

A Reflective Typology Emerging from the Collaborative Reflections of Three English Language Teacher Trainers

Üç İngilizce Öğretmen Eğitimcinin Ortak Yansıtımlarından Ortaya Çıkan Yansıtımlı Tipolojisi

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Abstract

This article presents the reflective typology emerging from post-observation conferences conducted as part of an action research study to investigate how a triad of Turkish university English Language teacher educators reflected with the aim of professional development. First, the literature on reflective practice and reflective frameworks are discussed. This is followed by a description of the data collection and analysis methods used in the research and the emerging typology. The typology was found to overlap with the reflective frameworks developed by other researchers. The occurrence of the different categories of reflection together in the data reinforces the claim that dimensions of reflective thinking are not hierarchical, but can occur simultaneously. The typology can be used with quantitative data analysis techniques to investigate teachers' reflective profiles.

Keywords: Reflective teacher development, reflective typology

Öz

Bu makale, Türkiye'de bir üniversitenin Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölüm'ünden üç öğretmen eğitimcinin mesleki gelişimi amacıyla yapılan bir eylem araştırma çalışmasından ortaya çıkan verilerin çözümlenmesi için araştırmacı tarafından geliştirilen yansıtıcı düşünce tipolojisini sunmaktadır. İlk olarak yansıtıcı öğretmen eğitimi uygulamaları ve yansıtıcı düşünce tipolojileri ile ilgili yazın sunulmaktadır. Ardından araştırma esnasında izlenen veri toplama ve çözümlenme süreçleri ile ortaya çıkan yansıtıcı tipoloji anlatılmaktadır. Verilerden ortaya çıkan tipolojinin, başka araştırmacıların geliştirdikleri yansıtıcı düşünce çerçeveleriyle örtüştüğü belirlenmiştir. Yansıtıcı düşüncenin çeşitli boyutlarının araştırmanın verilerinde birlikte bulunması, bu boyutların hiyerarşik olmayıp eşzamanlı var olabileceğini göstermektedir. Araştırmadan ortaya çıkan tipoloji, nicel veri analiz teknikleri ile öğretmenlerin yansıtıcı örüntüleri araştırmada kullanılabilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Yansıtımlı öğretmen geliştirmesi, yansıtıcı tipolojisi.

Introduction

Reflective practice (RP) has been the dominant paradigm in the literature of teacher education and development for the past three decades. However, despite its popularity, there has been no consensus on how reflection is defined. The most frequently cited definitions are those by Dewey (1933/1993) and Schön (1983/1991), which have been the starting points for other definitions. Emphasising scientific rationality, Dewey (1933/1993), described reflective thinking as an active and persistent process aimed at the escape from routine and impulsive thought. Schön, however, saw reflective thinking as an artistic and intuitive process arising at moments of "uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-conflict" (1983/1991: 49). On the basis of the definitions of a number of researchers, it can be said that essential elements of RP include engaging cognitively

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and affectively with practical experiences in such a way as to make sense of problematic classroom events beyond a common sense level with the view to learning and professional development (Brookfield, 1995; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) embraced RP later than other areas of education (Farrell, 2007). The early years of the field were dominated by the search for an ideal foreign language teaching method and paid little heed to the contributions of the learner or teacher to the language learning/teaching process. However, with the emergence of the postmethod era (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2001), the complexity of foreign language learning and teaching was recognised and more emphasis was given to the roles of the learners and teachers in the process. Rather than being a top-down process based on the one-way transmission of knowledge and the imitation of idealised practice, RP is a bottom-up process that places teachers at the centre of their own development as they analyse and evaluate their own practice, initiate change, and monitor the effects of this change (see, e.g. Richards, 2008; Wallace, 1991). This teacher-centred approach to professional development paralleled the spirit of the postmethod era.

There are said to be three time frames in which teachers can engage in reflective practice. The first is during a classroom event which triggers reflection and is called reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983/1991). The second involves retrospective thinking on a classroom event, or reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983/1991). However, many researchers (see, e.g. Fendler, 2003; Akbari, 2007; Stanley, 1998) have emphasised that the purpose of reflection on past events should be to prepare teachers for future events, or what Farrell (2007) refers to as reflection-for-action.

