<u>**Long-distance Observations:**</u>

<u>**Using video to assess classroom competence**</u>

<u>**in distance-learning TEFL/TESL candidates.**</u>

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<u>Introduction</u>

In the last few years there has been a rise in the number of institutions offering distance-learning degrees and certificate programs in TEFL to working teachers. While this seems a positive trend, indicating that a higher value is being accorded to the ongoing practice of teachers in real classrooms and its applicability as 'action research', the fact remains that 'what actually happens' in the classroom is a rather private experience. The inherent difficulty in objectively assessing that experience is exacerbated by the geographical space between the trainers and trainees. Some certificate and diploma programmes have overcome this obstacle by training local tutors to act as classroom observers or assessors, but the majority of programmes, especially distance masters degrees, contain no such element. Some would argue that it is not the remit of a higher degree programme to assess teaching competence, since these programmes are academic in nature, but the fact is that "professional qualifications gained through formal teacher education programmes carry currency as guarantees to employers or potential employers that the teacher in question possesses a certain level of knowledge or range of skills" (Kennedy and Edwards, 1996:99). If masters programmes are to retain their credibility, this deficiency needs to be addressed. In addition, it seems paradoxical to grant teaching degrees which claim to promote reflective practice to course participants who, while teaching full course loads the entire duration of the programme, are never at any time during those two years observed at their profession by any of the course instructors/ writers/ evaluators. While it is highly unlikely that anyone voluntarily submitting themselves

to this level of professional development is 'incompetent', there must certainly be areas in which we all suffer some degree of incompetence and which might be better noticed and worked through with some objective outside supervision.

In the following pages, I will look first at the effort to reconcile theory and practice in EFL teacher education programmes, and the integral role that observation can play in more fully developing actively reflective teachers. Then I will turn my attention to the question of observation by distance: how it could be incorporated it into these programmes, possible problems in orchestrating it and possible solutions to these problems.

Bridging Theory and Practice

How current programmes promote this.

Many in-service programs encourage participants to relate the knowledge they are receiving through their study to the experience they have in the classroom by means of reflection/discussion activities peppered through course readings and throughassessment tasks. Many such exercises merely ask teachers to think about how/if something is relevant to their teaching practice, while others ask teachers to fill in charts, draw comparisons, consider problems one might encounter, create lesson plans, etc. and still others suggest small-scale action research projects to carry out. The extent to which any of these are executed depends on the time, interest and inclination each participant has when he or she comes across them, but each is desugned to keep teachers constantly referring the course input back to the classroom. For all that encouragement, however, a requirement for explicit demonstration of how teachers tie course theory into their teaching practice is rare.

I am interpreting Wallace's mention of 'demonstration' in its most literal sense here when he discusses the assessment of professional action in teacher development programmes:

> Professional action is that part of practical experience in which the
> trainees have to demonstrate their capabilities as classroom
> practitioners ... . This mostly concentrates on classroom performance,
> but also includes their ability to participate positively in the process of
> clinical supervision, and therefore includes their powers of self evaluation. (Wallace 1991
> p.l30)

Often, where a requirement to evaluate classroom practice does exist, there are strict word limits and/or no objective documented recall for either the teacher concerned or his/her evaluator in the academic institution. The result is necessarily an extremely subjective and general account of a teacher's situation; as such it does not lend itself to inspiring any meaningful 'action plan'.

> The main disadvantage is that the experience is private, not shared.
> The articulation of it is consequently anecdotal … . Since the data are
> private and individual the whole authority of the evidence derives from
> the speaker … . Reflective discussion is very difficult or is at least
> based on an insecure foundation. (Wallace 1991 :53)

A framework for observation in distance programmes

In order to get around this shortcoming in the analysis of classroom practice, the experience needs to be witnessed objectively by an evaluator as well as the trainee. One way of doing this in a distance programme might be to include a peer teaching session - if there is a course seminar when all participants and some instructors meet - and to follow that up with critiques in small groups, for example. As an official observation procedure, however, it could be misleading since anything taught to peers in the confines of a seminar will necessarily be an unrealistic, 'out-of-service' situation, and of course, many programmes do not hold such seminars or summer schools.

