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Communication of feedback in an Argentine ELT practicum: Pre-service teachers' perspectives.

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Abstract:

A central component in any teaching education programme is the practicum. This stage is often regarded as a demanding, complex and overwhelming experience by pre-service teachers. Exposure to real-life activities, duties and responsibilities as well as continuous reflection on the interaction of theory and practice provide solid foundations for future success. Feedback and the ways in which it is communicated also play a significant role in encouraging or preventing significant learning from taking place. The present paper intends to show pre-service teachers' views of a range of supervisory behaviours and approaches employed to communicate feedback in post-observation conferences which cooperate to the development of autonomy and the enhancement of reflective thinking, key skills for professional life.

Keywords: teaching practicum – feedback – supervisory behaviour – pre-service teacher – communication strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Although there is little consensus as regards the most appropriate stage of the career for the practicum to take place, it is usually undertaken by students who are at or near the end of a preparatory academic program. This is the case at the English Language Teaching (ELT) Programme at UADER (Autonomous University of Entre Ríos) from Paraná, Entre Ríos, Argentina. In the fourth and last year of the career, trainee teachers are sent into schools for a number of weeks at a time. The aim of these block placements is to provide students with continuity and the opportunity to engage more fully with the broader school environment. The concurrent attendance at school and university is considered valuable because students are able to integrate theory and practice and reflect upon their experiences in a cooperative environment. Practicum structures vary widely from career to career. At the Department of Foreign Languages, the subject is delivered in a workshop format and class schedules vary from two to three meetings per week. In these sessions, trainees are given the chance to

comment on their own experiences at school and share positive as well as problematic situations met in their practice. Pre-service teachers are encouraged to participate in discussions and collaboratively search for possible solutions and ideas whereas the role of trainers is to prompt students' reflection and guide their suggestions with the support of theory. The curriculum includes education on workplace issues, reflective assignments, guest speakers, collaborative learning activities and it encourages flexibility and innovation. It sets out to integrate the theoretical knowledge acquired along the course of studies with the professional practice by providing diverse experiences in a range of school contexts and with a variety of students. Trainee teachers are observed, mentored and evaluated "on-campus" by their trainers who assess knowledge-based skills, capabilities and dispositions that the profession agrees are essential for a teacher at the beginning stages of a professional career. After observation, reports are carefully prepared to document the practicum-related attainments of the students and to enable them to confidently certificate their achievements. Generally, trainee teachers are able to privately access their feedback on practice reports forty eight hours after their teaching practice and before a post-observation conference. The purpose of the remaining time between the lesson and delivering/receiving feedback is meant for both trainers' and trainees' personal reflection and organisation of ideas. Furthermore, peers are also encouraged to observe each other teaching at different school contexts and to provide feedback with the goal of improving one another's instructional abilities.

Statement of the problem

For Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is first and foremost a kind of careful description of the current status of learning based on performance. The candidate becomes aware of strengths and weaknesses by engaging in dialogue with the mentor. The candidate needs to be open to receive and accept feedback, and he/she needs to know how to apply it when planning and executing future performances. Affective strategies such as how to accept criticism, how to meet challenges, how to defy lack of motivation, have to be in place before the candidate is ready to apply cognitive learning strategies in deciding how to proceed. The mentor's task is to ensure that challenges are optimal and has to provide clear feedback on the current status of competence, taking into account the trainee's level and personality (Smith, 2010).

"For many trainee teachers, feedback is the most useful component of the programme; for others, it is a source of disquiet and tension (Brandt, 2008 cited in Copland, 2010). According to Holland (2005), this tension has been attributed to the incompatibility of the different roles of trainers, which are the assessment role and the development role. Copland (2010) suggests that the tension may be due to a difference in expectation amongst trainers and trainees about the purpose of feedback. The author also acknowledges that student- teachers should be prepared in advance to take part in feedback events so as to have a clear and shared understanding of both the process and its purpose. The Argentine context adds another meaning to giving feedback. Pre-service teachers also experience tension as a result of the educational contexts where they carry out their practice. Lack of didactic resources, crowded classrooms, unmotivated students as a consequence of finding no use in learning English, poor school infrastructure and frequent strikes are only some of the problems

teachers have to face at schools every day. Hence, apart from providing feedback about candidates' performance, university supervisors find themselves comforting students who have experienced stressful environments and helping them become immune to continuous difficulties. An important role of feedback is thus, to build pre-service teachers' self-esteem and stress the professional status of teachers. The way in which feedback is communicated during the teaching practicum appears to be essential in helping future teachers develop self-confidence, autonomy and critical thinking skills. Therefore, investigating pre-service teachers' perspectives of their supervisors' strategies to communicate feedback can shed light on ways to improve the practicum experience with a view to generate significant changes in pre-service education.