Building on the theories of Dewey and Schön, many researchers in mainstream education have developed reflective frameworks focusing on the quality of reflection. Hatton and Smith (1995), in an analysis of student writing, distinguished between descriptive writing, which is not reflective; descriptive reflection, in which there is evidence of providing a justification for events; dialogic reflection, in which the writer steps back from the events and views them from multiple perspectives; and critical reflection, which demonstrates an awareness that events occur within a larger socio-political context. Analysing the teaching portfolios of pre-service teachers, Jay and Johnson (2002) suggested a typology of reflection which distinguished between descriptive reflection, or the setting of the problem for reflection; comparative reflection, or considering the problem from multiple perspectives; and critical reflection, or making a choice among actions based on the new understanding of a problem. The researchers emphasised that their typology should not be construed as hierarchical or developmental. Rather, the dimensions of reflection 'become intimately intertwined to compose a composite concept' (Jay & Johnson, 2002: 80). More recently, Ward & McCotter (2004) analysed pre-service teachers' writing to develop a four-level rubric making a distinction between routine reflection, which is disengaged from change; technical reflection, which is an instrumental response to a situation without a change in perspective; dialogic reflection, which involves cycles of questions and actions and gives consideration to others' perspectives; and transformative reflection, which focuses on the fundamental questions of personal practice and leads to a reframing of perspective. All these frameworks suggest a difference in quality of reflection, with the dimensions of dialogic/comparative and critical reflection being more conducive to change.

In the field of ELT, Pennington (1995) identified three developmental stages of development focusing on the content of reflection. The first is the procedural stage, in which the teacher focuses mainly on techniques and materials; second is the interpersonal stage, during which the focus is on the feelings, roles and responsibilities of the teachers and students, motivation and classroom atmosphere; the final is the conceptual stage, in which the teachers arrive at their own personal meanings, explanation and integration of theory and practice. Hall (1997) and Stanley (1998) proposed frameworks which were more action oriented than those described so far. Hall's (1997) three level framework includes fleeting reflection, which goes no deeper than remembering and talking about things with others; committed reflection, which involves the deliberate participation of an individual in some means of reflection on practice, but might not lead to change; and

programmatic reflection, which is the participation in some kind of reflection on or about action in a sustained way, by means of a development group or project. Stanley (1998) 5-step framework included 'engaging with reflection', which is the conscious decision to scrutinise one's beliefs and practices. Second, 'Thinking reflectively' involves deeper probing into why things were done as they were, what the consequences of a particular decision might have been, and what possible alternatives could have been taken. Third, in the 'using reflection' phase, teachers apply to their practice what they have found beneficial from the previous phase. Fourth, 'sustaining reflection' is crucial in the commitment to developing reflective teaching practice. Finally, over time and with practice, reflection becomes an inseparable part of teaching, and teachers find they are 'practicing reflection'.

RP in ELT teacher development can be embarked on in solitude, by means of self-reflection and keeping a reflective teaching journal. However, many researchers have claimed that RP can be enhanced by collegial collaboration in an atmosphere of trust (Wallace, 1991; Brookfield, 1995; Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Brookfield (1995) emphasised the importance of collaboration in reflection, saying that all teachers have blind spots in their work, and practices and assumptions that are never investigated because they either seem to be so obviously right to the teacher, or because s/he cannot see them clearly. Peer observation of teaching (POT) is one way in which teachers can engage in collaborative reflection to gain an alternative perspective on their practice (see e.g., Richards & Farrell, 2005; Farrell, 2007). In traditional supervisory approaches to the observation of teachers, it is assumed that the observed teacher has some deficiencies in his/her practice which can only be remedied by a supervisor, usually an academic or professional superior (Freeman, 1982; Richards, 1997). In contrast, the aim of POT in RP is to encourage the self-awareness about practice in the participants (see, e.g. de Sonneville, 2007), rather than to impose an outsider's opinion of how teaching should take place (Cosh, 1999).

Purpose of the study

There has been little research conducted on the reflections of practicing ELT teachers in the Turkish context. Öniz (2001) reported on the reflections of a triad of ELT teacher educators gleaned from their private reflections in teaching journals. However, to the researcher's knowledge, no research has been conducted using collaborative reflections. The current study aims to contribute to the knowledge base of how practicing ELT teachers' reflect on their practice by analysing their collaborative reflections emerging from the post-observation conferences conducted during POT. To this aim, one research question has been formulated: "How do 3 practicing ELT teachers reflect on their practice during POT?"

