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Stella Kourieos

Frederick University, Cyprus, skourieos@cytanet.com.cy

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Video-Mediated Microteaching – A Stimulus for Reflection and Teacher Growth

Stella Kourieos
Frederick University, Cyprus

Abstract : Numerous studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of video as an effective means of reflective practice in pre-service Teacher Education. However, only few studies have explored pre-service teachers' own perceptions in this regard in the field of ELT and none of these was related to primary level. To address this gap, multiple forms of qualitative data were triangulated. Participants were found to consider the use of video combined with guided reflection and peer dialogue to have a great potential in helping them form links between theory and practice and bring a heightened awareness of their teaching practices, especially in the areas of classroom language, error correction and student-centred activities. The study calls for more research which provides clear evidence of any changes in student teachers' teaching practices over a period of time and of possible factors which may hinder such changes.

Introduction

Designing teacher education programmes is challenging due to the demands on knowledge and skills that a newly qualified teacher needs to possess. In recent years, the nature of teacher learning has become a major research area in Teacher Education (TE) with an emphasis on the role of reflection (Korthagen, 2004; Larrivee, 2008). This shift to the role of reflection within the process of learning to teach has led many researchers to look more closely at the structure and function of instructional approaches which are prevalent in most TE programmes, with a host of research carried out on the practice of microteaching (Orlova, 2009; Fernandez, 2010; Sen, 2010; Ahmed Ismail, 2011; Kuter, Gazi & Aksal, 2012; Kloet & Chugh, 2012).

Microteaching is often conducted as part of a group activity on teacher-training courses and involves planning and teaching a short lesson or part of a lesson to a group of fellow student teachers; this is followed by feedback from the teacher trainer and the peers (Richards & Farrell, 2011). The benefits of this instructional approach have long been discussed and acknowledged by teacher educators worldwide making it an integral part of most pre-service Teacher Education programmes (Kuter et al., 2012). However, its practice in the education of teachers has often been criticised for being based on a traditional 'top-down' view of teaching which focuses on the reproduction of teaching norms, for being mainly based on corrective feedback (Richards & Farrell, 2011) and, for providing student teachers with limited opportunities to reflect on their own teaching (Lee & Wu, 2006). To support pre-service teachers' capacity for reflection, teacher educators spend time in post-observation conferences attempting to guide student teachers into clearer and deeper understandings of instructional practices (Baecher, 2011). However, research on post-observation conferences has shown that the latter are viewed as interactions of two unequal parties, with the teacher educator dominating the conversation and therefore 'doing' most of the reflection (Farr,

2011). Such an approach to teacher education is likely to leave teacher trainees ill-prepared to deal with a profession full of challenges and complexities.

Roberts (1998), Miller (2009), and Richards and Farrell (2011) among others, have suggested adopting a different approach to microteaching seeking to deepen student teachers' understanding of their own teaching through dialogue and reflection. This view has led many researchers to look for more innovative approaches for the enhancement of microteaching practices. Among the different techniques that have been investigated and used to support microteaching, the use of video technology, in the form of video-recorded lessons, has been given particular emphasis (Sherin & Han, 2004; Romano & Schwartz, 2005; Lazarus & