

A Reflection on Micro Teaching Sessions: When is what I Think Justified by my Practice?

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Abstract: An action research was carried out to ameliorate the quality of peer micro teaching exercises undertaken in an English language teaching practicum course. A model teaching on effective and less effective methods of teaching in each language skill was presented by the trainer and commented by both the trainees and the trainer. Following this, the trainees have presented microteaching lessons which have the following stages: the briefing, modeling, reflection I, teaching, reflection II, and portfolio production or re-teaching. The effectiveness of the ideas, methods and materials used to enhance the quality of the microteaching exercise was reflected. It was implied in the paper that an action research and reflection are important avenues to understand and improve one's classroom practices. It was also underscored that dilemmas have perpetuated than certainties after the intervention into the micro teaching sessions have been carried out.

Background

Micro teaching is a scaled down, simulated teaching exercise designed for preparation of pre-service and in-service teachers (MCGarvey etal 1986). Its objective is to offer an opportunity for teachers an enlarged, cluster of teaching skills while learning to

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develop simple, single- concept lessons in any teaching subjects. Micro teaching is invented in Stanford University in the late 1950s by D. Wight Allen, Robert Bush and Kim Romney. The model, then, emphasized a teach, review and reflect, re-teach approach using actual school students as authentic audiences (Allen etal 1997).

Micro teaching has exhibited different formats since its inception. In its early phase four or five real students were used to rotate from one to the other teaching stations and the trainees would teach five-to-ten minutes single element lesson and get critics from a supervisor. Next, the trainee would be given a brief time to improve the lesson and would re-teach the same lesson to other group. After some years, video recording the trainees' lessons was used as another format. Due to lack of technological devices in developing countries, the format of micro teaching was reinvigorated with a completely new format developed in Southern Africa and latter in China in the late 1980s and 1990s. One of the important new concepts added in this format is that teachers rotate between the role of teachers and students and this was built on the earlier version of 'peer micro teaching'.

It is a safe approach to experiment new teaching strategies in which feedback on their effectiveness can be obtained. It helps teachers improve both content and methods of teaching and develop specific teaching skills such as asking questions, class room management, motivating students, summarizing lessons effectively and so on. And it presents a controlled laboratory environment and realistic practical experience. Even though microteaching is not a substitute to an actual teaching practice, it has an advantage of offering close supervision, attention to individual trainees' need, continuous feedback, a chance to teach and re-teach a lesson, immediate guidance on identified weak areas of teaching. (MC Garvey etal, 1986; Wilkinson, 1996).

Since the time for micro teaching is usually short, trainee teachers are expected to practise and time their presentations carefully. Some of the important decisions that should be made with regard to the preparation of micro teaching lessons include:

- **Topic selection:** choice of a teaching topic in which trainees are comfortable to try out a specific teaching method or approach;
- **Lesson objectives:** thinking about and be able to articulate what trainees want their students to learn from their lesson (e.g., facts, concepts, skills, and/or values) and what teaching methodology might fulfill their objectives;
- **Area of feedback:** specification of the areas that the trainees need to get feedback. The focus could be on general areas of their teaching or on specific issues like questioning technique.

While conducting micro teaching, it is important that trainees respect the agreeable time limits, maintain collegiality, stay psychologically and physically present on task, respect others' attempts to experiment and to take risks, listen and speak in turn, so every one can hear all comments and enjoy and learn from the process.

Statement of Purpose and Method

This paper attempts to describe an action research which focuses on my direct actions of practice to improve the quality of 'peer micro teaching exercises' undertaken in a classroom in an English language teaching practicum course at Addis Ababa University. It reflects on and assesses my peer micro teaching practices, explores and reviews alternative ideas, methods and materials. Furthermore, it questions the net quality of the interventions or actions I made in the process.

I employed a cyclical method of planning, taking action, observing, and self evaluation in this paper as suggested as a method of study

in action research by O'Brien (2001) and McNiff (2002). I have also used interviews and focused group discussions to enrich my actions and reflection.

Context of the Reflection

One of the set of major courses offered to the English Language Education students in the English Language and Literature Education Department at Addis Ababa University is practicum. Developing the would be language teachers' teaching competence is the grand purpose of this course which has four expectations to be met at the end of a semester.

These are preparation of lesson plan, conducting teaching practice, evaluating materials and developing a proposal for action research. From these components of the course, I would like to self reflect on what I did in the teaching practice (peer micro teaching) sessions.

The trainers' guide developed by the concerned body has evidently spelt out that the teacher trainees need to practise actual teaching for four weeks in the cooperating high schools in grade 9 or 10.

