

The Contribution of ELT Reflective Practice in Compensating the Lack of Pre-service Training

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Abstract:

Untrained EFL novice teachers suffer from a lack of readiness to implement what they have been taught in their pre-service training in-class. With this background, this paper focuses on the very issue of the theory-practice gap, which, is caused by the lack of training. This study aims at investigating the contribution of reflective practice in bridging the gap between theory and practice. The data for the study were collected through a semi-structured interview with a sample of six EFL novice teachers at Tlemcen University. The collected data revealed that reflective practice helps EFL novice teachers to become more aware of their own actions, more skillful and more knowledgeable about teaching. Finally, the paper provides some recommendations and suggestions about the necessity of programming reflective practice as a partial course for pre-service training.

Keywords: Algerian context, Novice teachers, Pre-service training, Reflective practice.

1. Introduction

It is widely argued that novice teachers face problems in their profession. Most of them face difficulties to transfer what they learnt in theory to practice in real teaching context, so they find themselves lost between the theory and practice. EFL novice teachers start teaching with a set of beliefs about the teaching-learning process, which they learnt during the pre-service training. However, not all EFL novice teachers got a pre-service training; hence, they often find themselves in a difficult state during their transition from training to the classroom (from theory to practice). Momen Y & Ali R (2018, p.02) mention that “Novice teachers, who are also called newly qualified teachers (NQTs), are usually defined as teachers who have completed their teacher-education program (including the practicum) and have just commenced teaching in an educational institution.” Previous studies find that untrained EFL novice teachers suffer from the lack of preparation and readiness to implement the theoretical knowledge that they have learnt before their graduation. Momen Y & Ali R (2018, p.02) state that “*Novice language teachers face many challenges*”. This research introduces the problems faced by novice teachers NA Noel (2007). These problems are resulted from the lack of training. In the same vein, Varah, Theune & Parker (1986) named the first year of novice teachers as a “*sink or swim scenario*”, It is like a survival period of novice teachers. They are expected to face the profession problems by themselves. In this regard, pre-service training is a vital component to prepare future teachers; Collins English Dictionary (1994) defines

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the training as “*training that a student must undergo in order to qualify as a teacher*”. Similarly, Freeman (1989) refers to the pre-service training as a strategy, which allows the preparation of teachers for their profession practice.

This study serves to investigate the role of reflective practice and its effectiveness to compensate the lack of pre-service training. It had been introduced to untrained EFL novice teachers, they were asked to implement it on their teaching for a period of one semester to examine its contribution bridging the theory-practice gap and facing the problems and challenges that occur during their in-class teaching.

2. Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will help novice teachers to overcome their teaching problems. This study introduces the problems that novice teachers may face and gives suggestions to solve these challenges. This paper serves as a bridge for the theory practice gap. It helps them also to reflect on their teaching and become aware on their actions in their classes. This study focuses on the significance of reflective practice contribution in bridging the gap between theory and practice and helping untrained EFL novice teachers to move from just having the knowledge to apply it in their classrooms and hence, avoiding problems they may face.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Reflective Practice

Researchers and scholars have defined the concept of Reflective practice differently. Dewey (1993) was the first scholars who define reflective practice. He believed that:

“Reflective practice is the impetus of the practitioners to inquire into their own practices, question why they choose certain approaches, resources, techniques and activities over others. This questioning combined with the ability to evaluate the appropriateness of the choices for the learners and material being developed forms the essence of reflective practice.” (1933, p.15)

In other words, reflective practice means that teachers question their teaching practices and the reasons behind their choices of the different approaches and techniques, and the appropriateness of these choices for their students. Other scholars said that, in reflective practice, the practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation in order to understand their own actions and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in learners (Brookfield, 1995; Thiel, 1999). Teachers engaging in reflective practice involve in a constant process where they observe and evaluate themselves for the sake of better understanding to the teaching-learning process.

According to Richard & Lockhart (1994, p.1) reflective practice is when teachers “collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching”. Bailey (2006, p.193) also described this process as “gathering data about one’s own teaching, interpreting those data, and using our reflection to implement change”. It is mentioned by Tice (2004, p.1) that reflective practice means examining what you carry out in the classroom, thinking about its purpose, and thinking about if it is effective- a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. That is, by collecting information about what goes in teachers’ classroom, and analyzing and evaluating this

information, they identify and explore their own practices and underlying beliefs. This may then lead to changes and improvement in their teaching. Moreover, Pollard and Collins (2005) regard that the notion reflective practice enhances the professional development and competency. It helps teachers to improve and develop themselves as a core of professional development. By doing reflective practice, teachers can find their teaching strong points and weakness and have the chance to understand them and try to overcome them. Thus, reflective teaching can have a positive influence on the professional growth of teachers.

