going through various reasons.

That is, the reflective practice through reflective diaries affected their self and professional development positively. All the participants mentioned that diary writing led to positive changes in their characters and behaviors, and teaching actions and skills. Hence, the participants emphasized that writing a reflective diary was a demanding and tiring process. The following excerpt is an example of this negative opinion:

(15) "First, thinking about diary was tired for me. I had to spend a lot of time. I had to make observations in the classrooms". (P15)

(16). "This is the most subjective way to evaluate your teaching process. Taking simple notes or just writing down your feelings about the class is a good way to remember [...], but still, it remains subjective because it mostly includes teachers' self-opinions and feelings". (P20)

Based on the two excerpts on the challenges of diary use above, it is significant to note that the participants in the current study always stated positive views on the use of reflective diary even when they were mentioning the challenges of engaging in reflective practice through the diary.

The results of the research showed the advantages of using different reflection practices in terms of professional development, improvement of teaching practice, classroom management and improvement of constructive feedback. Also, the literature suggests relevant results in reflection practice, and reflection practice implies many advantages that help teachers gain better insight into the practice of teaching. The results of the study are considered to be an important tool of thinking of past experiences and are similar to those of Choi and Oo (2012), Fatemipour (2013), Azizah, Nurkamto, Drajati and Tosriadi (2018) studies. This effect reflects the practical and living characteristics of diaries to make it easier to look when needed. Similarly, Rezaeyen and Nikopour (2013) pointed out that keeping a diary is considered as a way of presenting a record of the important learning and teaching events and going back to these recorded experiences later. Thus, the present study provided a positive effect of reflective diary on self-evaluation.

4. Conclusion and implications

This research is aimed at attracting students' teachers to reflective practice and their understanding of reflection practice through a reflection diary. This study enabled the use of reflexive experience effectively, taking into account its advantages. The results of this study are incorporated into contemporary literature emphasizing systematic and implementation of reflective practice to increase awareness of the reflection in teaching. This reflection method has allowed student teachers to learn about the diversity of reflective teaching.

Throughout this study, participants had the opportunity to participate in the systematic reflection. This enabled the participants to find out about the diversity of the reflective diary and the effectiveness of the tool that contributes to the teacher's development. That is, the research was a great opportunity to see students' different ways to effectively depict their actions, beliefs and feelings. Viewing and testing such reflective approaches or tools allowed the participants to understand that they can make changes in teaching through different ways of reflexive learning.

In the light of participants recognitions on the positive effects of reflective practice, present study offers certain implications for advancing other student teachers and teachers' reflective practices and professional development.

Firstly, self-reflective implementations could be considered as a component that may encourage learner autonomy (Arslan, 2018). Secondly, educational organizations may provide in-service opportunities to help student teachers and teachers become aware of the ways of being reflective. Finally, other reflective tools such as teaching portfolio (Khan and Begum, 2012) and European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (Yüce, 2019) can be introduced for further reflective practices.

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