



World Conference on Educational Sciences 2009

Reflective practices of preservice teachers in a listening skill course in an ELT department

Demet Yayli*

English Language Teaching Department, Faculty of Education, Pamukkale University, Kinikli, 20070, Denizli, Turkey

Received October 25, 2008; revised December 18, 2008; accepted January 4, 2009

Abstract

This study explores both the types of reflection in the reflective journals written by 62 preservice teachers of an English Language Teaching Department of a University in Turkey and their opinions on their engagement with reflective journal writing. The findings of the present study indicate that the preservice teachers developed a positive attitude toward journal writing and using it in their future teaching but in their journal entries they failed to include dialogic or critical reflection. Explicit instruction and collaborative engagement with dialogic writing may contribute to enhancement of more dialogic and critical thinking.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Keywords: Reflection; reflective journal; critical thinking; listening; English Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

Tracing the works of Vygotsky (1978), constructivist principles state that learning is mainly a social activity and learners create their own learning through gaining access to their experiences and beliefs. In order to better understand teacher learning and teaching education, teacher research movement (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1998) highlights the importance of school-based inquiries to analyze teachers' development in the social contexts which give shape to that learning. The concerns on how inservice and preservice teachers develop themselves professionally in their own contexts, how they shape and monitor their experiences necessitate reflection (Dewey, 1933) to be fostered in teacher education programs.

Learners need to activate the previous knowledge to be guided towards the construction of new knowledge. In order to achieve this transfer and to solve any problems encountered in teaching, teachers need to be engaged in reflective action (Schön, 1983, 1987). Reflective approach to teaching requires teachers and student teachers to question the goals and values that guide their work, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 532 762 1877; fax: +90 258 296 1200.

E-mail address: demety@pau.edu.tr

practices, and use the information gathered as a basis for critical reflection about teaching (Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

In critical reflection, an experience is recalled, considered and evaluated as a way of bringing change; and thus, teachers take control of their own learning as an ongoing feature of the classroom rather than an occasional experience (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Richards, 1990; Short & Kauffman, 1994). The acts of looking objectively at teaching and reflecting critically on experiences could be achieved through such sources as reflective journals, learning logs, lesson reports, autobiographies, collaborative diary keeping, audio and video recording, teacher narratives, portfolios, observation and action research (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Each could help teachers develop a better understanding of themselves as teachers and of how they develop themselves in their own teaching/learning contexts.

In journal writing, teachers and student teachers write the events and ideas encountered and this writing process is believed to trigger a discovery process (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Basically, entries are made on a regular basis, and reviewing these entries is expected to lead journal writers to examine their learning and teaching. Since Hatton and Smith (1995) felt that there was a lack of appropriate and adequate definition of the term critical reflection, they designed their study to investigate the nature of reflection, to define specific types of reflection and to evaluate the strategies in terms of the degree to which they facilitated particular types of reflection. Their analysis resulted in the identification of four types of writing three of which are reflective (i.e., descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection and critical reflection).

Reflection, critical reflection and the use of reflective journals have commonly appeared in teacher education literature (Atay, 2008; Brownlee, Prudie & Boulton-Lewis, 2001; Canning, 1991; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Kocaoglu, Akyl & Ercetin, 2008; Lee & Loughran, 2000; O'Donoghue & Brooker, 1996; Posner, 2000; Yost & Sentner, 2000) but most of the studies involve participants who are engaged with reflective writing (reflective journals, portfolios or preservice teacher narratives) during their practicum courses. However, students of teacher education programs in Turkey gain their practicum experience in the last two semesters of their four-year education. They are required to teach only in the last semester as prescribed by the Higher Education Council (HEC, 1998). Since teacher education programs in Turkey include several other content courses than practicum, and practicum is provided in the last two semesters of their education, preservice teachers' active engagement with reflective practice in other courses should also be provided. Therefore, if preservice teachers might experience reflective writing long before their practicum course, this in turn may support more critical thinking in their following experiences. In line with this thinking, the present study aims at providing descriptive evidence on both freshmen level preservice teachers' reflective skills shown in their reflective journals which were collected as a course requirement in a skill-based course and on their opinions about reflective journal writing.

