

Full Length Research Paper

Diaries as a reflective tool in pre-service language teacher education

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This study presents and analyzes the positive and negative reflections of ten pre-service English teachers who kept diaries on their own learning and teaching processes and daily lives. The participants were students in an English Language Teacher Education Program who took an on-campus methodology course and voluntarily agreed to keep diaries. These student teachers were asked to write for one month, outside of class contact hours, about their own learning and teaching experiences. The diaries were analyzed to explore the pre-service English teachers' language learning and teaching processes, daily routines and turning points regarding their future profession. Results showed that diaries might provide an effective tool to gain insight into the pre-service English teachers' learning and teaching processes both in and outside of the classroom and to understand in more depth their daily routines as student teachers.

Key words: Pre-service teachers, diary, language teacher education, reflective thinking, Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a world that often requires agility by educators to rethink and shift their problem-solving strategies in teacher education. For this reason teacher candidates should be encouraged to practice reflective thinking as part of their professional development (Zeichner and Liston, 1987; Griffiths, 2000; Ward and McCotter, 2004; Yeşilbursa, 2011). Reflective practice in teacher education has gained importance recently as an alternative to two teacher learning models: the craft and applied science models (Ur, 1991). Considering all models and approaches in teacher education, educators have started exploring

meaningful options for helping pre-service teachers to reflect on their learning and teaching experiences (Shoffner, 2008). Reflective practice involves linking a current experience to something previously learned. In so doing, individuals can also see themselves, increase their awareness and improve the effectiveness of their learning and teaching. Reflection can be done via journals, logs, portfolios, and diaries, among other formats. In fact, researchers have reported the benefits of using different forms of reflective writing in teacher education (Freese, 2006).

The concept of reflective practice is commonly used

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in teacher education. When looking at definitions of reflection, we see a focus on its varied dimensions, as new trends and different studies affect perspective. Dewey (1933) defined reflection as “action based on the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it” (p. 9). Schön (1983) described it as an “artistic, intuitive process” that some practitioners use (p. 49). Similarly, McMillan and Weyers (2013) see reflection as the process whereby an individual evaluates an event or experience to arrive at a deeper understanding of the incident(s) and surrounding issues. According to Marcos et al. (2013), deliberate reflection by student teachers is a way to prepare, analyze and evolve their practice. For that reason, deliberate reflection has gained an important place in teacher education.

Reflective practices have also become a common practice in language teacher education through the use of diaries and discussion of daily classroom achievements and failures (Akbari, 2007). This development is most likely the result of the post-method discussion in language teaching (Prabhu, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Akbari (2007) explained that: in the method era, teachers were required to implement the dictates of language teaching methods without having much influence on the way methods were formulated in academic circles. The relationship between theoreticians and practitioners was (and to some extent still is) of a top down nature in which teachers were assigned little critical voice (p. 193).

Of the aforementioned reflection forms, diaries have acquired a distinct place in language learning and teacher education as they may contain potentially useful data for teacher education. McDonough (1994) pointed out that “diary-writing in an educational context has become a popular technique with several different types of application. It has now been used widely in both language teaching and in teacher training” (p.57). Moreover, Bailey (1990, p. 215) defined a diary study as “a first person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in personal diaries and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events”. According to Bailey (1990), diary studies have been used to document three main areas: 1) language learning experiences, 2) student teachers’ reactions to academic courses, and 3) language teaching experiences.

When studies related to reflective writing are considered in language teaching and learning, their importance and benefits come to the fore. For this reason, diary studies have been the focus of language researchers for some time. Woodfield and Lazarus (1998, p. 315) conducted a study with a group of Malaysian teachers in a short language-learning course. In this study, teachers reflected inwards about their own language learning processes and on themselves as teachers; and outwards about the learning processes of their students and on the teaching

processes of the course in relation to themselves as adult students.

Lowe (1987, p. 89) presented an experiment in which a group of teachers reversed roles and became learners of a foreign language while keeping diaries. On the other hand, Jarvis (1992) used learner diaries in order to understand how the teachers perceive the role of the diaries especially in relation to possible conflicting demands of reflecting on learning and presenting themselves in what they write. Numrich’s (1996, p. 131) study presents the results of a secondary analysis of 26 diary studies by novice ESL teachers. In this study, each participant was asked to write a personal language learning history. The obtained data were examined to identify common themes. The general themes that emerged from the analysis of the diaries were novice teachers’ early preoccupations with their teaching behaviour, transfer and rejection of teaching skills used in the novice teachers’ own L2 learning, unexpected discoveries about effective teaching, and continued teaching frustrations.