An alternative and more feasible way of enabling evaluation of classroom practice is to record it using audio or video recorders. Video is preferable in that it shows nonverbal behaviour as well as verbal behaviour. Video recordings can often provide a certain shock: that of seeing what one is actually doing in class as opposed to what one thought one was doing! This would be an important step forward in effectuating a reflective mode of professional behaviour, but not one which many people will do spontaneously of their own volition for a variety of reasons. "Experience of teacher education courses shows that there is little gain in leaving it 'up to the students' to make their own application. ... the application of academic information to practice is usually a fairly sophisticated operation, which most trainees cannot achieve without guidance" (Wallace 1991 p.56). What I propose, then, is that institutions offering distance ELT education programmes should seriously consider introducing a clearly structured, compulsory video-based observation element to their courses.

Advantages for candidates (self-observation)
Walker (1985:63) advises keeping a written journal of one's teaching as a reflective process which "can clarify the original experience by removing from it clouds of subjective feeling that can obscure it". Supplementing that quiet introspection with a visual recording of the experience from a spectator's perspective can add a significant measure of objectivity to the evaluation of one's own performance, in addition to 'shocking' oneself into awareness as mentioned above. The process can thus help teachers more fully evolve their reflective capabilities and perhaps suggest directions for action research they might not have thought of without it.

Advantages for the awarding institution
Most ELT projects involve a complex set of variables, including the teacher, pupils, parents, materials, and resources; and they take place within a complicated network of political, cultural, and educational systems. Any evaluation technique needs to take account of these different but inter-related factors (Williams and Burden

1994:23). Instructors in the awarding institution may have little or no real experience in the country where the course participants are working, often on the other side of the globe. Where tutors do have relevant experience, there may be no real homogeneity of teaching contexts among the course participants even within one country, making it difficult to pin down just what contexts teachers are really working in and "in the absence of first-hand data (primary data) available to all those present at the discussion, [questions about what a teacher has written] may be seen as an attack on the teacher's authority as an interpreter of her own experience" (Wallace, ibid.:53). Videotaped assessment submissions would provide a well rounded introduction to course participants and to their working situations and would therefore be helpful in assessing output and providing informed feedback.

Regarding the achievement of objective reflective practice, Wallace stresses the "importance of shared experience … and discussion … being focused along selected parameters" (Wallace 1991, p.54). Using video observation of classroom practice as a basis for structured feedback to trainees would facilitate this process, as it provides something concrete to refer to when commenting on something unclear, questionable or even particularly insightful in a written assignment.

Procedures

A fair and relevant procedure would be to allow teachers to tape classes privately and choose examples to analyse and send in for evaluation. "The issue upon which the teacher reflects must occur in the social context where teaching occurs. [...] The issue must be 'owned' by the teacher - that is, derived from his or her practice." (Bartlett 1990:207). In this way, the teaching is authentic (not just done for show) and any analysis and feedback will directly address the teacher's concerns in the real work context.

Baseline data: 'before training'

A carefully designed impact study could throw light on how contextual factors have affected uptake of ideas presented on a course. The 'before training' element is important, because without such a baseline study we cannot objectively determine whether any change has occurred. As mentioned earlier, though, the nature and limitations of reflection or assessment tasks set on distance courses often omit much that may be important. "[E]xperienced teachers already have well-developed mental constructs of teaching [...]. These need to be articulated, and then analysed for potential contradictions with each other, the teaching circumstances, and the beliefs of the learners" (Lamb,1995:79). These aims might be better achieved if each participant were to provide, say, a 10 to15 minute video segment of a class that he or she felt went well and another in which they were having difficulties, analyze those and form a plan of action specifically aimed at solving a problem they have identified therein. This initial stage would also acquaint the instructors with the trainee's teaching context and enhance feedback, as argued earlier.