Furthermore, reflective practice have been advocated as one solution to bridge the gap between theory learned at university and practice at schools via theorizing declarative knowledge and adjusting it to a specific teaching context by reflecting while teaching; in other words, through “reflection-in-action” Schon (1983, p.49). In the same line of thought, many academics agree that the approach of reflective practice lies between the “high ground” of theory and the “swampy lowlands” of practice. That is to say, it helps teachers to explore theories and to implement them to their experiences in a more structured way.

3.1.1. Benefits and Challenges of Reflective Teaching

Teachers are undoubtedly needed to make hundreds of decisions in a single class day as they watch their pupils' learning process. As a result, they may continue to observe educational challenges and issues in the same way, which is a part of their work. They do not find any other approach to address serious concerns except in their everyday classes. Language teachers are challenged to provide the opportunity to begin assessing themselves as educators. Ditchburn (2015, p. 94) mentions, “*creating opportunities for pre-service teachers (PSTs) to critically reflect on and theorize about their practice is frequently regarded as an essential component of professional experience*”. The quotation implies that language teachers require opportunities to reflect on how they have been teaching and to recognize that they do not have to make a decision simply because an issue arises. Instead, an action plan must be in place to identify potential problems and a backup plan must be in place. To put it another way, teachers should engage in ongoing reflection to recognize what is happening in the classroom as a chance to enhance their professional practices.

Responsibility appears to be an important component in the enrichment of ELT professional practice when it comes to reflective teaching procedures. The ability of teachers to take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect students' learning is seen as a critical component in ELT changing. It indicates that it is critical to provide high-quality education and to understand students' views toward their language learning performance in order for language learners to feel more confident when attempting to produce English. The process of reflection may have educational implications for the entire academic community as well as for teachers.

When people are active in rethinking how they view language instruction, their attitudes, perceptions, emotions, and sentiments can be changed. It indicates that when language teachers are motivated and implement various activities, students will be motivated as well, and their perspectives and attitudes about their learning process will change for the better. Tairab (2003, p.18) states that “*reflection was found to be characterized by the nature of reframing which occurred over the teaching practice period*”. In this regard, some acts and attitudes would need to be adjusted; nevertheless, there are certain more spontaneous activities that are not voiced and are difficult to describe.

Tairab's (2003) contribution adds to Dewey's initial ideas, primarily because teaching requires both thinking and reflecting, as well as paying close attention to what has to be reflected on, such as teaching methods and learning styles. Thus, by incorporating reflection into the classroom, instructors can critically evaluate their ideas and actions in order to improve. That examination would be converted into instructional contributions, allowing for a thorough understanding of what is possible in contemplation and what we can accomplish with those foundations.

3.1.2. Reflective Teaching Strategies

The major goal of this section is to demonstrate how reflective teaching can be used to improve ELT methods in a classroom or across an entire academic community. Several scholars have recommended significant strategies such as video recordings, peer observation, portfolios, notebooks, lesson reports, surveys, critical incident analysis, and case analysis. The strategies included in this part, on the other hand, were chosen as ways for EFL untrained novice teachers to incorporate reflective teaching into their everyday teaching routines.

These strategies were chosen because, first and foremost, teachers can execute them on their own or with the help of colleagues; they do not require any further assistance. Second, they are simple to manage; for example, instructors can keep a record of what and how they feel after teaching a class, and they can also have fun because technology devices are available to them. Instructors can post their observations on a blog and receive feedback from other teachers, as well as tips and recommendations, on what they have written. Third, EFL novice teachers can assess their performance in the classroom by videotaping and monitoring themselves after class. Fourth, in order to comprehend what and how they teach, English teachers establish a deep-thinking approach. Teachers can link their lesson plans to their actual classroom experiences.

Any reflective teaching strategy requires the instructor to come up with a topic to watch, study, or evaluate before implementing it. Teachers must then decide how they will use the knowledge. It's critical to emphasize that introspection necessitates results, such as a small project or a different class. Finally, the outcomes of implementing any of these strategies in a classroom may assist teachers in improving their teaching. It means that teachers can gather data, identify a problem to remedy, and carry out any action plan.

3.2. Problems Faced By Novice Teachers

EFL novice teachers face several challenges and problems. NA Noel (2007) research revealed types problems, which struggle the novice teachers, they are as follows:

Problems with self: novice teachers are facing problems with their own self such as: self-confidence, commitment, health and personality. They lack the ability in believing on themselves in keeping discipline on their classrooms. As, for commitment, it was shown on their worries on the poor learners' outcomes. Additionally, most of novice teachers showed lack of confidence, which influenced their teaching process. They also faced difficulties on applying their knowledge of the subject in the classroom because of the lack of pre-service training. Therefore, they found a theory-practice gap that should be bridged. Health as well affected their teaching; they were thinking about which lesson requires fewer efforts when they are sick.

Problems with students: students of mix abilities are causing problems to the novice teachers. As well, the variation of slow and fast learners in the same classroom is affecting their lesson plans.

