CLASSROOM OBSERVATION AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Ntombekhaya Fulani

and

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This article should be of interest to teacher trainers but also to teachers who wish to benefit from reflecting on their lessons and on observing each other’s lessons with the view to development of teaching competence.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a distinctive feature of the BEd in-service course for English teachers offered at Rhodes University by the Institute for the Study of English in Africa (ISEA), namely, the classroom-based support and school site visits for teachers. At least once a semester, a lecturer or dedicated school support facilitator visits teachers in their classrooms to observe them teaching a lesson. The main purpose of this part of the course is to improve teachers’ classroom practice through assisting teachers to reflect critically on the lesson observed by attending to important underlying principles of the new curriculum such as pacing, sequencing...
and curriculum coverage. Pacing refers to how a teacher plans, allocates and manages time during a lesson, while sequencing refers to the various stages and tasks that constitute a lesson and ensure that it meets the stated learning outcome. Curriculum coverage concerns the amount of curriculum content to be covered within a given time; for example, in language education, learning to maintain a balance of speaking, reading, writing and grammar that is appropriate for the grade, according to official curriculum policy needs. A variety of lesson transcripts on different topics were collected for analysis by the researchers during school visits in 2009 and 2010, from Grade 8 through to Grade 12. They focus on various (combinations of) language skills across the range of grades. This paper is based on these transcripts, as well as teachers’ reflections in their journals.

COURSE CONTENT

Broadly, the course focuses on developing language teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge. The nexus of content knowledge concerns the what (the core language skills of listening, speaking, reading/viewing, writing, and grammar and related aspects of linguistic theory such as genre and critical language awareness) and the how (pedagogical knowledge: practical and procedural classroom teaching decisions, including sequencing and pacing of lessons and an understanding of learning theory and assessment). There is also a cross-cutting focus on classroom management knowledge related to discipline, record-keeping and assessment, social/ethical issues around the environment and HIV/AIDS, professional conduct, human rights, and understanding the underpinnings of the new curriculum.

The course is interactive. Teachers sit in groups of about six per table, tasks and activities are designed to model the participatory, learner-centred approach of the new curriculum and to give the teachers a lived experience of these pedagogies. Over the three-year duration of the course, there
are eight contact sessions at Rhodes University totalling 40 days that take place during school holidays at the end of each term, as well as a two-day seminar and two workshops per term at a central location near the teachers’ schools.

The purposes of visiting schools and observing lessons are threefold: firstly, to give teachers support in reflecting on and improving their classroom practice; secondly, to monitor the extent to which teachers are able to implement new understandings, strategies and pedagogies introduced in the course; and thirdly, for university-based academics to observe rural Eastern Cape schools and classrooms at first hand in order to better understand the challenges facing teachers (Sayed 2004).

During a school visit the university-based lecturer or school support facilitator observes and makes notes of the lesson to provide a rough running transcript of the lesson, focusing on the teachers’ inputs (talk, instructions and board notes) and learners’ responses and tasks. The lesson is briefly discussed with the teacher in terms of its strengths and weaknesses and a copy of the lesson transcript is given to the teacher as a record and for later more detailed self-reflection in their journals. In addition, many of the lessons are video-taped and a DVD copy of the lesson is given to the teacher to view later.

SAMPLE

In the Queenstown district there are 49 high schools and 135
high school teachers of English, as both first and additional languages, and one Subject Advisor to support those teachers. The BEd programme includes 30 Queenstown English teachers as well as the Subject Advisor. The 30 teachers are in 24 schools, 15 in rural and nine in urban settings.

We purposefully selected four graduate teachers (two men and two women), each with at least five years’ experience at two functional schools to evaluate the impact of the course on the practice of well-qualified teachers at schools that have a sound physical infrastructure and governance (see Table 1). We use pseudonyms for the names of the teachers and schools to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of teacher</th>
<th>Teaching experience</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Grades taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonisile</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>STD, BEd (Hons)</td>
<td>10, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pumla</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>STD, FDE, BEd</td>
<td>9 – 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thabo</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>STD, BTech, BEd (Hons)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumi</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>STD, ACE, BEd (Hons)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Teachers’ professional details

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As is clear from the course description above, the BEd course assumes that there is a direct and positive link between teachers’ reflective practice and their professional development. A substantial literature linking reflective practice and professional development exists, dating from Schon (1983) up to the present. But how do we know this link actually operates in the classroom? What counts as evidence of reflective practice and what are the indicators of professional development in teachers’ classroom practice?

Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold (2003:88) identify various
classroom-level indicators of teachers’ pedagogic practice based on four theoretical constructs: the social organization of the school, use of language, curriculum and pedagogy, and evaluation. Interestingly, none of these indicators includes teachers’ reflecting on their practice.

The indicators of teachers’ professional development we use during classroom observation (which have much in common with Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold’s (2003) indicators) include classroom setting; pacing and time management; sequencing; the nature of learners’ engagement and opportunity to learn; teachers’ questioning and explanations. In addition, teachers reflect on the lesson observed, in conversation with the facilitator, Ntombekhaya (Khaya). Typically, a teacher starts by reflecting on what worked well in the lesson, what could be improved or changed, and sets goals for the next lesson.

When a teacher asks a question such as ‘What have learners learnt in this lesson?’ and supplies cogent answers, we consider this a sign of critical reflection. Further, teachers’ ability to link their reflections to theory is regarded as a measure of their professional development. For our discussion in this paper, however, we focus on only one indicator of teachers’ professional development: post-lesson critical reflection on practice.

FINDINGS

Patterns in post-lesson critical reflection on practice

We compare the teachers’ post-lesson critical reflections over time as an example of how their reflective capacity developed. At the beginning of the course teachers were taught the importance of reflecting on one’s practice.

Initially all the teachers found reflecting on a lesson difficult to do. One teacher, Thabo, completely misunderstood the purpose. He tried to reflect on a lesson before it was taught. For the first lesson observation, he wrote his
reflections while planning the lesson and presented these ‘reflections’ as part of his lesson plan.

Rather than reflecting critically on what went well and what needed improvement, many teachers simply recounted events in their lessons, as Bonisile’s journal reflection, below, illustrates:

One learner was asked to read the poem for the rest of the class. The teacher explained some of the poetic devices in the poem. Some of the figures of speech dealt with were alliteration, apostrophe, metaphors and simile. The learners were divided into groups of six. Each group was given a stanza to identify figures of speech and to report back.

Many also found it difficult to identify the things they had done well, things which made their lessons a success, and without the prompting of the facilitator they tended to focus on what needed to be changed in their lessons. Tumi, for example, relied on the facilitator (Khaya) to identify the positive aspects of her writing lesson. She wrote in her journal:

Khaya started with the good things that happened

(i) emphasis of learners’ prior knowledge
(ii) interactive – learners participated well
(iii) treatment of some aspects of the curriculum cycle
(iv) the instructions of the classwork were written on the chalkboard
(v) learners were seen as assessors because they were given a rubric to mark each others’ work
(vi) time management was spot-on
However, towards the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010 teachers’ ability to reflect on their practice started to show improvement. Tumi’s journal reflection in the second year of the course is evidence that she is beginning to make informed decisions in her classroom.

During the lesson I also used group work to identify what they can see in the two texts because according to Vygotsky, the learners are social beings who learn better through interaction with others.

The lesson was conducted in the target language and it was not directly focused on teaching grammar as Krashen mentioned that learners will unconsciously acquire the correct use of language through the learning process.

Tumi’s journal reflection provides evidence that she is beginning to reflect more independently and is less reliant on the debriefing with the facilitator, and also that she uses theory to inform and deepen her reflections. The two photographs below illustrate how, at the beginning of the classroom observations in 2009 Tumi’s learners sat in rows (pic.1), but by 2010, most teachers, including Tumi, were arranging learners in groups (pic.2).

1.    2.

Likewise, Pumla draws on theory to reflect how she groups learners:

On 13 July I was visited by Khaya, my lesson was on debate. I introduced my lesson well and developed my lesson into stages but somehow I noticed that some of the learners were struggling. I have learnt how to deal more effectively with students who have problems in expressing themselves. I then devised a strategy, based on Vygotsky learners learn more when they are grouped according to their mixed abilities, that the low attainers sit with the middle attainers, middle attainers
with high attainers. Then there was improvement. They then had more input into what they did and how they did it. My lesson was a success.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we consider the implications of these findings for three role-players: teachers themselves, in-service teacher educators and district officials such as Subject Advisors.

Firstly, it is evident that teachers need regular, on-going support to improve their practice. It is clearly not easy for teachers to understand and articulate what it is that they do: what is working in their lessons, what the problems are and what they can do about them.

Secondly, the current practice, that only pre-service (*not* in-service) teacher education courses require systematic lesson observation by an academic, needs to be changed. If one accepts that a central purpose of most in-service teacher education courses is to improve teachers’ classroom practice, then one must also build in some mechanism to monitor the extent to which teachers are able to implement new understandings and pedagogies introduced in the course.

Finally, to create conditions for systemic and sustained improvement in schooling, it is essential that district-level officials such as Curriculum Advisors and Education Development Officers visit schools regularly and observe teachers in their classrooms in a supportive and monitoring role. These officials cannot have as their main concern systemic evaluations only. Also, as Bloch (2009:106) has noted, the great silence in South African educational circles about the role of teacher unions in constraining constructive co-operation between district officials and schools needs to be addressed openly.
REFERENCES


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