Aim of the study

The purpose of this research study is to investigate pre-service teachers' perspectives of the ways in which supervisory feedback is communicated during the teaching practicum at the Argentine ELT teacher education programme from the Autonomous University of Entre Ríos.

Objectives

The present research has the following objectives:

To investigate student-teachers' perspectives as regards the ways in which supervisory feedback is communicated in the ELT practicum at the Autonomous University of Entre Ríos in Argentina.

To characterise supervisory feedback, after considering the pre-service teachers' perspectives, in order to deepen the existing knowledge about the teaching practicum.

To gather data and provide relevant information in order to understand, interpret and anticipate student teachers' and university supervisors' behaviours when receiving or giving feedback in the ELT practicum.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ELT Practicum

The teaching practicum is regarded as one of the most influential aspects of pre-service teacher education (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). It is critical to the development of student teachers because it is their first hands-on experience with their chosen career and it creates opportunities for future teachers to develop their pedagogical skills (Leshem and Bar-hama, 2007). According to Hascher, Cocard and Moser (2004), the teaching practicum serves as a 'protected field for experimentation' and 'socialization within the profession', it sets the stage for success or failure in student teaching and it determines a student teacher's future in education. Moreover, the practicum contributes with student teachers' development by offering a range of goals. Gebhard (2009, cited in Trent, 2010) lists the following: gaining practical classroom experience, applying theory and teaching ideas, discovering from

observing experienced teachers, expanding awareness of how to set goals, and questioning, articulating, and reflecting on their own teaching and learning philosophies.

Reflective Practices

The effect of professional development upon classroom teaching is governed by a number of factors, one being the ability of teachers to be reflective about their practice. Indeed, the literature abounds with calls for reflective practice to be fostered at the pre-service level and encouraged as a career-long pursuit (see for example Wallace, 1991; Oxford, 1997; Brandt, 2008; Farr, 2011). Reflective thinking, then, has its roots in the work of a number of educational theorists and practitioners and it cannot be considered an innovation in teaching (Qing, 2009).

Reflection allows for the appropriation of theory to real teaching situations. Hence, it has been argued that teaching experience and practice promote efficiency only when the dimension of reflection is considered (Oxford, 1997). The practicum plays an essential role in assisting pre-service teachers to become reflective practitioners, parallel with their intellectual and professional development (Armutcu and Yaman, 2010). By giving trainees a “voice”, their experiences are validated, a feeling of ownership and individuality is promoted and fundamental tools for professional development are provided (Farr, 2011).

Feedback

Brandt (2008) suggests that if the purpose of feedback is to supply information to trainees concerning some aspect of their performance, with a view to enhancing their practice, then trainees need to know that they are receiving good quality feedback. Hattie (2003, cited in Hattie and Timperley, 2007) reported that some types of feedback, such as providing students with information about a task and how to do it more effectively, are more powerful than others that involve praise, rewards and punishments. The most useful forms of feedback provide cues or reinforcement to learners; are presented in video-, audio- or computer assisted formats; relate to goals; provide information on correct rather than incorrect responses; and/or build on changes from previous experiences. Moreover, feedback is more effective when a number of conditions are met (Brinko, 1993, cited in Brandt, 2008). For instance, a) a psychologically safe setting is provided, b) information is gathered from different sources, c) the feedback is mediated by someone other than the individual who made the evaluative judgment, d) the feedback focuses on behavior rather than the person and it is descriptive rather than evaluative, e) the feedback reduces uncertainty for the recipient and allows for response and interaction, and f) negative feedback is ‘sandwiched’ between positive information. Hattie and Timperley (2007) summarise the effectiveness of feedback by stating that it must answer three questions: “Where am I going?”, “How am I going”, and “Where to next?” These questions correspond to notions of “feed up”, “feed back”, and “feed forward” respectively. For Tang and Chow (2007) supervision in the form of lesson observation followed by a post-observation conference and the communication of constructive feedback plays a vital role in pre-service teachers’ professional development. Brandt (2008) proposes considering the post-observation meetings as opportunities for