2. The study

2.1. The method

This study was carried out in an English Language Teaching (ELT) Department of a public university in Turkey, where ELT program is one of the programs offered in Faculties of Education (HEC). Like other programs, it follows a standardized, nationwide curriculum prescribed by the HEC (Cakiroglu & Cakiroglu, 2003). On the freshmen level, the student teachers of an ELT department are supposed to take several skill-based courses one of which is Listening and Pronunciation which requires students to listen to and analyze authentic materials and speech samples to be able to develop higher level listening skills and strategies (HEC). The data for the present study were collected from reflective journals written by two cohorts of 31 freshmen enrolled in the Listening and Pronunciation course. Firstly, these preservice teachers received some training on the importance of reflection and on how to reflect their ideas about themselves, their peers, the classroom activities and their instructor who is the researcher as well. Secondly, they were asked to keep reflective journals as a course requirement which formed 50% of the participants' midterm grade. Finally, the participants answered a survey questionnaire which included open-ended questions so that I was able to gather some of their opinions on their engagement with reflective journal writing.

Drawing on Hatton and Smith's (1995) seminal work on the definition and types of reflection, I analyzed the entries in the reflective journals and coded them according to the four types of reflection offered, namely: (i)

descriptive writing (description of events or literature – not reflective); (ii) descriptive reflection (description of events with reasons based on personal judgments); (iii) dialogic reflection (a type of discourse with the self in the exploration of events and experiences by drawing on possible alternatives); and (iv) critical reflection (the awareness that actions and events are located in and influenced by multiple historical and socio-political contexts). I carried out the coding; however, for considerations of reliability, a subset was analyzed by a second coder specialized in language education. To present descriptive data, I provided quotations from the reflective journals. Also, the participants were given pseudonyms.

In their journals, the participants made approximately 18 entries in total and they included varying amount of sentences from 9 to 65. The reflective journals were written in English and the participants were asked to do the same tasks every week after the class, namely providing written reflection of classroom activities, the problems or difficulties encountered, how they handled them and an evaluation of their peers' and their own performances. The data collection took 18 weeks, 8 in the first semester and 10 in the second. In addition to that, in the last week of the second semester, the participants answered a survey questionnaire in Turkish. As I was interested in capturing perspectives of the participants regarding the reflective journal writing experience, the questions were as follows: (i) Can you describe your reflective journal writing experience? (ii) What are the challenges you encountered while writing your entries? (iii) Do you think you will use this technique in your teaching in the future and why?. The answers elicited were analyzed to identify the commonly occurring themes.

2.2. *Findings and Discussion*

With the purpose of providing descriptive evidence on freshmen level preservice teachers' reflective skills, I coded all the data gained from the preservice teachers reflective journals according to the framework developed by Hatton & Smith (1995). However, some journal entries included some units which were hard to code according to the types of reflective writing. Such embedded units caused some disagreement with the second coder. However, the disagreements were solved with further discussions. It was agreed to take the preceding and following units also into consideration before the type of writing in embedded unit was decided.

The analysis in the present study indicated that almost all journals started with descriptive writing. In the initial part of their entries, the participants provided descriptions of events that occurred in the Listening and Pronunciation course that day, which might not be surprising as they aimed at making an introduction through a description of the course content, types of activities done, and etc. Although descriptive writing is not reflective, it was observed to serve an important function which is paving the path for oncoming reflective writing. As for descriptive reflection, Hatton & Smith (1995) state that most of the coded units (60-70%) in their analysis were descriptive reflection. Similar to this finding, the number of units exhibiting descriptive reflection in the present study was very high (67%). In descriptive reflection, reason justification for events or actions is provided (see Hatton & Smith, 1995), and in the quotations below, the participants provide reasons based on their personal judgments to justify their experiences or problems encountered in class:

I should try to understand more and get more details while listening so that I could grasp the whole message. In addition, in order to get better and challenge my level, I should continue listening songs in English which are not so easy to understand. (Dilek)

