

Developing reflective practice in distance teacher education programs

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ABSTRACT

Among the many challenges that teacher education programs face is fostering reflective practice in the future teachers. The difficulty is increased in distance education programs where face-to-face contact between students and teachers is missing. This paper presents the results of an analysis of the perceptions of reflective teaching, tools for reflection, and self-evaluation of reflective practices from in-service teachers enrolled in the distance BA and MA in English language teaching at the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico. Although subjects were able to describe reflective practice and its importance, they recognized that these practices are usually limited to activities undertaken as students, and once the course requirements have been completed, they were no longer practiced.

Key words: Reflective practice, distance education, in-service teachers

INTRODUCCION

The BA in English language teaching is a 4-5 year distance education program offered by the Faculty of Languages of the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico, specifically targeting those English language teachers who have experience as teachers (and are, in fact, in-service teachers at the time of admission to the program) but who have not had the opportunity to formally accredit their knowledge, or become educated in the theoretical foundations of teaching. As such, the students are usually older than the regular, face-to-face students, and because of their unique situation of being teachers already, have a different set of experiences and beliefs than those recent high-school (prepa) graduates who enter the Faculty of Languages.

The desired entrance profile stated in the Curriculum (Curriculum LEI, 2004) mentions that entering candidates should possess “skills and aptitudes which reflect an advanced cognitive capacity for analysis and synthesis, as well as being able to compare and contrast and **reflect.**” (authors’ translation).

When students graduate, they will possess “the necessary skills to function as an English language teacher in all levels of education; design, produce and evaluate teaching programs and materials. These skills depend on the capability for analysis and **reflection**, critical analysis of their own learning processes as well as those of individuals and groups, both within and outside of formal education systems, as well as the analysis of materials and assessment systems.” (Curriculum LEI, 2004 – authors’ translation).

Two different groups of distance students participated in this study. One group of students were enrolled in Reflective Teaching, a mandatory core subject in the BA, usually taken in the 5th semester. At the time of the study the Faculty of Languages also offered a Master’s program for English Language Teaching (MEI – Maestría en Enseñanza del Inglés), also a distance education program with a similar requirement of being an in-service English teacher upon admission. The topic of reflective teaching is covered in the mandatory second semester course of **Developing Teaching skills**. The other subjects in the study were enrolled in this course. (N.B. The MEI program has since been discontinued.)

JUSTIFICATION

Describing the reflective process and its impact on professional performance has been the focus of many studies and articles ever since Dewey (1933) raised awareness of the topic almost a century ago. Several authors (Leong Yoke Chu, 2008; Peacock, 2009; Tunzar & Özacan, 2018, Vélez-Rendón, 2002) recognize training in reflective skills as an important part of quality in teacher education programs, and that the reflection need not always be simply on the specific teaching methods, but can also focus on exploring their own beliefs and attitudes toward teaching, striving to have the teachers identify why they teach in a certain way. Peacock (2009) lists fifteen different criteria to determine the quality of teacher education programs, and three of these refer to reflective skills.

Reference to reflective processes form the basis for many education programs, and the BA program in English language teaching of the University of the State of Mexico is no exception. The curricula of both programs (LEI and MEI) specifically identify a reflexive model for teacher education, based on Wallace’s model of reflexive teaching (Wallace, 1991) (Curriculum LEI, 2004), and each of the course objectives descriptions includes reference to “being reflective”. The MEI curriculum specifically states that the focus of the program is “constant reflexive

practice” (Curriculum MEI, 2013), which leads the students to seek an understanding of the teaching-learning processes in their classroom, identifying learning as the construction of personal meaning.

In the light of the importance of reflection as a professional practice, and the programs’ stated core emphasis on reflection, it was determined that an analysis of students’ perception of reflection and their own reflective practice would provide important information for the further development of reflective practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflective practice for teachers is important for many reasons. To begin with, the teaching-learning process is a very complex one. We sometimes use the phrase learning-teaching as if it were one and the same thing. Although it is true that when one becomes a teacher one has had much more experience learning, it is not enough to prepare one for teaching. Experience is not actual learning. Reflection on the learning process is needed to begin with, and when one begins to teach, reflection on the teaching process is required to continue learning from experience.

Teaching requires much decision making – some of it prior to the actual teaching, some of it while teaching, and much after the teaching has taken place. Reflecting on what is done, and especially why it is done is the basis of professional judgements (Ashwin, et al. 2015, Schön, 1993). Reflection is the basis for professional development, hopefully leading to better quality in education and better learning in students.

One would be hard-pressed indeed to find counter arguments to developing skill for reflection in any profession. The very word “reflect” carries a strong positive cognitive and ethical value – who would confess to not wanting to reflect on their actions? However, when we look at the importance of being reflective in the area of education the different interpretations of reflection can cause some problems.