reflective conversations (indicating plurality) rather than for feeding back (indicating singularity). Reflective conversations may allow for “a more democratic, interactive, and trainee centred atmosphere (...) which could offer a number of advantages” (p. 43).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Kulhavy and Wager (1993), during the first half of the twentieth century, there was uncertainty as regards the role that feedback played in the learning process. However, three definitions of feedback that developed during the early 1900s are surprisingly similar to the ones we use today and still prevail in the current view of feedback (Mory, 2004). Kulhavy and Wager refer to these definitions as the “feedback triad” (p. 5) and they can be enumerated as follows: a) feedback as a motivator or incentive for increasing response rate and/or accuracy, b) feedback as a provider of a reinforcing message that would automatically connect responses to prior stimuli – focusing on correct responses and c) feedback as information that learners could use to validate or change a previous response – the focus being on error responses.

Thorndike (1911, cited in Kulhavy and Wager, 1993), led the first investigations involving the use of post-response information. Thorndike’s work showed that a response followed by a “satisfying state of affairs” is likely to be repeated and increases the likelihood of learning, a theory he named the Law of Effect. Anderson, Kulhavy and Andre found that students used feedback with little or no processing unless this use was controlled and suggested that feedback functioned primarily to correct errors instead of simply reinforcing correct answers. Therefore, feedback was examined from an information-processing perspective, where the learner participated in the system to correct his or her errors, and researchers focused on how feedback influenced cognitive and metacognitive processes within a learner (Kulhavy, 1977). The view of feedback as information highlighted the learner’s role in learning, with the ability to adapt his or her response according to information in the feedback and thus, correct his or her errors (Mory, 2004). Most research of the past 30 years has been conducted from the information processing perspective demonstrating that feedback can be accepted, modified, or rejected, contrary to the behaviourists’ argument (Hattie & Temperley, 2007). For instance, Roper (1977), provided students with either no feedback, yes–no verification, or an opportunity to restudy the correct answer and found out that scores on the posttest increased as more information was added to the feedback. The study also showed that the correction of errors and not just reinforcement of responses was the major effect of feedback.

The latest philosophy of learning, the constructivist approach, postulates that the student must construct his or her own reality or knowledge, and this construction will be based on the learner’s prior experiences, mental structures, and beliefs (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1988; Cooper, 1993; Duffy & Jonassen, 1991; Jonassen, 1991 cited in Mory, 2004). Considering this new view of learning, feedback will likely function differently than from an objectivist view of learning (Mory, 1995), and it could be used as a coaching mechanism that analyses strategies used to solve real world-problems (Jonassen,1991). Therefore, as feedback can serve to guide the learner to revisit a problem from different conceptual perspectives, Rieber

(1992) suggests using a variety of feedback features to complement one another, for example, verbal feedback at the same time as visual feedback.

METHODOLOGY

This research study was carried out at the EFL teacher education programme, which awards a degree in English Language Teaching, at UADER (Autonomous University of Entre Ríos) in Argentina. The practicum experience is conducted during the 4th year of the programme and follows a “partnership model”. According to Mattsson, Eilertsen and Rorrison (2011), partnership models are based on agreements between a university and local schools that have been carefully selected and which are expected to offer a good educational environment as well as grant opportunities for practicum learning. During the practicum experience, student teachers observe other teachers teaching, plan lessons and teach at different levels of education (primary, secondary and higher education). University supervisors observe and assess pre-service teachers’ performance in their host classes and provide after class feedback (verbal or written).

Participants

The sample consisted of 12 pre-service teachers randomly selected from the ELT Practicum at the Autonomous University of Entre Ríos, Argentina.