Follow-up: 'after training'

A second compulsory videotaped assessment should provide trainers with some evidence of change in teachers' classroom behaviour, approach, methods and analysis over time in the programme. "At the barest minimum, trainees should be assessed on at least two occasions at different levels and ideally by different assessors" (Wallace ibid. : 130). Once video 'evidence' is held by the awarding institution, the opportunity exists for the same data to be observed and evaluated by more than one assessor – the observation equivalent of second marking of written assignments. A well as these two minimal sets of 'before and after' data, additional video recordings could be made at interim stages during the course if this was considered deirable and feasible.

<u>Possible problems to anticipate</u>

<u>Technical difficulties</u>

The most immediate resistance is likely to come in the form of teachers not having access to video equipment, not knowing how to operate a camera or edit recordings, not wanting to make students nervous, etc. but these are not insurmountable problems. "At one time considered very 'high tech', the use of video is daily becoming more commonplace. [It can be] a simple hand-held camera with playback facilities" (Wallace 1991, p.63). Relatively inexpensive video equipment is not hard to obtain in most countries, slick production techniques are unnecessary and a small camera can usually be placed in a room without students noticing it. There just has to be room for some trial and error and that is allowed for if teachers can tape several classes and choose segments they want to analyse.

<u>Assessment ambiguity</u>

The time frame in which assessors can expect to see changes in classroom practices does not seem to be well established yet, nor the quality of change as teachers attempt to use course input in their teaching. It may be a long process, having little immediate practical effect in their teaching, and with the tension between previous and recent ideas taking years to find a resolution. There may even be a temporary decline in performance as the teacher tries out new procedures in an uncertain way, just as students' language production may falter as they struggle to accommodate a new grammatical rule into their interlanguage. (Lamb 1995.:78)

Bartlett's advice to "[k]eep the problem 'small'; [...] focused on a particular aspect of teaching" (1990, p.210) seems most relevant here, both for trainees and evaluators.

<u>Affective factors</u>

Personally and professionally, it is somewhat disconcerting for most people to have to listen to or view recordings of themselves - they do not enjoy the experience very

much because they generally find it embarrassing. And such feelings are only intensified with the added anxiety of knowing a recording will be used to make judgments on their professional capabilities. What if teachers try to stage 'perfect lessons' for video evaluation? Including a requirement in the first assignment to show an unsuccessful lesson segment and analysis should make it clear that perfection is neither required nor expected (nor even desired). With some practice in doing self-evaluation from recordings, self-conscious and embarrassment do subside and a different sort of self-consciousness can grow into a more self-directed awareness.

Challenging teachers' beliefs (acceptability) may cause disequilibrium which, depending on the individual, may create insecurity and a loss of confidence. On the other hand, such a challenge may be welcomed by teachers and they may view the change as a way of increasing their knowledge and skills or as a means of intellectual stimulation.

Conclusions

The use of video for observation as a means of appraisal and evaluation (by self and tutors) is one solution for possible questions of accountability in a distance learning program. While it may be at times be inconvenient or uncomfortable to adopt this approach, the benefits should outweigh the costs. Better communication could be fostered between instructors in the academic institution and program participants around the world The degree-granting institution can be more certain about whether or not it is turning out teachers who are competent in the classroom as well as on paper. Teachers can improve their ability to objectively evaluate their own actions and beliefs, thereby developing a strong ongoing cycle of reflective practice.

> Educating is not the same as training. For most people, there is no causal relationship between education and performance. There is, indeed, a causal relationship between training and performance. ... To educate is to increase intellectual awareness of a subject. To train is

to make someone proficient at the execution of a given task. Many wonderful things can be said about education, but education does not cause competence. Only training does. [...] knowing about a skill is not the same as being skillful. (Georges 1996 p 49)

Similarly, thinking about what one is doing is not the same as literally seeing and hearing what one is doing. To truly encourage careers of reflective teaching practice and small-scale research, academic institutions should make it a necessary and not optional part of their program to demonstrate as well as discuss how received knowledge is being turned into practice.

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