Students discipline, prior knowledge and skills are also causing problems for the novice teachers, which makes them finding difficulties in preparing the lessons.

Problems with Teaching: Concerning the teaching, EFL novice teachers usually think whether the lessons went smoothly or interrupted which may affect the teaching-learning objectives. The lack of, pre-service training, experience and knowledge about the subject inhibit the achievement of the lesson's objectives. Teachers should be skillful and knowledgeable of their teaching objectives and goals. They should have knowledge about the teaching curriculum, otherwise; lack of knowledge will make them struggle in their teaching and face difficulties.

Problems with Learning: Some teachers believe that they are in class just to practice teaching and forget about the students' learning process. In fact, learning is not just about absorbing knowledge. For this reason, teachers should not only teach but also design appropriate learning materials and encourage the learning process. Among the problems that novice teachers face with the learning process are the numerous students' learning styles, that can make their teaching inappropriate.

Problems with coping strategies: different teachers have different strategies to cope with problems when they are teaching. The coping strategies that novice teachers employ do not always serve to solve the problems they face, or they face the lack of knowledge and experience about how to implement these strategies.

4. Methodology

This research is a case study. It took place at a single educational institution at university of Tlemcen in the department of English. The data were collected through a qualitative research instrument. A semi-structured interview was addressed to a sample of six untrained EFL novice teachers after their application of reflective practice for a duration of one semester. The interview took around half an hour with each participant. In order to keep ethical concerns in social sciences (Denscombe, 2010), the collected data were kept confidential, and the participants' names were kept anonymous. The participants were not knowledgeable of reflective practice. Thus, reflective Practice had been introduced to them and they were asked to apply it on their practice for one semester in order to be interviewed after and to examine the effectiveness of reflective practice in compensating the lack of pre-service training. Once the semester was ended, the researcher met the EFL novice teachers to interview them about the changes occurred on their teaching after the implementation of reflective practice. They were asked about the differences occurred on their lessons and if the reflective practice strategies were an effective tool to encourage and motivate learners. At the end, the novice teachers were asked about how they see their role as a teachers and how the reflective practice shaped the teaching/learning process. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

5. Discussion and Interpretation of the Main Results

The research reveals that incorporating reflective teaching practices into regular teaching practice has a considerable impact. It also demonstrates that reflective teaching could become a professional growth path that should be tailored to each teaching situation. EFL untrained novice teachers' consistent reflection, understanding of the extent of their motivation, including their attitudes and perceptions about language education and self-examination would lead to a better understanding of ELE and compliance with a broader understanding of how students can actually become better

language users. Teachers can use reflection privately to boost their confidence and avoid the feeling that someone is assessing their work, or jointly if they want to get feedback from others.

During the investigation, it was discovered that reflection allowed the untrained EFL novice teachers to collaborate in order to improve communication in the classroom and with other members of the educational community. The reflective strategies were chosen because English language teachers are constantly making decisions in the classroom; as a result, novice teachers may perceive a link between what they encounter in the classroom and how they might solve challenges there. The application of reflective teaching has proved how effective it can be in improving the knowledge base and English language instructors' competency, based on the research findings.

Under the light of the results, EFL novice teachers reported answers revealed that the lack of pre-service training made them suffer of the problems stated earlier NA Noel (2007). They face many challenges; on their head, the difficulty of transferring what they learnt before becoming teachers when they are in class-teaching, what means they found themselves lost on the theory-practice gap.

In the same respect, Furman Shaharabani, Y., Yarden, A (2019, p.01) stated “*The gap between theory and teachers’ practice is a barrier to education improvement*”. This research was addressed to make the bridge between theory-practice and enhance the education improvement. According to the untrained EFL novice teachers answers, they reported that the reflective practice make a contribution on their professional development during the period of the study. They reported that reflective practice helps them to become more aware of their own actions, more skillful and more knowledgeable about their teaching. It involves novice teachers, observing themselves, collecting data about their classrooms and their roles within them, and using the data as a basis for self-evaluation, change and professional development. Hence, novice teachers can move from just having the knowledge to apply it and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Therefore, the use of different reflective teaching strategies is an effective and useful element to improve ELT. Teachers who engage in reflective practice can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching.

6. Recommendations

Many researchers emphasized on the importance of pre-service training, Kadri N & Benmouhoub L (2018, p04) research’s findings revealed that pre-service training plays a critical role in enhancing the quality education:

“For a positive and beneficial change to take place, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research should devote a considerable amount of money, efforts and resources for pre-service training programmes. Teachers should be prepared and equipped with the necessary skills and competencies before they engage in teaching in order to ensure effective teaching and high quality learning.” (2018, p.04)

Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations are suggested:

- It is proposed to decision makers to program Reflective practice as a partial course for pre-service training.

- To form would be teachers to implement it in their classrooms as prospective teachers.
- To encourage them to take it as a habit in their daily teaching for the continuous professional development and the quality education.

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