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NEW TO SELF-REFLECTION AND SELF-EVALUATION: NOVICE TEACHERS AS DIARY WRITERS

Danuta Gabryś-Barker

1. INTRODUCTION

In present day approaches to teacher training and its objectives, language teacher development is seen as not only based on a programme of studies completed in a training institution but it also emphasizes the role of the teacher and his/her insider's view of his/her own teaching and development. The idea of reflective teaching emerged as a multidimensional construct related to the effectiveness of one's didactic practices and professionalisation.

As I argue elsewhere:

Being reflective may be an innate feature of personality observed in one's daily life and activity, extending as well into a professional context. However, it can also be developed through creation of certain habits at the stage of professional training (as it is in the case of teacher training). If acquired at the pre-service stage, it will become a part of professional routine at the in-service stage (GABRYŚ-BARKER, 2008 a).

Consequently, the reflective teacher's presence in the classroom is seen as:

[...] a state of alertness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group, in the context of their learning environment, and the ability to respond

with a considered and compassionate best next step (RODGERS and RAIDER-ROTH, 2006: 265).

This alertness and receptivity of a teacher results in his/her reflective behaviours at different stages of didactic procedures undertaken in and beyond the classroom (Table 1).

Table 1
Types of reflection (based on FARRELL, 2007: 4–6 in GABRYŚ-BARKER, 2008 a)

Type of reflection	Characteristics
Reflection-in-action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — occurs when tacit knowledge based and often automatic and routinized action is not sufficient — a routine response of a teacher triggers a non-routine response of a learner (element of surprise) — acting on a spot (intuitively and spontaneously experimenting) — experienced teachers have a repertoire of actions to take, novices may lose control of the situation — based on past experiences
Reflection-on-action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — carried out on completion of the lesson in a form of retrospective interpretation of the events — metacognitive awareness of classroom events, — analysis based on experience, tacit knowledge and structured analysis
Reflection-for-action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — a combination of the two types of reflections, and the ultimate goal — planning for future actions — revisiting one's beliefs and attitudes

This paper continues the discussion which concerns itself with ways of developing teacher reflectivity at the early stage of becoming a qualified language instructor (GABRYŚ-BARKER, 2008 a, b and c). It looks upon diary writing as one of the possible instruments in developing teacher's reflectivity and the way that trainees respond to keeping them.

2. DIARY WRITING

Diary or journal writing is only one of the forms of teacher narratives which is assumed to embrace more specific situations and experiences of individuals that may contribute significantly to individuals' awareness of processes occurring in and beyond the classroom context (GABRYŚ-BARKER, 2008 a). In

this context, a diary is defined as an instrument for verbalizing and structuring teacher's thoughts, which allows for a more conscious exploration of one's own thinking about teaching and learning processes. According to Farrell, it should also be regarded as:

- [...] a way of exploring one's own beliefs and practices
- [...] a way of becoming more aware of one's teaching styles
- [...] a way of monitoring one's own practices (FARRELL, 2007: 109).

He also sees it as a form of "positive feedback on one's own teaching, for example by writing about one's successful experiences and a way to vent one's frustrations and set goals for remedying problems". It is also a way "to raise questions and issues to think about in the future [...] triggering insights about one's self as a teacher and about one's teaching". Farrell also emphasizes the collaborative nature of diary writing (then it is called journal writing) in the sense that it may be used "to provide a record of one's teaching for others to read (FARRELL, 2007: 109)

3. ONE DIARY — MANY PURPOSES

A diary is a multipurpose tool that can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives. This project aims at raising trainees' awareness of what they consider significant in their teaching, so it first of all focuses on the reflection involved in identifying so-called critical incidents — CI (TRIPP, 1993 and WOODS, 1993) and ways of analyzing them. The critical incidents identified by the trainees are interpreted in terms of success and/or failure so the focus is therefore on the trainees' perceptions of their strong and weak points, and their individual responses to being successful or failing at those critical moments. It also shows through the subjects' narratives their perceptions of themselves as teachers and their system of beliefs. A corpus of 30 diaries written over a period of one academic year by trainee teachers in their final year of gaining qualifications to become teachers of English as a foreign language constitutes the data for this analysis. It was supplemented by a questionnaire in which the trainees voiced their opinions about their individual experience of diary writing and its value for their professional development. The diaries written by the students make up their diploma work, which is an obligatory part of their college requirements. Table 2 presents an outline of a sample work.