I, however, failed to meet the expectation propounded in the trainers' guide. This was mainly due to the teachers (mentors) in the cooperating high schools did not allow me to let the trainee teachers teach in their classrooms. Their reason for this was the use of plasma TV, which is the recently mode used to offer standardized teaching in most subjects at a fixed schedule across Ethiopian high schools, to present the daily lessons. For instance, teachers who I asked to cooperate said:

If we gave a period for your trainees to practise teaching, our students would not get another opportunity to have the lessons; they would miss the plasma TV lessons.

Concurring with their reason, I surveyed what my colleagues who have been handling the same course were doing. I realized that some of them were also not able to conduct the teaching practice sessions in the cooperative high schools for various reasons. Instead, they were using peer teachings in the university to observe and mainly to evaluate their group of teacher trainees. Specifically, they made their group of teacher trainees select any section of a lesson from grade 9 or 10 textbooks, prepare lesson plan, conduct peer teaching, and evaluate their performance.

Having done this survey, my group teacher trainees were apprised that they would conduct peer micro teachings and then what they were expected to do. The instruction that was given to them was exactly the same as what my colleagues put into practise, as they informed me.

Following this, four trainees were assigned to prepare for the peer micro teaching practices to be undertaken in the next period. What is more, I imparted them the major focused points in observing their peer micro teaching sessions: their mastery of the subject matter and methods of teaching. I also handed out a general checklist adapted from a relevant literature to self and peers observe their teaching effectiveness. Each of them then started presenting his/her peer teaching in turn while I kept on recording my observations.

Observations

My observations of the first four trainees revealed that these trainees have questionable competence to handle the subject matter of the lessons they presented. Instances for this are:

- wrong use of grammar while delivering explanations;
- extended silence to search for words and ideas that should be used while presenting the lessons; and
- frequent use of fragmented statements and ideas due to dearth of adequate knowledge on the functions and systems of the instructional language which is the subject matter (content) of the practice.

My observations have also focused on the quality of the teaching methods they employed. Some of the commonly observed areas that were challenging these trainees included:

- classroom management (for example, they were dropping names of group and peer work while a task is better done individually);
- questioning techniques;
- motivating learners;
- clarity of instructions (for instance, in giving directions to tasks);
- giving too much explanations in grammar and vocabulary lessons;
- error treatment: who treats errors?, when?, how?, what kinds of errors?;
- use of praise behaviors;
- wait time after asking questions;
- amount of time students stay on tasks;
- giving away answers to the while-reading exercises while they are doing pre-reading or brainstorming exercises;
- too much teacher's talk at the expense of students talk.

After having the aforementioned data from my observations, I thought it was important to obtain a corroborative data by undertaking a focused group interview with the four trainees. Accordingly, I asked them to respond to the following general questions. The first one was: Have you taken (a) course(s) on language teaching and learning methodologies?

Only one of the first four trainees responded positively. Responses from the other trainees also showed that there were two more trainees from the total of 15 trainees who did take courses on language teaching and learning methodologies while they were diploma program students. Following this was a question that focused on what the first four trainees used as resources to learn about and decide the methods they employed in their peer teachings. Their responses to this question were:

- I modeled my high school English teacher;
- My experience helped me. I have taught English for five years. I am an advanced standing student;
- I modeled the plasma TV teacher; and
- I modeled my teacher who taught me listening skill in the university.

Without reacting to the responses forwarded, I posed another question which aimed at eliciting rationales behind the teaching methods they employed.

Their responses to this question seemed to attest the fact that all of the first four trainees who conducted the peer teaching sessions did appear to have indistinct understanding about the underlying principles behind the methods of teaching they used.

Purpose of the Intervention

My observations of the first four peer micro teachings, the responses of the interviewee trainees and the comments that were flying around about the quality of the peer teachings conducted while the teacher led whole classroom discussions were under play insinuated that an intervention should be sought to redress the process before perpetuating the practice. To this end, I thought presenting a model teaching on the language skills and areas and having discussions on the effectiveness of the lessons presented were worth considering to:

- raise the trainees awareness about the contemporary principles of language teaching and learning;
- attempt equipping them with the fundamental approaches and techniques that could be used in teaching vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, reading, and writing;
- build their confidence in offering feedback on the quality of the peer teaching sessions to be conducted.

Even though, the two elements – knowledge of the subject matter and methods of teaching are eminently important elements to make teaching and learning a success, I decided to focus my intervention on the second one for a heavy focus of the course is vested on it.

Stages of the Model and the Micro Teaching Sessions

The stages I used in the model and micro teaching practices were highly interwoven. These were the briefing, modeling, reflection I, teaching, reflection II, portfolio production or re-teaching stages.