Method

Research design

This study reports the findings related to the manner of reflections of 3 ELT teacher educators emerging from a larger action research study (see Yeşilbursa, 2008) using the action research cycle suggested by Elliott (1991). Action research is inextricably tied to RP. As Carr and Kemmis (1986: 162) stated, "action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out". According to Kumaravadivelu (2001: 550-551), action research is "initiated and employed by practicing teachers motivated mainly by their own desire to self-explore and self-improve". The present study took the form of action research, because it allowed the participants to reflect and collaborate in their real working environment with the aim of understanding and improving their own classroom practices.

Participants

The main participants in this study were the three ELT teacher educators, including the researcher, teaching the basic language skills courses in the first semester of the ELT programme at a large, state-run university in the Western Black Sea region of Turkey at the time of the current study. They chose pseudonyms to protect their identities. Biker, a 56 year-old Turkish male with over 20 years of teaching experience in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, was responsible for the Contextual Grammar I and Listening and Pronunciation I courses; Bookworm, a 35 year-old Turkish female, took the Advanced Reading and Writing I course and had over 10 years of experience teaching at high schools and universities in Turkey; The Brit, a 40 year-old British female, was responsible for the Oral Communication Skills I course and had nearly 20 years of teaching experience in Taiwan, the United Kingdom and Turkey. They received no instruction on how to reflect.

Data collection procedure

The data were collected over the autumn term of the 2007-2008 academic year. As the initial step of the action research process, the participants were asked to make a list of the aspects of their teaching they were pleased with and those they perceived as problematic areas, the latter serving as input for the first cycle of the action research process. Problematic areas included Bookworm's teacher talk time, The Brit's feedback stage of her lessons, and Biker's digression during the revision stage of his lessons.

At the initial conference, the participants met to discuss their perceived problems and choose ones that could feasibly be observed and attempted to be changed within the limitations of the study (see Yeşilbursa, 2008). The dynamic nature of the action research framework allowed the participants to make choices about focus problems as they went along. Due to the time constraints imposed by the workloads of the participants, it was decided that each participant should observe one colleague and be observed by the other. Thus, three dyads were formed in which Biker observed The Brit, who observed Bookworm, who in turn observed Biker. There was no particular rationale behind the selection of who should work with whom.

The next stage was the action research spiral in which the participants had one hour of their lessons a week video-recorded using a digital camera in order to be observed by their dyad partner for the pre-decided problematic area of their practice. They met for a weekly post-observation conference (POC) to discuss the lesson in terms of the problem, come up with an action plan, and also discuss possible future focuses for the ensuing cycle. No prescribed format was used for the POCs, allowing the participants to develop their own approaches. The POCs were recorded using a digital voice recorder in order for the researcher to transcribe them onto Word documents for analysis. 7 cycles for each dyad were completed over the data collection period, yielding the 21 transcribed POCs that constituted the data relevant to the current study

Data analysis procedure

The researcher read through data several times to familiarise herself with the content and to arrive at a tentative set of codes to assign meaning to the data in line with the research question (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In order to cross check the initial set of emerging codes, 10% of the data were given to two independent coders, research assistants familiar with the process of qualitative data analysis and who were continuing their doctorate studies in the field of ELT at the time of the current study. They were told that the focus of the study was on how and on what the participants reflected, and they were asked to read and code the data in any way they thought would represent the meaning of the content according to the focus of the study. Then, the researcher and the two coders came together to discuss the extent to which the categories they had assigned coincided and to compose a comprehensive list of codes.

Two main categories emerged from this discussion. The first of these categories was named the "Reflective category", and represented the manner in which the participant framed the

reflection; and the second “Content category”, which represented the content of the reflection. Under each of these categories were a number of sub-categories of codes that were assigned to represent all the meanings that were being communicated by the utterances. The researcher tried to make this list as detailed as possible in order to increase the reliability of the coding system. Because the focus of the current study is the reflective category, the content category will not be handled from here on.