The first area of discussion highlighted the events that occurred in students' classrooms during their practicum in the first months of teaching and were iden-

Table 2

The format of the project (a diploma work)

Stage	Title	Content	Objective
Introduction	The teaching context	1. <i>Me as teacher</i> 2. <i>My students</i> 3. <i>My school</i>	Presentation of the teaching contexts and learner profile
Chapter I	<i>My beginnings</i>	1. <i>The first impression</i> 1.1. <i>Diary entry 1</i> 1.2. <i>Comments</i> 2. <i>Ghosts from the past</i> 2.1. <i>Diary entry 2</i> 2.2. <i>Comments</i> 3. <i>Checking the borders</i> 3.1. <i>Diary entry 3</i> 3.2. <i>Comments</i> 4. <i>Summary</i>	— Introduction to teaching in the the first month of teaching practice — Initial self-evaluation (strong and weak points) — Setting goals
Chapter II	<i>In the middle</i>	— 3 entries in the mid-period of practicum — summary	— The end of the first semester teaching experiences — Evaluation of progress
Chapter III	<i>Towards the end</i>	— 3 entries in the final period of practicum — summary	— The third (final stage) of teaching practice — Evaluation of progress
Chapter IV	<i>My year at school</i>	1. Introduction (general remarks) 2. Successes 3. Failures 4. A way forward	— Self-reflection (a general impression) — Highlighting success and failure areas — Planning for future
Appendices		Lesson plans, materials used, comments from learners (optional)	Additional information, learner's feedback to a novice teacher
Bibliography		References and sources used in analysis of critical incidents	To support the analysis of the entries with theory and research findings

tified by them as critical. The focus was on describing them in terms of their content focus (e.g. language teaching vs. management issues), the novice teachers' ability to identify a critical incident and the ways of analysis employed, as well as self-evaluation of performance. The different areas of focus in diary entries reflect directly the views student-teachers bring to their classrooms largely still seen from their own learning perspective. Their educational programmes (eg. TEFL methodology) abound in topics related to teaching different aspects of language and developing individual abilities at the level of technical skills: methods, techniques, tasks, materials choice. Hence 36% of all critical incidents reported focus on these areas. Also these are the major assessment categories that

are traditionally taken into consideration when students' teaching achievement becomes the objective. So it may be contended that these pre-service teachers see what is significant probably more from their own former perspective as learners from than that of being teachers themselves. The dominance of this focus area may also point to an understanding of the teacher as a transmitter of knowledge (even if it is done in an innovative way) rather than a facilitator. The issues of motivating and involving (33%) the second most significant area when critical incidents occur, are also related more often to lack of appropriate teaching methodology of how to make learners interested by designing appropriate tasks and using motivating materials than in developing appropriate classroom dynamics and establishing effective roles for both the teacher and learners. Only to a certain extent was the latter highlighted in the cases when significance was given to appropriate group composition in assigning group work. It related more however to rapport between learners themselves and their ability to work more effectively in certain learner configurations than in others. The remaining critical incidents described misbehaviour issues (13%) and teacher's affective states (6%) (for a detailed discussion see GABRYŚ-BARKER, 2008 a).

The second research area in the project focused on the trainees' perceptions of success and failure. The students tended to identify more critical incidents in which they themselves evaluated their performance as a failure: 44% failure vs. 22% success rates. What is interesting here is that failure did not seem to lead to a state of disequilibrium and helplessness. It was not perceived as negative and not permanent but developmental in 70% of cases of failure. There is a certain degree of disequilibrium described, however it is only seen as negative in 30% of cases, whereas 70% of those instances are described as encouraging the teacher to learn more and be more conscientious in teacher preparation, which was earlier described as critical. The novices are clear about what is successful in terms of episodes relating to category of motivation (33%). They assume that the observable involvement (or lack of it) of the learners in the activities conducted is the sole criterion for being successful (or unsuccessful). On the other hand, the trainees' perception of being either successful or failing is not that obvious in the context of the episodes that relate to effectiveness of teaching (36%). This, I think, highlights directly the area of serious didactic difficulties that new teachers encounter: how to evaluate and measure their own effectiveness at teaching on the level of methods and techniques used. This difficulty is openly expressed by some of the trainees who evaluate their own knowledge in certain areas of teaching as inadequate and requiring further formal and theoretical, not just experiential, development and study (a detailed discussion to be found in GABRYŚ-BARKER, 2008 b).

The third area of research related to trainees' perceptions of themselves as teachers and the sources of their beliefs. Their main beliefs expressed about teaching are seen as (in order of frequency):

- a mission to be accomplished,
- a highly specialist job requiring professionalism,
- a sharing of knowledge developed through study and experience,
- performing a well-prepared role.

These systems of belief can be conceptualized as metaphors of *a victorious battle, a lighthouse showing the way in difficulties, a guided tour or acting on the stage*. They are seen by the trainees as deriving from:

- models of former teachers that the trainees recover from their memory, mostly at the primary and secondary level — positive examples and, as such, copied by the trainees in their own classrooms, but also negative and, when so, rejected by them,
- one's personality features which determine preferred styles of management and interaction with the learners,
- the new teaching experiences of trainees.

3. TRAINEES' FEEDBACK TO SELF-REFLECTIVE DIARY WRITING

The focus of this article is the comments received from the trainees on the value of diary writing in the initial stages of their teaching experiences. The data was classified into comments reporting on the positive aspects vs. the negative aspects of systematic work with a diary. Table 3 presents the areas of positive attitudes to diary writing.

