

Collaborative Reflection: Vehicle for Professional Growth

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Abstract

This paper relates our own experience in working with our undergraduate students, who are studying to be teachers, in their teaching practice. It shows how these students can be involved in various reflective processes hopefully resulting in becoming increasingly aware of various theories of teaching and in the improvement and the development of their perspective of classroom practices. The framework within which we worked incorporated five criteria: observation, experiential practice, personal evaluation, group discussion, and comments by mentors. Problems in the implementation of this framework and possible solutions will be discussed.

Keywords: collaboration, reflection, observation, mentor, practicum.

Introduction

Girls' education in Saudi Arabia has expanded tremendously in the last 25 years. This expansion has created a need for pre-service education and teacher professional development programs resulting in the establishment of colleges of education throughout the country. These colleges were recently affiliated with various universities. A central aim of the colleges is to develop professional knowledge of pedagogical theories and methods. Such knowledge cannot be merely transmitted but achieved through practice and experience.

The college of education for girls in Almajmah is one of the many girls' colleges previously under the auspices of the Presidency of Girls' Education in Saudi Arabia and recently affiliated to Almajmah University. It is upgraded to offer a Bachelor of Education in 1994. It comprises eight departments: Islamic Studies, Arabic Language, Science, English, Home Economics, Mathematics, Computer Science and Education. English language is a compulsory subject in the first two years in all the departments and in all four years in the department of Arabic. This is not only because English is an international language but also because there is a particular need for English within the Saudi community. English is an important tool in the oil, banking and medical industries. Saudi Arabia is the largest oil export country. In addition English is used for communication and transactions in the business and medical industries. There is also a large community of speakers of other languages that use English as a *lingua franca*.

The English language department, which teaches a combination of linguistic, literary and educational subjects, provides the Almajmah province and surrounding towns and villages with primary and secondary English language teachers. ELT methodology and training are essential components of the English department.

This paper describes our own experience in working with our students in their teaching practice. It explores the actual processes involved in assisting these students on developing their potentials by embracing reflective processes hopefully resulting in highlighting potential problems and examining alternative means of overcoming them besides becoming increasingly aware of various theories of teaching and the development and improvement of their own classroom practices.

Practicum

The practicum includes a variety of activities. Students are required to observe teachers and peers in action, devise a lesson plan for teaching a specific activity, teach a class, reflect on their own teaching behavior and discuss their own and their peer teaching behavior in seminars. Below is a schedule for the practicum.

Table 1. Students' Participation during Practicum

	Phase	Week	Number of lessons	Activity	School
Third year class 2 nd semester	1	1	3-4	Observation	Junior secondary
		2-5	2-3	* Periodic teaching +observation	
		6-7	6-7	*Continuous teaching	
Fourth year class 1 st semester	2	8-13	3-4	Periodic teaching +observation	Senior secondary
		14-15	6-7	*Continuous teaching	

*Teaching once a week

*Teaching two weeks consecutively

The students start their practicum in the second semester of their third year (phase 1). The practicum during the first phase takes place at Junior Secondary level in government schools. The schools are usually selected in collaboration with the ministry of education regional office of girls' education and according to the availability of the classes required for practice. The students attend schools once a week in the first five weeks of the second term (phase 1). In the first week they observe 3-4 classes taught by class teachers. Following observation in a session specifically assigned for discussion, they discuss with their mentor what happened in each class. In weeks 2-5 of phase 1 students deliver lessons themselves and observe lessons taught by their peers which are followed by discussion.

Continuous teaching practice lasts for two weeks; however students do not spend all two weeks in schools. Depending on the school schedules, each student teaches a specific number of lessons and is assessed in two lessons.

Similar to phase 1, phase 2 is focuses on teaching, observation of peer teaching and discussion; however the teaching is performed at senior secondary schools.

Phase 2 concludes the practicum. For two weeks the students give lessons either to a particular class or different classes according to availability of English classes and they are assessed in two of these classes.