For some people it might mean just thinking about something, perhaps an activity that takes place in the car when commuting home from work but goes no further than that. For others it implies a

well-structured process that progresses from an initial experience through different stages until an alternative plan is finally reached (Gibbs, 1988, in Scales 2012).

In Dewey's initial writings on the topic (1933) emphasis is placed on the difference between simple (idle in his words) thinking, and actual reflective thought. For him, reflective thinking is not a simple random sequence of ideas that go through one's head but thinking that follows a reasoned sequence. Reflective thinking begins with a state of doubt or confusion (perplexity) and continues to seek evidenced that will serve to either confirm or negate the belief.

There is a danger in seeing only the theoretical aspect of university education as the most important. In many professions, teaching as well, the importance of developing reflective skills helps future teachers turn these theoretical bases into starting point for self-evaluation and eventual action and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Theory is an important starting point, but just as experience alone is not sufficient for learning, mastering theory does not guarantee successful application of the principles in a teacher's daily practice. The teaching experience of the in-service teachers in the LEI program is thought to provide them with varying ways to address things that happen in the classroom, but it can only be through reflecting on the experience that one can identify the different beliefs and principles that are at work, and have the opportunity to weight those beliefs and principles as to their effectiveness and accuracy. (Lougran, 2002).

For a reflective model to be effective, the student-teachers need to learn both the theoretical bases for teaching and develop reflective skills that will allow them to connect the theory and their current practice. (Vélez-Rendón, 2002). And, as Zeichner and Liston (1996, in Vélez-Rendón, 2002) mention, in order for it to really be reflective teaching, there need to be opportunities to consider the implications of beliefs, experiences, attitudes etc. and situate these in the context where the teacher is working.

As Dewey says, through reflective thinking we can get away from simple routine action and enter into reflective action (Dewey, 1933).

METHODOLOGY

The Faculty of Languages is a part of the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico, a public institution of higher education. The Faculty offers two separate undergraduate degree programs. One, BA in Languages, is a face-to-face, five-year program, in which students choose to specialize in either English or French, and then subspecialize in either teaching or translation. The BA in English Language Teaching is offered as a distance program which can cover between 4-5 years' time, and is meant for students who are currently working as English teachers, but have not obtained any type of university degree in that area. The Faculty currently offers a face-to-face Master's in Applied Linguistics program, but at the time the study began there was also a distance program, Master's in English Language Teaching.

As all of the programs at the Faculty of Languages center around a reflective model of teacher education, so identifying the in-service teachers', in both the undergraduate and master's programs, understanding of the role of reflection, and how they classified themselves as reflective teachers was considered a necessary first step in any restructuring of the programs.

During both semesters (Spring and Fall) of 2018 the Facultad de Lenguas of the UAEMex carried out an exploratory analysis of the development of the concept of reflective practice in students enrolled two different distance education courses: 17 students enrolled in Reflective Teaching, a required course undergraduate program and 6 students from the Master's program. Students in both programs are in-service English language teachers. Both levels are included in the study.

Students in the Reflective Teaching course (the undergraduate level) were asked to define reflective teaching, identify different strategies or tools that could be used to help the teacher reflect, and then analyze their own teaching practice to see if any of these strategies were used.

Students in the Teaching Skills course (the MA level) were asked to develop a paper on their understanding of reflective practice and relate it to their own practice.

In order to identify the students' understanding of the role of reflection in their own teaching practice, essays from the regular course tasks were analyzed to identify their level of reflexivity, according to the typology of Jay and Johnson (2002).

Jay and Johnson's levels start with a **Descriptive** level, where the teacher simply describes what has happened. Here the teacher answers the questions "what is happening? Is this working? How am I feeling? What am I pleased and/or concerned about" (Jay & Johnson, 2002).

The next higher level is **Comparative**. It is at this level that the teacher can make comparisons between what they are doing and what is mentioned in the research, or what other teachers do. The questions answered at this level are: "What are alternative views of what is happening? How do other people ... describe and explain what's happening? How do other people accomplish this goal?" (Jay & Johnson, 2002).

The final level in this typology is when **critical** reflection takes place. Here the teacher can analyze the experience in light of alternatives and use that analysis to either confirm or modify their own perspectives on teaching.

Van Manen's (1977, in Scales, 2012) levels go from the lowest, technical reflection to critical reflection. At the technical reflection level, the teacher focuses on whether or not the pre-determined goals were achieved or not, and what was necessary to achieve them. At a slightly higher level, practical reflection, the underlying rationale and outcomes are also analyzed, examined and assessed. The highest level, critical reflection, adds the moral and ethical considerations related to the problem, going deeper than just a descriptive level.

