

Classroom Research in Pre-Service Teacher Training: A Case Study

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Abstract

Pre-service teacher training in Slovakia offers several components which allow trainees to experience all aspects of teaching profession. Teaching practice conducted at elementary and secondary schools is usually the right time to observe experienced teachers and to learn the first skills in the real setting. Most of the time during the teaching practice is spent by trainees over the planning of lessons, conducting the lessons and reflecting on the achievements and the space for improvement.

However, the teaching practice offers also some space which can be devoted to deeper analysis of what trainees experience, to conceptualisation and deduction of new principles based on theoretical background gained in methodology seminars and concrete experience during the lessons taught or observed. This paper focuses on how teaching practice can be connected with classroom research and highlights the positives of what this experience brings to trainees as well as problematic aspects which are connected to conducting research in school conditions. It raises the question whether trainees are in fact able to carry out a meaningful research with the skills gained during the studies and whether the tools of classroom or action research are available to them as future teachers.

Keywords

classroom research, teacher beliefs, pre-service teacher training, research methods

Introduction

Teacher training traditionally prepares future teachers for many roles they need to perform during teaching. There are many specific roles mentioned by ELT professionals (e.g. Harmer 2001, Homolová, 2003) such as the role of organizer, assessor, tutor, resource, etc.

One of these roles, however, is perceived as “kind of awkward” by the teachers themselves. It is the role of a researcher. Teachers have a tendency to look at anything connected to the concept of research as the world too distant and irrelevant for their every-day work. In their understanding it is what teachers and researcher from universities do in order to feed the university students with the sufficient amount of theory.

However, even trainees do not envisage the role of a researcher as an important one for their future career because they find it difficult to see clearly any practical application of this role in their future profession. Viewing theory

and practice as something disconnected seems to be a logical consequence of listening to practitioners saying: *"It's all just nice theory but just wait until you get to practice – there you will learn everything from the beginning"*.

These viewpoints are rather dangerous since trainees have a tendency to accept them as true quite easily. Thus it seems inevitable for teacher trainers to constantly remind trainees during their training courses of the famous quote by Kurt Lewin that *"there is nothing so practical as a good theory"*. Even though some researchers have certain reservations to this quote, still they agree that *"practice can develop differently in the presence of theory"* (Sandelands 1990, p.258). And what is more important than making theory practical is thinking about the principles and seeing their demonstration in the real setting.

Teacher education should allow the space for challenging trainees' beliefs about learning and teaching which are based mainly on the prior experience and thus taken for granted. Trust that trainees have developed over years to the ways they have seen their teachers used are the reason why it is much easier for them to accept something that is in accordance with this experience rather than something that contradicts it. The question of beliefs system is, therefore, of crucial importance in any teacher training course.

The role of teacher beliefs

In recent years, educational research has shifted the attention of prime interest from observable actions that happen in the classroom to such aspects which are not visible however still influence the learning and teaching processes, e.g. personality of the learner and teacher, learning atmosphere, individual predispositions as well as learners' and teachers' beliefs and assumptions about learning and teaching.

The concept of beliefs is important not only in understanding the learning and teaching process but they help us understand the reality and to function in our social environment. Borg (2001, p.186) outlines the concept of beliefs as follows: *"... a belief is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour..."* It is quite obvious that beliefs, especially those held unconsciously would serve as a selective aspect of whatever new areas a person is being confronted with.

In teacher training it is very important to pay attention to what is addressed as teacher beliefs. This term usually refers to teachers' pedagogic beliefs about teaching, learning, and learners; subject matter (i.e. language); self as a teacher, or the role of a teacher. Richards and Lockhardt (1995, p.30) claim that *"teachers' belief systems are founded on the goals, values, and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the systems in*

which they work and their roles within it." Also other educational psychologists (Williams & Burden, 1997; Woods, 1996;) admit the importance of these beliefs in whatever action we take in the classes and whatever decision we make as teachers. Their importance needs to be stressed even because they might guide a teacher more than a teacher training course or any methodological advice published in teacher's books can.

Research that has been conducted within the field of teachers' belief systems suggests that we need to look at the sources of their origin to understand the complexity of their substance. Richards and Lockhardt (1995, p.30) for example state several sources of teachers' beliefs. One of the most important seems to be teachers' own experience as language learners. It is quite interesting to mention one teacher's point of view comparing her prior learning experience of teachers and their teacher training: *„By the time we receive our bachelor's degree, we have observed teachers and participated in their work for up to 3,060 days. In contrast, teacher preparation programs [at the master's level] usually require [about] 75 days of classroom experience. What could possibly happen during these 75 days to significantly alter the practices learned during the preceding 3,060 days?“* (ibid, p. 30).

They mention further that are also other sources of teachers' beliefs such as the experience of what works best for individual teachers as well as established practice within one school or area or even the whole country or the personality factors. All these play an important role in selecting certain patterns of interaction with students, preferences among teaching approaches and philosophies. Last but not least educationally based or research-based principles may also influence the formation of their beliefs, e.g. attendance at conferences, seminars, courses, sharing their experience with other professionals and learning from the latest results of pedagogical research. (ibid.)

The belief system serves as a selective factor also in what trainees perceive as helpful, feasible and applicable from the content that is presented by their trainees. They do not simply take over the suggestions of the trainer in the course and do not put these in practice with ease. The decisions they make seems to be well-established in the system of their internal principles. This can be illustrated by a comment one trainee made as a reaction to a lesson where a lecturer tried to present the advantages of presenting grammar communicatively: *“How can I believe it works? I have never been taught like that before!”*

What seems to open the channels of penetrating into the layers of deeply-rooted principles is to question the main decisions that we make during planning or teaching and search for satisfactory answers. Questions like these might focus us on thinking about what guides us to certain actions and what influences us in our decision-making process. The process of becoming aware of why things are

happening is a discovery process based on experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). We go through and experience, we reflect on it and after that think about this experience, consult other people and professional literature and finally we make a plan for further steps. Kolb (ibid, p. 3) argues the *“people do learn from their experience, and the results of that learning can be reliably assessed and certified for college credit. At the same time, programs of sponsored experiential learning are on the increase in higher education. Internships, field placements, work/study assignments, structured exercises and role plays, gaming simulations, and other forms of experience-based education are playing a larger role in the curricula of undergraduate and professional programs.”*

The role of classroom research

Classroom research has the potential to address teachers' beliefs and thus bring teachers to deeper consideration of how they carry out the decision making process. Hopkins (2002, p.1) offers his understanding of classroom research as an *“act undertaken by teachers, to enhance their own or a colleague's teaching, to test the assumptions of educational theory in practice, or as a means of evaluating and implementing whole school priorities.”*

When we look back at the theory of teachers' beliefs it is quite obvious that trainees with no real experience of their own might actually rely more on their experience as language learners and the practices performed by their own teachers, so classroom research implemented into a training course can actually offer some space for testing the assumptions they hold based on their prior experience.

The origins of teacher research as a movement, as Hopkins (ibid.) projects it, can be traced back to the Schools Council's Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP) (1967-72) directed by Stenhouse with its emphasis on an experimental curriculum who published his experience in the book *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. There were other attempts which followed this initial project such as the Ford Teaching Project by Elliott and Adelman (1972-75), which involved about 40 primary teachers in the act of thinking about their classroom practices. These pioneering projects led to much higher interest among teachers to take over the roles of researchers (Hopkins 2002, p. 2).

However, teachers in general find rather problematic to get involved in classroom research carried out as action-based research. The study of Nunan points to several reasons why teachers might not be so keen on taking a part in a classroom research:

1. lack of time;

2. lack of experience, particularly with critical phases of research, such as formulating the research question and determining the appropriate research design and statistical tools;
3. difficulty in identifying subjects;
4. problems in negotiating access to research sites;
5. issues of confidentiality;
6. ethical questions relating to collecting data (these arise when one wants to collect oral language without alerting subjects to the fact that they are being observed...);
7. sensitivity of reporting negative findings, particularly if these relate to worksites of individual with whom one is associated;
8. Preparation of a written report of the research (Nunan, 1992, p. 219).

Similar findings came out of the case study presented below in which trainee teachers asked their mentors during their teaching practice whether they have carried out any kind of classroom research. 97% of the teachers responded negatively and in one case the teacher admitted some kind of research cooperation within a project schema but this was not initiated by the teacher herself. The barriers which were stated as main reasons preventing them from carrying out action-based research seem to be quite similar the list above:

1. No time for this kind of activity – they claimed they are overloaded with administrative tasks in such extent that another, as they named it, administration is not appealing for them.
2. Another reason that they stated was the lack of motivation – teachers did not really envisage any benefits they could gain. Their ideas of how learning and teaching processes should be organized were quite definite and they did not see any relevance for action research in their setting.

Teachers in practice might feel hesitance when it comes to research also due to the lack of experience as Nunan (ibid) states and if we take into consideration the level of involvement of trainees into any kind of research tasks during their studies, the result is far from satisfactory. As a consequence, trainees who start their teaching career with minimum experience in the field of carrying out classroom research will thus not feel competent to start any activity of this kind. However, thinking about their own teaching, collecting some data to discover the facts which can lead them towards the change in their belief system and in the way they approach teaching is more than desirable for a developing teacher. So it seems quite relevant for teacher educators to consider possibilities of equipping trainees with the skills of conducting classroom research for their future benefits. As Walker (in Nunan, 1990, p. 17) states, that *“teacher education programmes with a prominent teacher research component vest much more authority in the*

trainees than the trainer, as it is the trainees rather than the trainer who set the agenda. They will be the people who have the first-hand experience of the problem and its context, and the onus will be on them to communicate issues, difficulties and concerns..."

A case study: classroom research project in pre-service teacher training

In accordance with above mentioned we tried to incorporate the classroom research element into the teacher education programme in Slovakia. The idea behind introducing the classroom research element into the teacher training course was to help trainees implement in their future teaching practice such techniques to which clear justifications can be found and which will not be only a result of a vague system of their belief. The secondary benefits also included the expectations that trainees as future teachers should be able to apply theoretical principles into practice in order to see whether and how things work in their context.

The case study had the aim to gather the data about the skills of conducting research in the school environment. The main aim was to find out how able the trainees are to design the classroom research, to state appropriate research questions, to select the appropriate research method as well as to analyze their data and to come to relevant conclusions. The Classroom Research Project was assigned as a compulsory element of the third (as well the last) semester in a two-year training programme. The case study focus group consisted of 45 trainees who have mastered the basic issues of English teaching methodology in previous two semesters (approx. 78 hours of training) and they have experienced one week of school observations (approx. 10 hours observed) and two weeks of teaching practice (approx. 16 lessons taught) in a regular school setting. In Methodology seminars during their training they have experienced teaching at least two micro-sessions (each for at least 15 minutes) with the feedback discussion and analysis of selected issues. In the last semester of Methodology the trainees were assigned the classroom research project which was to be realized during two-week teaching practice at secondary schools.

Trainees received a lecture on classroom research – where they could learn about how to define research areas, how to state research questions, how to identify the research methods, which will bring the data they need. Trainees had a chance to discuss in the successive seminar the ways of data collection and interpretation and also how to prepare the written report they were expected to hand in.

The area of research was for the purpose of this classroom research selected and limited to a specifically given topic, otherwise trainees might feel lost which area to choose. Trainees were asked to do some background reading and define

the basic concepts in order to make sure they understand the focus of the research. In the introductory instruction they were offered sample research questions however, they were free to design their own questions. Their further tasks were to choose an appropriate research method. The choice of research methods was limited as well due to the nature of the research project which was to be conducted during their two-week teaching practice. Trainees were advised to choose one of the following research methods:

- *observations* – they were asked to carry out at least 4 observations of what happens in the class, with the aim to record how the teacher supported or focused on the issues from the topic of the research during the lessons and how balanced this focus was. They were directed to design a grid with key categories which were supposed to guide their observations.
- *a questionnaire* – trainees were asked to design a set of approximately 10 questions through which they would collect the data about the main topic for students (the minimum number of students were at least 40). Trainees were encouraged to use basic statistical methods to analyze and interpret their data.
- *an interview with students* – a brief interview was to be conducted with a group of students (5-10). The interview was to be recorded and transcript provided.
- *an interview with a teacher* - a brief interview was to be conducted with individual teachers (supervisors or other teachers at school). The transcript or detailed notes (question-answer) were to be provided.

Completed Classroom Research Projects were delivered and evaluated by the trainer. Each trainee received evaluation based on several criteria:

- introduction of the topic - the focus was on how they managed to define the key concepts and briefly introduce the topic
- appropriacy of research questions – the focus was on which research questions they have selected or how they designed their own research questions
- method selection and handling the method in general – the focus was on whether the method they have selected corresponded with the research question and could bring the data they needed as well as how trainees managed the process of data collection, e.g. how they formulated questions for their questionnaires or for their interviews
- data analysis – the focus was on how they managed to analyze the data they collected during two weeks, how they managed to see correlations and implications

- conclusions and general impression - the focus was on how trainees managed to synthesize all their findings and bring it to the final conclusions connected to their research questions.

Research results

In the feedback sessions trainees admitted they were not very clear on how they were supposed to carry out this task and what exactly they could expect as an outcome. Even after the introduction of the research methods and exemplification of similar project results, they still felt insecure in whether their choice of methods and steps they took were the ones expected.

In general it can be said that the aim of this research project has its value in the training course. The overall evaluation of this project brought interesting findings about how trainees carry out the project step-by-step. For instance, majority of trainees decided to use a questionnaire – they considered as the easiest and manageable way of obtaining the data. They had much clearer idea of how they would go about this method in the classroom. However, the overall experience with this project can be reflected through positive aspects which were possible to notice as well as some problematic aspects which need to be addressed in the future.

Positive aspects of the classroom research project can be summarized into several points:

1. *Trainees had a chance to experience the path of a researcher* – they did the project with the initial support given to them, they had a chance to consult the procedure with the trainer, the results of their classroom research could not influence any of the learners so they need not worry about the negative impact of what the results could possibly reveal.

2. Each trainee received *the feedback* from the trainer so they had a chance to realize the strong and weak points of their research and they learned how to improve things in the future. This was very helpful especially for the students who were getting ready for their diploma thesis in English methodology and were preparing for their own research within their own theme. It was clearer to them what kind of data they could expect from which research method. They also had a chance to think about the faults and wrong steps they took during their classroom research project and they were more aware of how to avoid it in the future.

3. Most students who decided for the *data collection from students* (whether an interview or a questionnaire) experienced that for the first time and they considered this way of learning about how students see their own learning process or their teacher's teaching as very interesting and beneficial. Most of

them expressed their desire to use this method also in their own teaching practice in the future.

4. Trainees started to think about what was happening in the class and about *what was beyond the teachers' decisions* to carry out certain actions in the class. They had to start questioning the actions they saw and search for supporting principles which would explain the teacher's decisions. They also had a chance to compare their own thinking about the topic and their mentor's thinking which also provided space for contemplation. That was also a new experience for them since before they were more focused on the visible actions and activities teachers did. This reflective process was the main aim of the classroom research project. Instead of taking notes of well-tried procedures they had to rely on their thinking process in order to justify their conclusions.

5. The project itself had an important unforeseen benefit. In the feedback sessions trainees admitted that they were proud of themselves to be able to carry out such a task which they considered impossible or at least rather demanding at the beginning. They mentioned that they felt important when they carried out the interviews or handed out the questionnaires to students. Of course, this added value is important for trainees as their *personal positive feeling* though this fact cannot be taken as significant for the classroom research project as such.

At the same time this project pointed to several **problematic issues** which will need to be addressed in the future. Some of the most troublesome issues can be specified as follows:

1. Trainees had serious problems to *formulate questions* for their questionnaires. It only occurred to them that their questions were inappropriate when they were not able to draw any conclusions from the data they gained. Even though this can be viewed as a lesson they have learnt, it will be important in the future to implement more support in this field in order to avoid complications in the final phase. For instance, they used a lot of terminology in the questions for their students which was completely unknown to them. As well they asked questions which were absolutely irrelevant for the focus of their research. This means they did not really envisage how the answers are going to lead them towards any conclusions.

2. While discussing the results of their questionnaires they found it difficult to *find correlations* in the individual areas and interpret these based on their own experience.

3. It will be important to pay more attention to trainees' complete understanding of *how qualitative data should be discussed*. This area seemed to be problematic even though many interviews especially the interviews with teachers brought a lot of interesting findings. Trainees had a tendency to apply the same procedures for their interpretation as if these were questionnaires –

one question by another despite the fact they had been instructed how to design categories for data analysis. More attention will have to be paid to this area since it turned out that interviews were a quite frequent choice of the research method.

4. In the area of qualitative data there was one more problematic aspect. Trainees did not really grasp the *role of the interviewer* with ease. They did not feel secure enough to lead an interview with their mentor and thus they stuck to their prepared questions-sets like glue, so in many cases interviews were presented as if they were oral questionnaires. The quality of data deteriorated by the fact that they did not ask additional questions and they were often satisfied with yes/no answer. These aspects of interviews were not anticipated in advance and trainees were not ready for this.

5. For the future use it will be desirable to provide trainees with wider *space for presentation* of their results since they can learn a lot from each other's findings especially if they have a common thematic thread. Oral presentation of the findings would also help to focus the trainees more on justification of their conclusions.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on highlighting the importance of preparing future teachers for the role of a researcher in their own environment. This skill can widen teachers' perspectives on their own development. At present teachers are not very keen on carrying out any actions connected to research-based activities especially because they are not aware of any benefits these activities can bring. As it was mentioned the lack of experience can also play a role in their attitude towards classroom research. The case study which was presented is a part of teacher education at pre-service level and was designed with the idea of introducing the basis of classroom research to trainees before they enter teaching profession. As trainees' first experience it obviously had a number of limitations, still the value of experience was appreciated in the end.

Teacher education aims to prepare future teachers for all roles they are to perform in the school setting. Even though there is a limited space for this during the courses offered in pre-service teacher training, we should at least try to engage trainees in those actions we expect them to perform in the practice. Therefore, the role of researcher should be no different from those of the assessor or organizer. To try out what it takes seems to be much more relevant than to think what it takes.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported in part by a grant from KEGA 006PU-4/2012.

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