I adapted the major stages from the works cited in Whba (1999) and I added some stages which I considered important. The first addition was a section which asks students to discuss and reflect on the less effective and effective model teaching I presented as a trainer. This is

presented in the modeling stage below. Besides, I included a section that subjects my model teaching for comments and reflections both by the trainees and later on by me before the trainees conduct the actual micro teaching sessions. This is presented in the reflection stage below. And as a substitute to a re-teaching stage, I used production of portfolio.

The source of motivation to think of following the mentioned stages in the micro teaching practice was the result of my observations and interviews pointed out earlier. In addition to this, my exposure as a staff of the department and to the syllabus seemed to make me question the pedagogical readiness of the students to take the course. For example, I doubt whether or not the vertical and horizontal course offerings of the new curriculum in the department is adequately well thought. A case could be the language teaching and learning methodology and many of the basic language skill courses which are offered after students have micro teaching or real teaching practices.

To help the trainees to have some ideas about the principles, methods of teaching and learning, the college of education has handed out a note on these issues together with the modality of the practicum courses to all trainees and trainers across the departments in the college. This note is useful to use it as a resource to teacher trainers in general and the trainees in particular. However, it is too general to be used in the context of language teaching and learning methodology unless it is tailored.

To this end, including lessons for each skill that are deliberately geared towards using 'less effective' and 'effective' methods in the modeling stage and having a reflection in the next stage, I thought, could give opportunity to deductively present the core elements in language teaching and learning methodology.

The Briefing Stage

In this stage, I explained the purposes of the peer teaching and the general procedures to be followed in the practice. In other words, the teacher trainees were briefed about what they were expected to experience in the modeling, reflection I, teaching, reflection II and portfolio production stages. What is more, they were apprised to take notes about the merits and demerits to be observed while I was presenting the model teachings and while other fellow trainees did the same afterwards. They were also told that the records of their observations and other comments that they would get from the group and the trainer led whole classroom discussions about every lesson presented were expected to be compiled in the form of a portfolio.

The Modeling Stage

Here, I first adapted lessons on the language skills and areas from the grade 10 teaching material. The lessons adapted were made to appear relatively 'effective' and 'less effective' in the methods used to present them. Prior to presenting my model teaching, I informed the trainees about these qualities of the lessons. My rationale to inform them this was due to the trust I had the trainees would not be afraid to identify weaknesses in my model teaching if information about the existence of the ineffective model teaching was pointed out at the outset. This, in other words, was hoped to raise the trainees' confidence and freedom to comment on my model teaching.

Following this, the trainees were informed to assume two roles while I was model teaching on each of the language skill and area that took about 10-15 minutes. These roles were to act as grade 10 students in every possible aspect and to act as teacher trainees who should take notes on the observable teaching and learning behaviors while each micro teaching was going on.

Reflection I Stage

This was a stage where the trainees were made reflect on my model teaching. I formed groups and requested them to discuss the strengths and weakness on the two sets of lessons I presented on each language skill and area. Chairpersons of the groups, then, reported the summary of their discussions. Following this, I (the trainer) attempted to comment on my teaching based on the current literature in language teaching and learning. The focus of my comment was mainly on why the method employed in one of the sets of the lessons presented on each language skill and area is relatively 'less effective' and 'effective'.

The Teaching Stage

In this stage, the trainees selected a lesson from any one of the language skills and areas presented in the grade 10 textbook and prepared a lesson plan that would guide their 20 minutes peer teaching practices. While each of the 20 minutes lesson was under go, the rest of the trainees were apprised to act as grade 10 students in every possible aspects and teacher trainees who record notes on the observable teaching- learning behaviors.

Reflection II Stage

At this time, the trainees were grouped to discuss the quality of each peer teaching presented. First, they were encouraged to focus on the strengths of the teaching conducted and then on areas that need to be ameliorated.

Each trainee teacher was informed to be attentive and to record every comment forwarded whether he/she felt the comments were relevant or irrelevant.

Lastly, in this stage was presentation of my summary of the comments forwarded by the trainees together with reflection of my observations.

Portfolio Production Stage

For there was a time constraint to let the teacher trainees incorporate the valuable comments forwarded and re-teach the improved lessons, the trainees were informed to clearly present in their portfolio in what ways they would have improved the lessons they taught if they had been requested to re-teach them. They were also asked to produce justifications in their portfolios if they have disregarded some of the comments provided by their fellow trainees as irrelevant.

Dilemmas that Perpetuated after the Intervention

Even though I thought what I did by presenting the model lessons on the language skills and areas followed by the reflections on my model teaching might have contributed to the trainees' inputs on language teaching methods, I still remained to have some dilemmas on the effectiveness of what I did. The dilemmas that perpetuated after practicing the micro teaching have been the following.

Every trainee was expected to bear in mind two roles while a trainee was teaching: to act as a grade 10 student and teacher trainee. These roles, however, do not only seem to be authentic but also tax cognitive resources since they require the trainees to exhibit a simultaneous shift in roles.