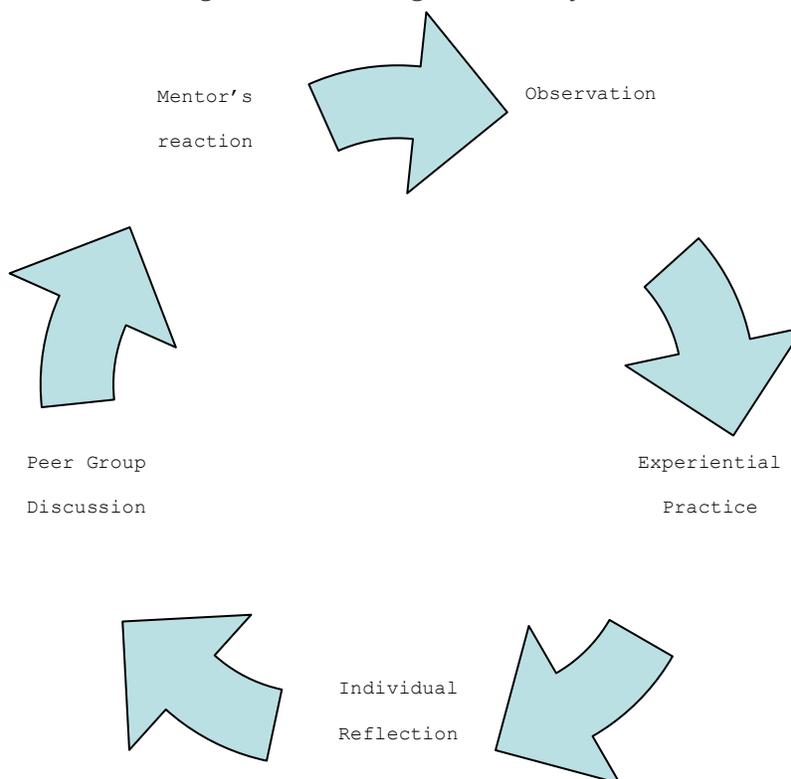
Models of teacher learning

Wallace (1993) outlines three main models of teacher learning: the craft model, the applied science model and the reflective model.

In the craft model learning occurs as a result of observation and imitation. The student observes professional actions of a model teacher and imitates them.

In the applied science model the students study theoretical courses and then apply them to classroom practice, whereas in the reflective model they observe or teach lessons and then reflect on their teaching either individually or in a group.

The teaching practice in our college adheres to the reflective model. Reflection however, was found to be unsuccessful in developing countries (O'Sullivan 2004) because learners are accustomed to being instructed by their teachers. To make our model as real as possible so as not to be swimming against the current we incorporated mentor's comments in our model. Our reflective model is represented by figure 1.

Figure 1: Teaching Practice Cycle**Observation**

One way that students can begin to acquire insight into the complexity of the foreign language classroom is through 'guided, systematic and focused observation' (Day, 1990, p. 43) of real classroom situations. Such a process will assist the students in:

1. developing a terminology for understanding and discussing the teaching process
2. developing an awareness of the principles and decision making that underlie effective teaching
3. distinguishing between effective and ineffective classroom practices
4. identifying techniques and practices student teachers can apply to their own teaching.

(Day, 1990, p. 43)

Day identifies two approaches to classroom observation: the qualitative approach and the quantitative approach. The qualitative approach is too broad and requires an overall view of the activities that take place in the foreign language classroom. Because a lot happens in the language classroom it would be difficult for students to grasp the whole activity and record events reliably and accurately. Students need to be highly trained in order to be able to perform a competent and reliable observation.

The quantitative approach on the other hand is based on completing a checklist. The checklist provides guidelines for effective observation. Checklists are simple to construct and use and they do not require extensive training. However, they may fail to capture all features of a class that

need to be observed. With this shortage in mind, we adhered to the quantitative approach in preparing our students for observation.

Preparation for observation

Following Nunan's (1990) previewing activity, the students were asked to generate a set of features they expect to observe in a language classroom. A summary of the aspects they came up with was put on the board. These are usually features they have discussed in their English language methodology classes 'and this reinforces the notion that observation is not value free but will reflect the beliefs and attitudes we have internalized through various means' (Nunan, 1990, p. 66).

Based on their methodology course, students nominated the following features:-

Use of blackboard	Elicitation techniques
Teaching aids	classroom management
Teacher's personality	Use of L1
Organization of the lesson	language accuracy and fluency
Evaluation	interaction
Time allotted	lesson variety
Error correction	methods used

The students looked at a previously designed checklist, compared it with their list, discussed items not included in their list and inquired about items they did not understand. Such a process makes them feel that they have participated in the construction of the checklist rather than the list being imposed on them. Providing them with a checklist of their make to fill is fruitful and may assist in discovering things about their skills and abilities as well as areas of weakness as they are compelled to fill the list. The checklist affords the students the opportunity to focus their observation and later assist in evaluating 'their performance against clear criteria such that they are measuring their progress against targets which are self-identified' (Stefani, 2004, p.164).

This checklist is then used for observing language classes and evaluating students' performance at the end of the practicum. The purpose of this practice is to sensitize students to various aspects of the language classroom, familiarize them with the observational tool they are to use and stimulate discussion on internalized theoretical issues. By participating in discussing aspects for observation and evaluation we hope to develop the ability to describe classroom activities and peers' behavior, and identify techniques students can apply to their own teaching.

Observing classroom teachers

During this stage of observation the students equipped with their checklist attend classes (table1, phase1, week1) on real time taught by the class teachers and take notes. On a session following the classes they discuss with their mentor the various classroom behaviors they have coded and whenever possible relate them to theoretical issues. In this way they can identify techniques they can employ in their own teaching. Moreover, they will be able to comprehend what happens in the classroom and relate it to what they have studied in their methodology class.

Observing peers

Students observe each other when doing their teaching practice on preparation for reflection. The purpose of this activity is to enable students to compare and contrast what their peers do to what they themselves do when they are in their shoes and to bring to their attention techniques of which they might not be aware. Observation of peers provides ground for reflection.

Drawback of checklist

To catch most of the activities that go on in the language classroom we adopted a long checklist. Although the students were familiar with the aspects in the checklist, its length hindered their ability to pursue the numerous items. One way of overcoming this is to devise various checklists each dealing with a specific behavior in the foreign language classroom e.g., error correction, classroom management etc. The whole group of students can look at one classroom phenomenon or they can be divided into smaller groups each observing a specific behavior.

Experiential practice

There are two main periods for the execution of teaching, the periodic and the continuous periods. In the periodic teaching experience each student has an opportunity to teach between 3-5 classes while in the continuous teaching practice each one teaches 10-12 classes.

During the periodic teaching practice prior to the implementation of each individual lesson the students prepare their lesson plans and discuss them in a meeting with their mentors. This is intended to afford students with an opportunity to focus attention on problematic areas and means of overcoming them. During the presentation of the lessons their peers and mentors observe them using the checklist. Usually at the beginning of the practice the students were nervous and lacked self-confidence. This gradually disappeared as they observed, discussed and presented lessons.

Reflection

Although a great number of educators agree on the advantages of the use of reflection to promote teacher development, there is no consensus on the definition of reflection (Hatton and Smith, 1995). For the purpose of our training we adhered to Farrell (2001) who defined reflection as means used by to-be-teachers to consider the methods they use, why they use it and whether using it will effect change.

Modes of reflection

Subsequent to observation and experiential practice we have a seminar session of 60 minutes in which students reflect on their actions verbally. The importance of such sessions is that they provide chances for students to talk about their teaching and to discuss their experiential practice. Such settings afford students opportunities to ask questions about teaching problems and get responses to their questions, which will help them gain new insights (Gebhard 1990). Discussion also provides alternative possibilities that can be adopted. Reflecting on their actions will hopefully lead to a change of behavior.

We followed two modes of reflection individual reflection and peer group discussion.

Individual reflection

Individual reflection affords students chances to talk about their teaching to increase self-knowledge (Gebhard 1990). Students are invited to talk about their own teaching experience. They are encouraged to identify the positive and negative aspects of their lessons. By considering their lessons 'in light of positive and negative values' they 'begin to evolve personal standards and goals for future teaching in the practicum and beyond'. (Paddington, 1990, p. 144) They reflect upon factors that influence their behavior during lesson implementation and in so doing, they reveal their own perceptions and beliefs (Hatton and Smith 1995). For example one student stated her negative views on pair work. This brought up a lively discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of pair work, when to use it and for what purpose. However, most of the time students were reluctant to voice their views either because they lack confidence or are not aware of or embarrassed by their shortcomings.

Peer group discussion

Peer group discussion affords students opportunities to talk about their peers' teaching. Subsequent to observation of their peers' lessons students discuss the teaching behavior according to their coded observation checklist. 'Through this process they have the chance to relate their experiences to those of others, to gain awareness of possible teaching behaviors, and to consider their own teaching decisions' (Gebhard et. al.,1990, p. 22).

Discussion can provide ground for problem solving in which students 'share ideas about how to solve a problem and work together in a decision making process' (Gebhard 1990:23). For example, in one of our practicum seminars, one student indicated her difficulty in making students understand her instructions and appealed for a solution for her problem. The lesson was taught to 1st year junior secondary students who were in their 3rd month of encountering English as a foreign language for the first time. The following are some of the suggestions from the group:

- Repeat the instruction
- Rephrase the wording of the instruction
- Simplify your language
- Give the instruction in Arabic

This last suggestion raised a 'hubbub' of pros and cons on using L1 in the English language classroom and I had to intervene to bring it to an end. Paradoxically, the discussion was carried out in Arabic. I guess they were too eager and excited to defend their views.

Obstacles associated with reflection

There are a number of problems that impede the attainment of reflection.

Time limitation imposes constraints on acquiring the reflective skills needed for development. We noticed that developing reflection appears to take an extended period for our students. The time allotted for our sessions (60 minutes per week) seems inadequate for developing reflective teaching techniques.