The competency statements from the Cambridge English Teaching Framework (2014) were also used for students to identify their levels of professional development.

INITIAL RESULTS

Most of the undergraduate students were able to identify the strategies and tools for reflection after the course but did not feel they had been aware of them before, nor were they commonly incorporated into their daily teaching practice. A few cited aspects of their practice that they felt required reflecting upon,

A general overview of the comments from the MEI students shows that they are very aware of what reflective practice is and the benefits that can be gleaned from being a reflective teacher. Nevertheless, in spite of several years of teaching experience, the majority placed themselves at

Van Manen's incidental level of reflection, similar to Jay and Johnson's descriptive level. They are very capable of describing and defining reflexive teaching, and are familiar with several reflection techniques (journals, recordings, action-research). However, almost all of them coincided in recognizing that they learned and used these techniques while enrolled in a specific course or certification program (such as ISELT), but that in spite of recognizing the usefulness of them they no longer continued with them once the course had finished and they were back in their teaching context.

In analyzing their teaching competences (with reference to the Cambridge English Teaching Framework, 2014), and despite what might be expected from experienced teachers, they placed themselves between the **Developing** and **Proficient** level in all 5 categories, with some going as low as the **Foundation** level. None of them considered their competencies as Expert.

Some of the comments to the question of *what you understand as reflective teaching* were:

"I would say that I have been an "unconscious teacher" because just after revising literature about reflective practice is when I realized that I have carried out this process intuitively during my teaching practice."

"(It is) ... looking at your practice from a critical approach where you identify your strengths and opportunity areas to improve your teaching practice. This metacognitive process is important because it enables you to make changes."

"Reflective practice is a process where attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, teaching and learning practice, classroom management, as well as teaching methodology, resources, materials, values opportunities and constraints are taking into account to evaluate, judge, assess, and improve the learning-teaching phenomenon."

"Reflective practice contributes to the training of better teaching practices however it is often overlooked; therefore, it is crucial to raise teacher's awareness about its importance and the impact reflective practice has on professional development."

When asked to comment on whether they practiced reflective teaching the answers were as follows:

"...unfortunately, since I graduated I stopped using them, the main reason is because I do not have to time after class to do any of them. Back in college I used to fill a sheet of paper for every class I taught."

“Doing reflection formally it is not common. I mean, I have just done short reflections at the end of the lesson planning just in terms of “observations”. It is more a personal exercise of personal reflection.”

“Even though all of us have used these techniques in college, very few of us practice reflective practice in our current practice. When we practice any of the techniques is because we are told to do so by our authorities or because we are taking part in action research as part of a master’s degree. “

“I have also to admit that I have done it as a task in a teaching training course; never as a regular practice.”

“Personally, I consider reflective practice as a crucial opportunity to have a professional growth, especially to make visible the invisible of my teaching.” – This same student makes no mention of any of the techniques that he has ever used.

Although the characteristics of and techniques for reflective practice in the courses in this study were clearly associated with professional practice, it was not sufficient to develop in the students the levels of reflection described by authors such as Van Manen (1998) and Jay and Johnson (2002). Thus, we suppose that the topics analyzed in these courses do not extend to the daily teaching practice, as there was no evidence of students espousing them in their professional practice.

COMMENTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A quick search for papers on reflective teaching, reflective practice, basically anything with the word reflection in it, produces a huge number of papers reporting studies that have been carried out in the past decade all over the world. Information on reflective practice in Mexico, however, is surprisingly limited. It is hoped that this study will lead to greater understanding of the challenges that English language teachers face in becoming reflective practitioners.

This preliminary study was undertaken as part of the self-evaluation exercise which is a necessary step in any restructuring process, and which both programs (LEI and MEI) were at the time preparing for. Unfortunately, the initial self-evaluation of the MEI program indicated that it was no longer viable for the Faculty to continue to offer it, and efforts were shifted to the restructuring of the face-to-face Master’s in Applied Linguistics program.

The BA in English Language Teaching is still undergoing the self-evaluation process and faces major changes in its structure and curricular content. The core beliefs based on reflective teaching, however, continue to be the guiding principles in this process.

One aspect that has been identified as needing strengthening is that of developing skills in reflection. Although all of the courses in the current curriculum specifically state in their objectives that the content of each will include a process of “reflecting on the experience”, it was found that the student-teachers.

This study emphasizes the premise that teaching without reflecting on the process does not allow the teacher to grow as a professional, nor be prepared to face the challenges that education in the twenty-first century present.

The next step in the process is to identify the reflective teaching practices and strategies of the staff of the LEI program, and how these practices are perceived by the students. This is currently being developed.

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