The cognitive load I imposed by requiring the trainees to assume the two roles has, thus, made me to question whether or not I have reduced and diverted valuable attention of the trainees from the practice of the micro teaching sessions that could have been used to generate insights and comments about the teaching effectiveness.

Reducing the roles to one (i.e. only as teacher trainees) would also question the quality of the micro teaching practices for there would be no relatively authentic like teacher-students interaction.

In order to help the trainees what the current language teaching and learning principles advocate, I attempted to model teach lessons that I felt were geared towards 'effective' and 'less effective' teaching methods. This was followed by group and teacher led whole classroom discussions about what made each of my presentation of the lesson 'effective' or 'less effective'. Latter on, I questioned how 'effective' is 'effective'? And how 'less effective' is 'less effective'? Did my lessons reflect my intentions? Did model presentations inform the trainees the best ways to teach? If so, did this imply to them that they should build their method of teaching entirely on the model I presented.

As it is pointed out above, I had changed the modality of the micro teaching sessions that was to be in effect for all of the trainees but which was later on in effect only for four of them. When I see this decision retrospectively, I seem to be in a dilemma whether or not I modeled in my decision a teacher who had not been well prepared to undertake his/her teaching responsibility as expected. Or did this imply to the trainees that teachers need to be flexible and adaptable to the classroom situations?

To collect data on the effectiveness of the micro teaching presentations, I handed out a general checklist of observation to the trainees. However, I am now questioning whether or not this practice was implying that I was attempting to mould the trainees to operate under a prescribed teaching mode while the process of language teaching and learning is so dynamic. What is more, the checklist provided contained varied aspects of observations such as correcting errors, questioning, motivation, classroom management etc. I asked every trainee teacher to record his/her observations against each

item. Could this be questioned to make the trainees' observation superficial since they were requested to record their observations on all of these aspects? Should not I have geared the trainees to focus their observations on specific teaching behavior at a time? Even then, would the quality of the observations still be compromised since the time allotted for this aspect of practice was too short and there was no due attention given in this course as well as in the previous courses the trainees took that helped them learn how to observe.

After each micro teaching session, the trainees were required to talk about their observations in groups followed by the teacher led classroom discussions. When I felt some important points regarding weaknesses or strengths of particular lessons which were not elicited, I ended up by telling them what should have been elicited. Did this difficulty (i.e points being not elicited as expected) make me to reduce the trainees' opportunity to be critical for themselves? Or did the trainees lack the fundamental skills to be critical to themselves? Or would this question my skill and sensitivity in my method of elicitation?

The trainees' group discussions were facilitated by their chairs. The chairpersons were requested to report the discussion results to the class. At the same time, members of each group were also informed that they could forward additional points that were not uttered by their chairpersons. It was, however, observed that in some of the reports the main issues were observed to get obscured by irrelevant details. In some of the cases, misleading comments were pointed out. When this happened, I frequently used to switch on the reports to shape and direct the comments. After embarking on this intervention, the following two implications of my action have remained to worry me. These were did this intervention create a sense of insecurity particularly to the introvert trainees to freely participate? And/or did my intervention imply that they should over value my comments which may be an indicator of an authoritative teacher trainer?

The trainees were not given any opportunity to re-teach their lessons after they received comments from their peers and the trainer. This was due to time constraint. They, however, were informed to incorporate the comments forwarded, and to improve the lessons accordingly and to re-produce them in the form of a portfolio which was assumed to give parallel experience to that of the re-teaching stage. Nevertheless, a closer review of their portfolios indicated that some of the trainees did not incorporate the comments obtained from their group and the trainer led whole classroom discussions. More specifically, some of the trainees who seemed to accept the forwarded comments did not change anything in their portfolios. On the other hand, some of the trainees who seemed to be defensive to accept some of the valuable comments forwarded by their peers but who eventually appeared to accept the value of the comments given did not also incorporate them. Therefore, there should have been a rigorous system to monitor every assignment carried out before it was referred to be compiled in a portfolio. Or did they want to be autonomous to make their own decisions? Since the trainees were evaluated for grades based on how they taught prior to obtaining comments from their peers and the trainer and with out having no re-teaching stage to a lesson presented, would my assessment be considered judgmental than developmental?

Final Remark

In this paper an attempt was made to reflect on an intervention made in micro teaching sessions in ELT classrooms. Among others, it could be underscored that weeding out all the variables that influence the quality of micro teaching practices is difficult. However, a reflection on action could help for good understanding of the dynamism and extraneous elements of micro teaching practices. The action taken has also set an agenda for further exploration into the different facets of micro teaching since a point of dilemma has been raised under each intervention made in this action research.

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