The researcher read through the data once more using the new list of codes emerging from the first discussion with the independent coders. Each reflective chunk was assigned a reflective code and a content code. A first reliability check was carried out, in which 10% of the data were given to the independent coders along with the detailed description of the codes as an electronic document. They were requested to use the ‘add comment’ option of the ‘track changes’ tool in Word so that the coded data could be sent to the researcher by e-mail. In this way it was possible to check whether the researcher had assigned the codes consistently; the codes themselves had been described adequately; the codes could be used practically; and finally whether there were any ambiguities in the codes. At this stage the intercoder reliability was low. It was observed that there were still a number of discrepancies between the coding of the researcher and that of the two independent coders, particularly concerning the codes of the reflective category. The researcher reviewed the system once more, making alterations such as combining or removing codes to make them less ambiguous (see Yeşilbursa, 2008 for more details). The new coding system was given to the independent coders along with the original 10% of the data with the utterances needing revision having been highlighted. As a result of this second reliability check, a much higher level of 83% concurrence was found.

Results

The data analysis process revealed that the participants framed their reflections on their practice in certain patterns, which the researcher named as the reflective category. The 11 reflective sub-categories emerging from the data are given in Table 1. They are then exemplified with extracts from the data.

Table 1.

The Reflective Sub-Categories

Code	Explanation
R	general reflection
R+	positive reflection
R-	negative reflection
R?	inquiring reflection
RR	reflection on reasons
RS	reflection on solutions
RN	reflection on new discoveries
RC+	reflection on positive change
RC-	reflection on negative change
Com	commitment to make change

General reflection (R): Non-judgemental reflections on events or situations. “The activity sort of lends itself to setting up groups of students according to their energy levels so they can talk together and discuss” (The Brit, “The Brit-Biker” p. 3).

Positive reflection (R+): This code was assigned to all utterances indicating a positive attitude or preference for an event or situation, such as the results of using a particular teaching strategy,

student performance or behaviour, or an idea suggested by the observer. For example “Well, generally you were so systematic that everyone had to participate overall to the class is general. So that I can say that you first made a revision of the last session which was good “ (Bookworm, “Biker-Bookworm”, p.1).

Negative reflection (R-): All utterances that indicate directly or indirectly that the participant did not like an aspect of an event or situation, or was not pleased with an aspect of his/her performance, such as “Yes, that’s one thing I know I don’t. I’m aware of that; it is one thing I wrote on my list at the beginning that I maybe don’t spend enough time on pronunciation” (The Brit, “The Brit-Biker”, p. 12)

Inquiring reflection (R?): Because of the dialogic nature of the data, a certain amount of the reflection takes place in the form of questions and answers. This code was assigned to utterances indicating an inquiry about an event or situation. For instance, “Right, but wouldn’t you like to elaborate on the language?” (Biker, “The Brit-Biker”, p. 17).

Reflection on reasons (RR): All utterances indicating an elaboration on or a search for the reasons behind a particular action. “Maybe because you’re a native speaker when you get the message you’re satisfied” (Biker, “The Brit-Biker”, p. 12).

Reflection on solutions (RS): These are utterances that either suggest or discuss the feasibility of solutions to the participants’ perceived problems they see in their teaching practice. For example, “I think what I could do when doing group work is to set them up randomly” (The Brit, “The Brit-Biker”, p. 13)

Reflection on new discoveries (RN): Any utterance indicating that either of the participants had discovered something new about themselves as a result of the observations was given this code. “One thing I’ve noticed is that I tend to repeat myself twice. Immediately. I mean this is what I noticed when I was watching this video...” (The Brit, “The Brit-Biker”, p. 1).

Reflection on change (RC+/-): Since this study was carried out as action research, change is an essential aspect and a major focus of reflection. Utterances referring to the recognition of change in the participants’ behaviour as a result of the action research were assigned this code. For example, “The general atmosphere of the class was much more participative this time. There were a lot more different students participating” (The Brit, “Bookworm-The Brit”, p.10). While these utterances were coded “RC+”, there were some examples of returning to previous behaviour, such as “But as usual I spent more time than what is actually needed doing this review part” (Biker, “Biker-Bookworm”, p.14) which were coded “RC-”.