Table 3

The positive aspects of diary experience

"What I like about my diary writing?"	Comments (unedited language)
1	2
Development via awareness growth and self-evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Working on teaching mistakes more consciously 2. Focusing both on teacher's and learner's development more 3. Keeping track of one's development and experience 4. Noticing details, normally unnoticed 5. New awareness of problems 6. Paying more attention to what happens in class 7. Analyzing after the lesson at home, retrospectively 8. Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses 9. Reflecting about one's own teaching 10. Evaluating mistakes objectively (through analysis) 11. Analysis of one's style of teaching 12. Developing ability to predict problems 13. Writing about emotions, fears and feelings about students

con. tab. 3

1	2
Language and skills development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving language skills 2. Language learning (lexis) 3. Practicing writing skills 4. Writing a clearly structured text 5. Developing academic reading skills 6. Writing informal language (diary entries)
Motivation to teach	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being motivated to work harder and to improve 2. Being proud in writing a long research text 3. Enhancing self-esteem and personality growth 4. The personal aspect of it (It happened to me) 5. Based on true experience 6. Sharing with others experiences of failure
Learning about one's students	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning cooperation with students 2. Getting to know students and becoming more aware of them 3. Becoming aware of students' feelings and needs
Reviewing for tests and exams	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Developing theoretical knowledge for exam purposes 2. A tool for TEFL revision
Expanding theoretical knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looking for references in psychology and pedagogy (references) 2. Comparing theory with practice

It seems that the trainees see their diary writing experience as a thorough search for more theory and its validation through their own practices in the classroom, on which they have had a chance to reflect. This reflection in the form of written verbalizations expressing thinking processes makes them much more structured, hence more explicit and open to change. What also seems to have surfaced as a value of diary writing is reflection on the affectivity of the classroom context, in which trainees become more aware of the learners and not just themselves. Being still involved in the educational process, the students see a great value in expanding and also revising their knowledge of methodology employed in the analysis of the diary entries. Table 4 reports on “the aches and pains” the trainees experienced in their diary writing.

Table 4

The negative aspects of diary experience

“What I dislike about diary writing?”	Comments (unedited language)
Practical considerations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time consuming 2. Keeping to deadlines and time pressure 3. Unhealthy sitting in front of the computer the whole day 4. Difficulty in finding sources (references)
Analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying critical incidents and focusing them 2. Using 1st person narrative, feeling of subjectivity 3. Difficulty in self-evaluation 4. Not challenging enough

“What I dislike about diary writing?”	Comments (unedited language)
Stress	1. Breaking the code of secrecy (talking about students) 2. Stressful as it is a new experience 3. Using word-processor disturbs thinking
Language problems	1. Terminology and formal, academic register 2. Coming up with the titles for diary entries 3. Doubts concerning the use of quotations (plagiarism) and paraphrasing

Even though there are negative comments about this diary writing experience, the trainees in no way disavow its value. The drawbacks relate mostly to practical considerations of lack of time, necessity of spending it on writing and editing the texts. On the cognitive level, analysis seemed to pose problems mostly at the stage of identification of critical incidents. The novelty of the task of diary writing was a stressful event and brought with it a certain some degree of insecurity, especially at the early stages of writing. At the formal level, the language of the text and distinguishing between the informality of diary entries themselves and the formal language of analysis was considered a difficulty and a negative aspect of presenting one’s own reflections in this narrative.

In additional descriptive comments the trainees emphasized the growth of their professional awareness, the motivational character of diary writing (a willingness to improve) and it was a useful way (as mentioned earlier) of revising the theoretical material (Figure 1).

- *I can read the diary from time to time and think over my failures and successes*
- *In general I like writing and analyzing my diary entries [...] a fruitful experience which helps my development*
- *[...] it helps avoid similar mistakes*
- *[...] with time it gets harder and harder to find interesting and new critical moments*
- *Diary makes me work systematically. Moreover it is a good practice of writing longer composition*
- *Writing a diary motivates me to get to know my learners, their needs and interests*
- *Probably it is better than writing on one particular topic because it demand from us to study a variety of topics*

Fig. 1. Additional comments

5. THE FINAL WORD

As was pointed out earlier in the discussion of the project, what seems most important in the teacher narratives presented here is that all the trainees who

expressed their views see themselves as involved in a developmental process of becoming: becoming more aware and more reflective, more creative and better able to share their knowledge and also themselves as people with their own learners, revealing a powerful need to reflect on themselves in their own classrooms. Developing an awareness of this need and willingness to reflect are the first steps in developing the ability to reflect. This was achieved here by trying out a new complement to regular supervision and mentoring form of feedback to the teaching experiences of pre-service teachers. This form autonomously carried out by the trainees themselves in the form of diary writing, should therefore be evaluated as unqualified success.

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