As a teacher, you are trying to help us by letting us listen to the texts two or three times because some texts are very complicated. By giving us some clues when necessary or allowing us to listen to texts more than twice sometimes, you guide us through our listening journey. (Kamile)

If I listen to English channels on TV or on Radio, I can improve my listening more easily. I need to do some other listening outside the class to get better. (Sebahat)

The second type of reflection used was dialogic reflection and in Hatton & Smith's study (1995) the highest proportion of dialogic reflection was observed to occur in essays based on critical friend interviews. However, in the present study the units including dialogic reflection were very limited (1%). This can be attributed to the fact that the participants were individually engaged with journal writing. Although they were allowed to work in groups to produce collaborative journal entries three times, this did not lead the preservice teachers to include more dialogic reflection in their journals. In dialogic reflection, there is stepping back from events to examine them by using alternative explanations (see Hatton & Smith, 1995) and in the following quotations the participants discuss their experiences and problems by presenting several explanations for them:

As a class, I think we are improving a lot. Our ears have become sharper while distinguishing sounds and words. Although we are much better, there are still problems. We cannot fully understand the whole text. Some speakers speak too fast or with a different accent. This experience teaches me that I still have a long way to do better in listening. And the instructor and the listening activities that we do in class are playing a great role in helping me to achieve my goal. (Hayri)

Although I cannot say that I have improved enough, I have been able to solve some of my listening comprehension problems so far. At first, I used to try hard to understand the whole text and when I could not succeed it, I used to feel that I would never be successful in that. However, now I do not get frustrated that easily. I try hard to follow what is coming next. Because by now I have learnt that I should not give up. (Gaye)

In these quotations, the participants reflect on what kind of problems they encountered and how they empowered themselves. As for the third type of reflection, which is critical reflection, Hatton & Smith (1995) identified instances of it only in three reports. Likewise, in this study, only three units in two journal entries were identified and coded as critical reflection. In critical reflection, awareness is presented that events are not only explained by reference to multiple explanations but they are also under the influence of their historical and social contexts (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Here are some quotations in which the participants take their social contexts into account while presenting an explanation or justification for their listening difficulties:

I always try to perfectly imitate whatever I hear in this class. That is to say, I aim at getting a perfect pronunciation. If our purpose is to become English teachers, our pronunciation must be more than satisfying to serve the needs of our students. (Orhan)

It was the first time I attended a listening class and this experience made it clear to me that listening is commonly ignored in schools. But I am determined to do some activities similar to the ones we did this year in my future classes because all skills should be integrated in a language class and listening should not be left behind. (Dilek)

Overall, the participants were observed to include descriptive writing (22%), descriptive reflection (67%), dialogic reflection (1%) and few instances of critical reflection. This means that the participants mostly provided reasons based on their personal judgment but failed to provide possible reasons from multiple sources or to take the context into account while exploring their experiences. In addition to these, in their responses to the survey questionnaire, the participants expressed mostly positive views on writing reflective journals. Theme-based analysis revealed that almost all participants responded favorably to journal writing and to using it in their future teaching careers. Two main themes about the positive sides of journal writing emerged: (i) it is beneficial as it helped me to revise activities and my performance that day in class (ii) it also enabled me to see my strengths and weaknesses so I started to improve the points where I failed. Therefore, it can be concluded that journal writing was an initiative for them to improve themselves. However, only one negative theme about journal writing emerged. Nearly all participants stated that journal writing became repetitive in the last weeks because they found it very hard to write new comments for the classroom events.

3. Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicate that the preservice teachers developed a positive attitude toward journal writing and using it in their future teaching but in their journal entries they failed to include dialogic or critical reflection. This may have stemmed from several factors. Although the participants received training on reflective journal writing, they were not trained on the types of reflection offered in Hatton & Smith's (1995) study. It is certain that critical thinking requires explicit instruction and a long time to develop. Another factor might be that students should not be left alone in their engagement with journal writing (Peyton, 1990). They should work together with teachers in collaborative dialogue journal writing (Peyton, 1991; Staton, 1991). However at the present study, I did not participate in the writing process collaboratively, only the participants were urged to reflect collaboratively three times. These may have hindered critical and dialogic reflection. In other words, dialogue journal writing in which a student works with a more competent other (Staton, 1991) might contribute more to the improvement of preservice teachers' descriptive reflection into critical reflection. And such reflective writing activities should be designed to increase critical and dialogic thinking especially in pre-service teachers who are supposed to organize similar activities in their actual teaching.