Feelings of vulnerability: Such feelings result from exposing one's ideas to others that may reveal weaknesses through reflection and may cause students to be defensive.

Social inhibition: Students are reluctant to talk about their teaching. They indicate that they have no comment on their lessons or their peers' lessons or they just say 'the lesson was good' or just keep silent. Their social upbringing inhibits them from making comments especially if they tend to uncover weaknesses. Admitting incompetence doesn't come easy to some people. It is blocked by a sense of embarrassment or inhibition, a fear of being scrutinized by others, or a sense of friendship towards some of their peers.

Collaborative reflection

To overcome these problems and facilitate reflection we attempted collaborative reflection within which students can discuss together as 'critical friends' (Farrell 1998). For example;

- observe a number of classes prior to discussion to eliminate judgment and focus on description of language aspects.
- whole class discussion to identify behavior(s) that needs modification highlighting the activity rather than the person performing it.
- divide class into groups of 3 and ask them to discuss why a specific behavior needs to be changed and what are the ways by which change can be effected
- whole class discussion of ideas generated during small group collaborative reflection.

In an out of class assignment the students were advised to reflect on their own teaching behavior and write how they behaved during their lessons. Based on the results of the group discussion and collaborative reflection they were asked to record how this behavior could be altered to produce more efficient teaching. Hopefully their reflection will result in a change of undesirable behavior in their subsequent classes. This process will also afford students opportunity to compare their current experience with their previous ones and detect where modification occurs. Journal writing is believed to be an effective method of reflection. It provides a platform for promoting effective reflection (Baily 1990, Ho and Richards 1993, McDonogh 1994, Hyatt and Beigy 1999, Brock, Yu and Wong 1992). Incorporated with peer reflection, it provides ground for identification of situations that are 'puzzling, troubling and uncertain' (Schon, 1983, p. 40). Nevertheless, our students stood short of performing this activity complaining that it is time consuming. This is in accordance with Cornford (2002) who stated that writing journals is 'time consuming and not resulting in substantial insights' (p. 225).

Mentor's role

The main role of the mentor is to train to effect change. The literature gives us different modes of fostering change in teachers by helping them to teach more efficiently. Freeman (1990) identified three modes of offering such assistance; directive, alternative and non-directive

Directive mode

In the directive mode the mentor takes an authoritative role. She\he comments on the students' lessons, directs and informs students of proposed changes. She\he even sometimes provides an example to be followed which is based on her\his views of what constitutes effective teaching. The role of the students is to effect change by implementing the mentor's directions. The problem with the directive mode is that it 'may give rise to feelings of defensiveness and low self-esteem on the part of the (student) teacher' (Gebhard, 1990, p. 156).

Alternative mode

In this mode the mentor proposes 3 or 4 alternatives to the point under scrutiny and the student chooses from among the alternatives. Discussion of the reasons for the selection of a particular alternative then follows.

Non-directive mode

The student finds solutions to teaching problems herself without direction from the mentor. The role of the mentor is 'to provide the student teacher with a forum to clarify perceptions of what he or she is doing' (Freeman, 1990, p. 112). The mentor points out some of the things that occurred in the lessons and the student is free to express and clarify ideas and decide how to act. The mentor refrains from making suggestions, giving examples or proposing solutions but shows understanding and responds with paraphrasing the student's words (Freeman, 1990).

We used an eclectic method comprising elements of the directive and the alternative modes. Our students are under training and they expect the mentor to voice her views on teaching techniques. They expect to be assisted to acquire various teaching techniques and to be empowered to develop and improve their way of teaching. They may not think highly of their mentor if she stopped short of directing them. Hence the role of the mentor is:

To provide information by giving it herself, by advising on other relevant sources, by eliciting it from the students themselves during the reflection sessions and/or encourage students through question and answer technique to express their thoughts and present their own new ideas.

Conclusion

The purpose of the practicum is to empower students with pedagogical techniques that enable them to teach more efficiently. Structured observation, individual reflection, peer group discussion, collaborative and written reflection, and mentor's comments are means of effecting change. They help students comprehend and appreciate what transpires in the language classroom and they assist them in developing techniques for handling their own classes. However, care must be taken to empower students with clear criteria that enable them to evaluate their performance. Hoover (1994) cautioned that reflection requires time and opportunity and Cornford (2002) argues that such programs like ours lack sufficient 'practice and feedback to ensure long-term skill retention and effective performance' (p. 223). Hence, our course needs to be restructured to provide enough time for the practicum to develop students' awareness and empower them with different means of effective reflection that assist them not only in their practicum but also in their later teaching.

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