Data collection instrument and procedures

The instrument used to collect data on pre-service teachers’ perspectives as regards the ways in which supervisory feedback is communicated in the ELT practicum at the Autonomous University of Entre Ríos in Argentina was a semi-structured face-to-face interview. Hence, although there was a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts, “the format was open-ended and the interviewee was encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner” (Dörnyei, 2007). Each one-to-one interview lasted about 30 to 40 minutes and the interview guide included six sections: A) Greeting and introduction to the interview, B) Presentation of the objectives of the interview, C) Interviewee’s personal information, D) Content questions: meaning/importance/characteristics of supervisory feedback, relationship between the supervisor and the pre-service teacher, positive/negative aspects of feedback, E) Final closing question, C) Final greeting (See App. A). All the interviews were carried out in Spanish to minimise any pressure and to make clear that there was no intention to evaluate the respondents’ use of English. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and conducted by the researcher in person. Before recording the interviews, the interviewees’ consent was obtained and the researcher guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of the data.

Data analysis

In order to analyse the data generated by the interviews, the transcripts were first examined individually to find out each individual’s perspectives. After that, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), the data was reduced, displayed and interpreted, three steps to be taken in

qualitative analysis. Recurring words or themes were coded and the open-ended responses were carefully read to identify themes and patterns which were recorded on a worksheet. This step involved counting how many times each word or theme appeared. Meaningful categories were created and it was verified that the codes could be easily and unambiguously assigned to the appropriate categories.

RESULTS

According to the pre-service teachers interviewed, feedback is information provided by an observer (in this case a university supervisor) about the student teachers' performance. Feedback helps future teachers realise what they do or do not do while teaching as well as pay attention to their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, by becoming conscious of their own performance, pre-service teachers are able to reflect on their own practices and generate the necessary changes. The participants interviewed stated that feedback should always include suggestions as well as advice on strategies to be used in the classroom. Feedback should include comments related to students' behaviour in the classroom, the student teacher's presence in front of his/her students, the use of the language and classroom management techniques employed during the lesson observed.

As regards the characteristics observed in the feedback provided by university supervisors, student teachers mentioned the following: suggestions to improve the way the lesson was taught, student teachers' demeanor, student teacher's interaction with his/her students, the way in which instructions and explanations were delivered, how the resources were exploited, how the language was used and how the content was mastered. Pre-service teachers agreed on the fact that supervisory feedback should be delivered immediately after each lesson is observed since it is important for them to know what the supervisors' comments and suggestions are as soon as the lesson is over. Moreover, pre-service teachers claimed that they need to be able to respond to their supervisors' feedback as well as to explain the reasons for behaving in the way they did during the lesson.

The relationship between the university supervisor and the pre-service teacher was described as unfluent and sometimes distant due to the lack of time supervisors face plus the numerous pre-service teachers they have to observe in a short period of time. All the pre-service teachers interviewed preferred verbal feedback over written feedback. They noted that, when feedback is verbal, the assessment role is minimised and the suggestions made by the supervisors result clearer. Furthermore, written feedback may cause misunderstanding and confusion and provides concise information on the student teacher's performance.

The interviewees highlighted the positive aspects of supervisory feedback and pointed out the importance of receiving feedback that promotes discussion, reflection and critical thinking. Expressions such as "you did very well" or "good idea" were not considered useful by pre-service teachers. On the contrary, they expected comments that made reference to specific situations in the lesson and that provided concrete examples of how a teacher is expected to behave in the classroom. If the supervisor focused more on the negative aspects of the lesson and pre-service teachers were not able to find a "balance" between the positive and negative

aspects mentioned in the feedback received, they felt frustrated, uncomfortable and, in some cases, “lost”. Therefore, they stressed that feedback should be communicated in a supportive, sensitive manner in order to help future teachers to increase their self-confidence and self-awareness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research study explored, from a qualitative stance, student teachers’ views on the ways supervisory feedback should be communicated during the ELT practicum.

The research findings were consistent in that all the student teachers interviewed agreed on the fact that feedback should be transmitted orally, it should present weaknesses and strengths in a balanced way, it should provide enough information and concrete examples for student teachers to clearly understand the supervisor’s viewpoint and it should promote reflection and critical thinking skills. Communicating feedback constitutes a central component of the practicum. It is the task of university supervisors to find the best strategies to communicate feedback constructively and promote reflective thinking. By enhancing student teachers’ participation in making judgment on performance and by helping them to set targets for improvement, student teachers’ ownership of the assessment process is maximized and self-regulated learning is promoted. As a result of reflecting on the impacts of their actions on pupils’ learning outcomes, setting goals and targets for further improvement and tracking their own learning paths, pre-service teachers develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to become autonomous professionals, who determine the direction of their learning.

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