In terms of the participants' responses to the survey questionnaire, the positive views are in line with the previous literature on the advantages of journal writing. The only negative comment which was commonly expressed was

that journal writing became repetitive after certain time for the participants. Therefore, the allotted time might be problematic if students are not encouraged to produce more dialogic and critical thinking. As Staton (1991) reminds us, a personalized, written dialogue may contribute to the empowering of students as meaning makers but an active participation increases the motivation for learning as well. In sum, by participating in journal writing collaboratively and holding periodic individual conferences with students, teachers may enhance more dialogic and critical thinking.

References

- Atay, D. (2008). Teacher research for professional development. *ELT Journal*, 62(2), 139-147.
- Brownlee, J., Purdie, N., & Boulton-Lewis, G. (2001). Changing epistemological beliefs in pre-service teacher education students. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6(2), 247-268.
- Cakiroglu, E., & Cakiroglu, J. (2003). Reflections on teacher education in Turkey. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 26(2), 253-264.
- Canning, C. (1991). What teachers say about reflection. *Educational Leadership*, 48(6), 18-21.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Fries K. (2005). Researching teacher education in changing times: Politics and paradigms. In M. Cochran-Smith & K.M. Zeichner (Eds.), *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA Panel on research and teacher education* (69-109). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. (1993). *Inside/outside: teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. (1998). Teacher research: the question that persists. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1(1), 19–36.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*. Boston: D.C. Heath.
- Hatton, N., & Smith, D. (1995). Reflection in teacher education: towards a definition and implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(1), 33-49.
- Higher Education Council (1998). *Reorganization of Teacher Training Programs of Faculties of Education*. Ankara: Higher Education Council.
- Kocaoglu, Z., Akyel, A., & Ercetin, G. (2008). Paper/pen and electronic portfolios: An effective tool for developing reflective thinking of Turkish EFL student teachers?. *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, 13(1), 1-24.
- Lee, K. F., & Loughran, J. (2000). Facilitating student teachers' reflection through a school based teaching programme. *International Journal of Reflective Practice*, 1(1), 69-89.
- O'Donoghue, T. A., & Brooker, R. (1996) The rhetoric and the reality of the promotion of reflection during practice teaching: an Australian case study. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 47(2), 99-109.
- Peyton, J. K. (1990). Introduction. In J.K. Peyton (Ed.), *Students and teachers writing together: Perspectives on journal writing* (ix-xv). Alexandria, Virginia: TESOL Inc.
- Peyton, J.K. (1991). Settling some basic issues. In J.K. Peyton & J. Staton (Eds.), *Writing our lives: Reflections on dialogue journal writing with adults learning English* (11-23). Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Posner, G. (2000). *Field Experience: A Guide to Reflective Teaching*. New York: Longman.
- Richards, J. C. (1991). Towards reflective teaching. *The Teacher Trainer*, 5(3), 4-8.
- Richards, J. C. & Lockhart, C. (1994). *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Schön, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Short, K. G., & Kauffman, G. (1994). Teacher and student voices: the role of reflection in learning. *Reading*, 28(1), 9-14.
- Staton, J. (1991). Introduction: Creating an attitude of dialogue in adult literacy instruction. In J.K. Peyton & J. Staton (Eds.), *Writing our lives: Reflections on dialogue journal writing with adults learning English* (xiii-xxvi). Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Yost, D., & Sentner, S. (2000). An examination of the construct of critical reflection: implications for teacher education programming in the 21st century. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, 39-49.
- Zeichner, K., & Liston, D. (1996). *Reflective teaching: An introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.