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**Intuition and Insight for Professional Development through
Reflective Practice Using Teaching Diaries**

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Abstract

English language teaching in India poses various challenges for the teachers however trained or experienced in the field. Text book or prescribed material is the blind reference to most of the teachers of English. As such, the classroom teaching has become more of passive, teacher- fronted or examination oriented process. The purpose of English teaching will be at cross roads if the teacher merely concentrates on making the learners get marks and pass the examination concerned, because it fails the learners to suit the global job market. The demands on the English teacher's professionalism have become greater now in the context of foreign universities making forays into our country. This will be much greater in near future when the Indian higher education institutions compete with foreign traders in higher education, once GATS (General Agreement On Trade In Services) becomes fully operational. The teacher of English is called upon to develop the delivery-related skills in the undergraduate learner. As a result, the teacher is constantly under pressure to aim for her professional development in order to make the classroom teaching effective and student friendly.

There are three models of professional development. Crafts model provides theoretical knowledge tested through practice. Applied science model advocates the persistent experimentation of received knowledge and the third being Reflective practice based on the received as well as the experiential knowledge keeping the teacher at the center of the teaching-learning process as a researcher. It makes a teacher competent enough to train the students at college level to meet their requirements.

It is the language teachers' intuition rather than insight that interprets what occurs in the classroom. As perceptions of the learners and the culture can have far-reaching effects on the motivation of language teachers and the affective nature of their classroom instruction, it sometimes is necessary for teachers to pause and reflect upon the validity of their personal assumptions. The question for many, if not most language teachers, however, is how to embark on a journey of professional self-reflection while maintaining their typically busy schedules. One possible answer to this dilemma is keeping a focused, short-term journal, or diary writing.

Introduction

The task of English language teachers is becoming highly challenging because they are expected to perform a variety of roles like soft-skill trainer, communicative skill trainer, besides being a teacher of English language. The tasks become even more strenuous with

IT revolution and foreign universities foraying into our country. The teachers of English, in addition to their competence in language, are also expected to develop skills relevant to their area, which include not just teaching but taking instant decisions, meeting classroom challenges, maintaining rapport with the students by understanding their behaviour, attitudes, etc. In spite of the services rendered by the language teachers, voices of concern about the quality of ESL teaching are raised, as many graduates are being disqualified by the job market due to their inefficiency in communicative skills.

The Reasons

The reasons for this unsatisfactory state of affairs are not far to seek. At the college level, most teachers enter the profession without any training in teaching. There are two possible ways for in-service training, i.e., through orientation programmes conducted by the Academic Staff Colleges (ASC) and the Refresher courses conducted by the Universities.

Due to the lack of facilities, ASC could accommodate only limited number of participants, and even the resource persons talk more of literature than what exactly is needed for present day teaching. The participants come out of the programme merely appreciating the scholarly lectures given by them.

On the other hand, colleges are willing to send only a few teachers for refresher courses, which extend for about three to four weeks, just not to jeopardize the work on the campus.

Moreover, available approaches to teacher education include purely 'outsider' approaches such as craft's model (imitating the trainer) and Applied science model (experimenting the theoretical knowledge), which may not come to teachers' rescue in this fast changing higher education scenario.

Teachers of English may enhance their professional competence by participating in professional development programmes, such as workshops, seminars, and conferences. But, they are few and far between, and so not all teachers of English get opportunities to participate in them.

Some Solutions

The received knowledge gained either from books/materials/ learning experiences may help them in forming the core of their intuition but it is only the regular reflection on experiential knowledge, which helps in English teachers' professional development.

Through reflecting on a teaching situation, teachers can solve problems in various aspects of their work. For the English teachers to improve their teaching through reflective inquiry, they must "accept that it requires deliberation and analysis of their ideas about teaching as a form of action based on their changed understandings" (Bartlett, 1990, p.202).

It is the language teachers' intuition rather than insight that interprets what occurs in the classroom in most cases. Richards and Lockhart (1996, p.3) note that "the teacher who has a more extensive knowledge and deeper awareness about the different components and dimensions of teaching is better prepared to make appropriate judgments and decisions in teaching".

As perceptions of the learners and the culture can have far-reaching effects on the motivation of language teachers and the affective nature of their classroom instruction, it sometimes is necessary for teachers to pause and reflect upon the validity of their personal assumptions. As teaching is a knowledge-based multidimensional activity, the creation of teaching knowledge is a process in which "ideas are sown, germinated, thinned, pruned and displayed" (Hegarty, 2000, p.454), and in which teachers need to reflect on the received knowledge in light of classroom experience.

How to Embark on a Journey of Professional Self-reflection? A Diary Writing

The question for many, if not most language teachers, however, is how to embark on a journey of professional self-reflection while maintaining their typically busy schedules. One possible answer to this dilemma is keeping a focused, short-term journal, or diary writing.

Diary studies have had a long history of use in English teaching (Maneekhao & Watson Todd, 2001; McDonough, 1994; Thornbury, 1991; Lowe, 1984). They are usually personal accounts of teaching a language. Nunan (1992) remarks "they have been used in investigations of second language acquisition, teacher-learner interaction, teacher education, and other aspects of language learning and use" (p. 118).

The Goal of This Paper

This paper attempts to explore the benefits and difficulties of undertaking a diary study, based upon English teachers' personal experience, as a move towards ESL teachers' professional development through Reflective Practice. The narration would be in first person singular 'I' as the writer herself expresses her reflections through diary writing. The hierarchy of the teacher's experiences penned through the pages of her diary shows the significance of diaries in teachers' professional development.