Commitment (Com): Reflection on a perceived problem and its possible solutions led to the participant as observee making a commitment to change an aspect of their teaching. Such utterances were marked “Com”. An example commitment can be seen in Bookworm’s comment on her teacher talk time: “I want to change it, because this is a problem” (Bookworm, “Bookworm-The Brit, p.11”).

Discussion

As a result of the data analysis, a total of eleven sub-categories of reflective mode emerged indicating how the participants were reflecting on their practice. These sub-categories were general reflection, positive reflection, negative reflection, inquiring reflection, reflection on reasons, reflection on solutions, reflection on new discoveries, reflection in the form of metaphor, reflection on positive change, reflection on negative change, and commitment.

These sub-categories show similarities with the typologies discussed in the literature. For example, R, R+ and R- together resemble Hatton and Smith’s (1995) and Jay and Johnson’s (2002) descriptive reflection, in which the participants provide a description of the events. While descriptive reflection is considered as the most superficial level, many researchers have pointed

out the role of such reflection in establishing a basis upon which more probing dialogic or comparative reflection can take place (see, e.g. Hatton & Smith, 1995; Jay & Johnson, 2002), The RR and RS sub-categories overlap with Jay and Johnson's (2002) comparative reflection, Ward & McCotter's dialogic reflection, and Stanley's (1998) thinking reflectively phase. This is evidence of the participants discussed the possible reasons for problematic classroom events and suggested possible solutions for future action, key features of the action research spiral (Elliott, 1991). The occurrence of the RN sub-category showed that the participants made new discoveries about their practice as a result of engaging in the action research process: In other words, the process helped them to gain new perspectives on their practice, in line with comparative reflection (Jay & Johnson, 2002) or dialogic reflection (Ward & McCotter, 2004). The R? sub-category is perhaps a distinguishing feature of the collaborative nature of POT, and shows that engagement in the process encouraged the participants to question each other about their practice (Brookfield, 1995; Cosh, 1999; de Sonnevile, 2007).

The ultimate aim of engaging in action research is change. The Com category shows that the participants were making commitments to change aspects of their practice as a result of their collaborative discussions. These commitments formed the basis for the attempts to change in the ensuing cycles. In Bookworm's case, her commitment to make her lessons more learner-centred required her to engage in transformative reflection (Ward & McCotter, 2004), as she questioned her fundamental approach to teaching and its affect on her students. The occurrence of the RC+ and RC- categories show that the participants observed change in each other's practice. Due to the relatively short length of the study, it was not possible to see how sustainable this change was. The occurrence of the RC- category was a sign of the participants slipping back into their old habits. This is an indication of the necessity of time for lasting change to take place.

The emerging reflective themes have a number of implications for teacher development. Just as it is necessary to observe ourselves and have ourselves observed as teachers to raise our awareness of our practice, reflective rubrics are ways in which to make reflection visible (Ward & McCotter, 2004) and teachers can use them to raise their awareness of their reflective patterns. Engaging in sustainable reflection over time, and analysing the emerging reflections can reveal recurring patterns in reflective thought. By identifying these patterns, teachers may develop their reflective skills in order to further their professional development.

Conclusion

This article reported the reflective themes emerging from the qualitative analysis of 21 post observation conferences between 3 ELT teacher educators engaging in POT as part of an action research study. It was found that they engaged in descriptive reflection, focusing on the positive, negative and neutral aspects of their practice. They also discussed reasons and possible solutions to practical problems, in addition to new discoveries about themselves as teachers, indicating that they engaged in comparative or dialogic reflection. They also made commitments to change aspects of their practice, some of which gave positive outcomes. However, as a result of the short time span of the study, the participants noticed that they sometimes reverted to old practices.

As with any research, there are a number of limitations to the present study. First, the number of participants was very small and limited to the context of the ELT programme of one university. Further studies need to be conducted with a larger number of participants from varied contexts to check that similar results occur. This study was also limited to a description of the reflective category emerging from the data. Research on how the reflective sub-categories were distributed across the post-observation conferences could reveal some of the genre characteristics of the post-observation conference in POT. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of the content category could reveal the practical concerns of this particular group of ELT teacher educators. The emerging

typology consisted of categories which were more discrete than previously suggested frameworks. This characteristic makes it suitable to be used with quantitative data analysis procedures to reveal the reflective profiles of the participants.

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