Several researchers have highlighted the benefits of keeping a diary for student teachers’ learning and teaching practices. Yeşilbursa (2013) pointed out in her study that transcription of student teachers’ participation in a lesson raises their awareness of their classroom language. She also indicated that reflecting through writing could help both pre-service and in-service teachers to think more productively on their practice. Within the framework of a foreign language (Japanese) teacher education course, Geyer’s (2008) study compared graduate teaching assistants’ observations of their own classroom performance through two distinct windows: an entire classroom and a targeted teacher-fronted led activity.

On the other hand, Medina (2013) explored the diary insights of a foreign-language reading teachers and found that classroom diaries could be objective contrary to the argument that classroom diaries are subjective. Lee’s (2007) study explored how dialogue journals and response journals could be used to encourage reflection among pre-service teachers. In terms of application, Lally (2000) argued that a major concern within the language teaching profession is the need to narrow the gap between research and teaching, and she supported the idea that language teaching and learning diaries could be an important mechanism in altering the traditional hierarchical flow of information from the researcher to the teacher. With this study Lally presented and compared findings from both the teaching and learning diaries of French conversation courses. In so doing, she assembled and evaluated the perspectives of teacher, student and researcher.

Chan (2011, p. 45) conducted a study that investigated learners’ autonomy and out-of class English language learning of proficient tertiary students in Hong Kong. The findings of this study presented some implications for

English language teachers and students to make use of out-of class opportunities and foster learners' autonomy.

Our aim in this study is continue the exploration of the use of dairies and reveal pre-service English teachers' language learning and teaching experiences, daily routines and turning points in their lives and thoughts regarding their future profession in an English language teacher education program at a state university in Turkey.

Research questions

The following questions were examined in this study:

- 1) What are the negative and positive reflections of preservice English teachers regarding their learning and teaching experiences?
- 2) What are the daily life routines and experiences of preservice English teachers?
- 3) What are their attitudes of preservice teachers towards keeping a diary in English outside the class-contact hours?

METHOD

The research approach in this study was exploratory in nature, qualitative in terms of the type of data used, and interpretive in its analysis (Bailey and Ochsner, 1983 in Woodfield and Lazarus, 1998, p. 317). As Dörnyei (2007, p. 38) pointed out, "qualitative research is concerned with subjective opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals and thus the explicit goal of research is to explore the participants' point of view of the situation being studied."

Participants

The participants comprised ten third-year students of an English language teaching education program at Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Muğla in Turkey who voluntarily agreed to keep dairies for one month. Their ages ranged from 21 to 23. All of them were non-native speakers of English. As they were placed in this program based on the foreign language component of a university entrance examination, their English language proficiency was considered similar. Their real names were not used in order to protect their identity. Instead, numbers were used to identify the findings from Student 1 (ST1) to Student 10 (ST10).

Procedure

The course in which the present study was conducted was the Teaching Language Skills II, which is given as the second part of a two-semester long methodology course in the third year of the English language teacher education program. By the end of the course, pre-service teachers were to learn the techniques and stages of teaching grammar, pronunciation, listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the present study, the researchers asked the students to keep dairies outside of contact hours for the course on the subject of language learning and teaching. As the researcher was also the course instructor, one aim of the study was to explore what English language teacher candidates would normally

do in order to keep their language ability at a proficient level and how they would stay up-to-date with recent developments in ELT in addition to course requirements.

Data analysis

In this case study, data were collected from the entries of ten student teachers' dairies during four weeks. The contents of the dairies were evaluated by two researchers, who were English language teaching experts. The interrater reliability was 0.90. The purpose of this analysis is to reveal what student teachers wrote according to three main themes:

- 1) positive and negative teaching and learning experiences,
- 2) daily life routines and experiences and
- 3) their attitudes towards keeping a diary as a part of this methodology course.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes were determined to better organize students' reflections. Some excerpts from the dairies are given as follows:

Negative reflections on teaching and learning behaviours and experiences

ST1: "All of my friends in the class pretended to understand while I was doing presentation. I know that in real classroom, there will be a lot of problems. For example, I prepared a puzzle activity or rhythmical irregular verbs activity by keeping in mind that they had learnt required verbs very well. But I know that it would be difficult for the students who had just learn tense to make sentences. I can remember easily now how I got disappointed on my first day while doing teaching practice. This is because in universities, we are just learning how to teach grammar inductively. We have been told how to contextualize language, and how to make use of context. But on my first day our lessons in the university did not work."