Setting

This study took place at an Engineering college in the suburbs of Vijayawada. I am conducting English language and communicative skills classes for the students at undergraduate level. The classes are considerably big, consisting of sixty students each of different linguistic and social backgrounds. The duration of each class is fifty minutes.

Diary Study

I had about six years of experience at various levels, teaching English as the second language before I got an opportunity to teach undergraduate technical students. My task is not merely teaching language and literature, instead, I have the responsibility to train the students in communicative skills, soft skills in a way to prepare them for the job market.

A Personal Journey

My teaching experience in the very first class led me into a gloom of ‘dissatisfaction’. I started sorting out a method that could make me realize the problems and find the solutions based on my own teaching experiences. This search made me realize the necessity to pen down all my classroom experiences, not only my point of view but also the students’ responses and reactions to my teaching. The moment I started to write, I could find it very difficult to recollect all the events and moods by re-living the class. But the thoroughness in evaluation facilitated by the diary writing kept my fascination alive in spite of the difficulty involved in the process.

I started writing each entry spending five minutes after each class. Initially it took more time as I had to fight the inertia of writing. As time went on it has become a habit. The main aim in writing these diary entries is to find out the problems from each class and think about the possible solutions for them after reflection, try them again in class, thus work for my professional development. The professional development of a teacher makes her teaching affective which in turn makes the learning among students affective, thus bringing about desired change in teaching-learning process.

Each entry is a candid description of what exactly had happened in each class. In order to reinforce my reflective comments; I included the actual incidents and student responses clearly in my writing.

Findings from the Study

The words like *well-prepared, dissatisfied, disciplined, informative, students-passive*, etc. which found their room in my first entry made me realize the gap between my intuition about the class and the actual classroom situation.

On the whole, it says that the class was pleasant and as the lecture was informative students could gain knowledge, but the reason for dissatisfaction and the overheard comment from one of the students... ‘boring’ is to be reflected upon and the appreciable solutions should be arrived at. The entry goes like this:

Um! Dissatisfaction... Lesson was prepared well according to the lesson plan learnt from the training I had. Students were motivated through convergent questions on vocabulary. I have given words of their standard along with their meaning, usage and etymology. In a maximum pace, I taught about twenty-five words. Students were writing busily and silently.

When I asked them questions to sum up, even then they were silent. I felt worse when I overheard some one say... boring.

Insights Gained

Observations such as these made me gain thorough insight into actual work place requirements. The reflection on the above extract warned me that the problem is not with the class but with my lack of practical knowledge. By designing activities and tasks for the students in vocabulary, the students were brought out of the cocoon of passivity, I could transform myself from a dictator to a friend and a guide and the classroom has become student centered unlike the previous one which was teacher fronted.

The second experience was rather pleasant as I could gain confidence that could also build in confidence among the students, supporting the view that the teacher and the students are not separate entities but they work together for healthy academic prospects. Entry after the second experience:

To day, I'm happy a bit. I found the students were enjoying the class. They were talking to me, answering me. Their expressions make me feel friendly towards them. They were trying to clear their doubts. They were talking among themselves, sometimes while attempting the tasks. The class today, though it was the last period was full of activity.

Discernible Gradual Movement

From the above information I could see the gradual movement from 'dissatisfaction, to 'happy a bit' which is possible only through reflection through diary writing. I could activate the class by developing a rapport with the students and allowing them to attempt the tasks freely chosen for the purpose.

Next time I thought of involving all the students by giving them equal chances, by systematically organizing the activities. This time I planned to make my class affective to the core through teamwork using dictionaries, thus becoming a facilitator which is the need of the day, breaking the norms of conventionalism.

A glance through the third entry:

Extremely satisfied... I could create team spirit among the students. They were talking to me freely trying to get their doubts cleared. Lot of work was done with out feeling tiered. I moved round the class warning them to avoid speaking in their mother tongue. They could answer the summing up questions competently.

Now, Fewer Hurdles!

There seemed to be fewer hurdles between my students and me. The diary writing has not only provided me with an opportunity to make my teaching affective, it has also given me a technique for professional development. The reflections on my own experiences allowed me to refine my intuition through deeper insights gained through my own experiences both good/bad. The diary study provided me deeper understanding into my own teaching style and took me more close to the students. For writing diary entries, I made a close observation of every aspect of my class, which made me more sensitive towards the taught. I ultimately realized that the better way of teaching is to facilitate opportunities for the students to learn.

Though writing a diary is time-consuming and laborious activity that calls for consistency and transparency, this is the best method for professional development of teacher of English.

Conclusion

The reflective approach is an 'insider' approach or 'self-directed' approach (Richards and Farrell 2005). It seeks to offer a dynamic, reliable, and viable means by which the teacher can develop her professionalism.

A teacher-initiated and teacher-directed professional development model, it is exploratory in nature and involves teachers observing themselves, collecting data about their own classrooms and their roles within them, using the data as a basis for self-evaluation and change and their professional growth (Richards and Lockhart 1996).

Of all the strategies of reflective practice it is the diary writing which involves the documentation of thoughts and experiences is more practical and beneficial for teacher's self – analysis, as it involves recalling, re-considering and re-thinking about their own experiences. The solutions obtained or the lessons learnt by a teacher can be a reference to other teachers, if the diary is kept open to the public.

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