ST6: "There were especially pronunciation problems in the classroom today. Although it didn't last long, it made me uneasy. I tried to correct them by repeating. I think that I am afraid of making mistakes in front of the class. I wish I had better pronunciation" (Student after giving a presentation in the classroom).

ST3: "If I was the teacher of this class, I would correct my students' pronunciation errors but the teacher ignored them. Students are so active that the teacher can't keep up with them. A teacher should orient himself to his class. I think that correcting one student's errors helps student to develop" (from one of the student teachers' school experience).

ST5: "I tried to memorize the necessary information for the exam. In fact memorizing the sentences for the exam is not good way of learning, but sometimes I have to do it"

ST1: "Today I had a Michigan test. I am bad at grammar. I did not know most of the words in the test. I realized that I forgot some grammar structures. I have to study them again."

ST2: "I will be a teacher in a year but I must attend a course in order to pass a centralized exam to become an English teacher. This idea is so stupid. I will graduate from this department but it doesn't mean I am qualified to be an English teacher. I don't understand this dilemma."

ST3: I think that I do not like reading so much. Today I was at home in the morning and wanted to do something for my own studies. I read an article on story-telling. I enjoyed it but I exaggerated reading for two hours without any pauses.

ST7: "I am so busy with high-level articles that I don't care about basic rules. I know that the problem isn't lack of knowledge but lack of practice. Sometimes I forget basic rules and words. I need more practice especially in speaking."

Positive reflections on teaching and learning experiences in the classroom setting

ST1: "There was a conference in our university, for the first time. It was for language teachers. I was looking forward to participating in it. There were a lot of teachers, professors from ELT. I participated in some presentations. I enjoyed them very much and I get involved in some activities done during the presentations. I learned a lot. Today I watched a movie. It was about the daily lives of a teacher. The classroom was different from the classrooms in our local context. It was very colourful, full of teaching materials. I was deeply impressed by the teacher's affectionate behaviour.

ST10: "Today is the first day of my school experience. I feel as if I were a real teacher. It is a different experience to have an actual classroom atmosphere. I feel that I will be a very enthusiastic teacher who always remembers her school years."

ST4: "It is necessary that one should have a positive mood to words in that language to be able to study and understand it. Unless one takes a positive attitude, learning turns out to be torture. I like to concern myself with English so it is a very enjoyable thing for me to study" (a student teacher writes while studying). Today I read the news in English on the net. I will read every day.

ST5: "The teacher is at the core of the education for me. We see them as a role model, and we internalize their behaviors. Thanks to my instructor, I am now more conscious about how to be a good teacher. He is very self-sacrificing to us."

ST2: "As we all know students' attention span is limited. Today the teacher ignored this fact and the course was boring. I saw that the most crucial thing is to catch students' attention so I will do it in my own classes when I become a teacher. I will never stick to the dull textbooks."

ST9: "Motivation is important. A teacher should motivate his students. I also believe that students' feelings are important. I will behave according to this fact. Today I saw that one of the students felt uneasy while answering a question and the teacher encouraged him to give an answer. This behavior impressed me and I decided to behave in this way. "

Reflections on daily-life routines:

ST4: "Everybody is going somewhere. But me, I am in my room and I have to complete my homework. I can leave all my homework now and go out but I can't enjoy myself because I am thinking of my homework. This is called 'RESPONSIBILITY'."

ST5: "I am studying, studying and studying a lot but I don't feel ready and I don't know why? I feel as if I will be unsuccessful because I am studying only when I know I have to pass my exam."

ST1: "Today I am very happy because I used my time effectively. I read an English novel as well as studying a lesson. I feel unhappy when I cannot do something related with English in a day. I will be a teacher and I have to develop myself. "

ST2: "... I read articles and write summaries and what I understand. I also read three chapters from "Frankenstein."

Attitudes towards keeping a diary in English and reflections on it

ST1: "Writing in English is a totally different experience. It has two goals for me: developing my writing skills in English while sharing my emotions. I will be an English teacher so it helps me to use the language fluently."

ST2: "It is a magical thing. I will share my ideas in English. I was always dreaming of keeping a diary in English. I will continue to keep it from now on. I tried it

once for a short period. Thanks to this study, I will achieve my dream.”

ST3: “I feel as if I am talking to my friend while writing in my diary notebook. I feel relaxed because I am not afraid of making a mistake, as keeping a diary is not a course. I know that the teacher will not score us or that we will not have to enter an exam in the end. This thought provides me with a sense of relief. This notebook is like my special area.”

ST7: Even now I am not writing on my notebook but I am speaking with my friend, a diary friend. So you are my second friend from now on.

When the reflections obtained from the student teachers' diaries are evaluated, it is seen that this study provided opportunities for them to engage in reflective thinking. It also provided opportunities for them to apply their own experiences, values and beliefs to evaluate what they have learned. Keeping a diary provided a summative document outlining students' achievements and allowed them the freedom to discuss their views and ideas and obtain feedback from their teaching and learning processes. It was also seen in this study that some students preferred memorization while preparing for the exams, although they did not support this way of learning. The experiences reflected by the student teachers showed a pattern of insecurity regarding classroom management. They think that real classrooms pose some problems to them such as fear of making mistakes, inconsistency between theory and practice. So they highlighted a need for more practice in the methodology courses at the faculty. They also realized that using varied materials in the classroom encouraged students to participate in learning processes more actively

Several studies have noted the value of diaries and diary studies. Baily (1991) emphasized the value of diary studies as a source of vital information and insight regarding affective factors, language learning strategies, and learners' own perceptions of language learning. Analyzing diaries can provide teacher educators at the faculty with information about their students, allowing them to give feedback in a non-threatening environment. With the help of diaries, teacher educators can collect both longitudinal and temporal information.

Such diaries present them with the opportunity to see students' negative and positive reflections clearly, and the results subsequently can be used to help develop those student teachers better. As Chant et al. (2004) stated, diaries require critical thought, self-direction and problem solving, lending credence to pedagogy in which students are encouraged to keep a diary in English. This practice also provides a chance for teachers to observe their students outside of class contact hours. According to Bailey (1991), this approach offers advantages for teachers, students, and researchers. For teachers, dairies

offer the possibility of re-examining the language learning process; for learners, dairies offer safety valves for frustration and promote awareness in language-learning processes and pitfalls; and for researchers, dairies offer the ability to add to the knowledge base and also reveal new issues and factors that must be considered

Conclusion

It was seen in this study that student teachers felt they could share their feelings and thoughts comfortably and freely. The dairies also provided insights into their daily life experiences, showing that they often had similar daily routines including doing homework, studying for exams, reading novels and spending spare time with their friends.

They also shared common concerns with their language learning. Because of their fear of mispronunciation in English, they often avoided speaking English in the classroom. Although they were aware of their weaknesses, they had not found pathways to professional development. From the findings of the present study it can be suggested that keeping diaries helped the student teachers to know their weakness and strengths in their teaching profession. Another salient point from the dairies is that almost all of the students were in a panic because of the centralized employment examination. Clearly, this exam affected them negatively; some complained that they had forgotten even basic rules and simple structures due to exam anxiety.

The student teachers all found their first experience of conducting lessons in an actual school classroom to be exciting and rewarding. From the dairies, the conclusion can be made that all the participants like learning and teaching English. They believe that a teacher plays a crucial role in enhancing learning in the language classroom. They also pointed out that they had learned lessons from both their negative and positive teaching and learning experiences, making reflections on their own needs for professional development. They commented on the path to becoming a teacher and also highlighted the importance of using visual aids and real-life activities in the classroom in order to increase students' participation in language-learning activities.

One thing was made clear from the analysis of the student teacher dairies in the present study: Student teachers feel that they are overloaded with work and have to spend their spare time tending to school assignments. Almost all of them study systematically. They feel anxious during exam periods, and they openly reflect these feelings in their dairies. Overloaded by preparing assignments and classroom presentations, they claim that they cannot devote time to developing their English. They are student teachers from an English language-teaching program, but they can only find time to meet their faculty course requirements. This suggests

that faculty could use alternative assessment models to reduce exam anxiety.

Suggestions

As this study was carried out with ten participants, further studies with a larger number of participants allocating longer periods of time for keeping diaries are needed. Support from other sources of data such as student teachers' learning styles and strategies, conducting interviews and keeping diaries and journals for longer periods would also be useful in understanding the complex nature of student teachers' learning and teaching processes. Such diary studies can be integrated into additional courses to more closely observe professional development of student teachers.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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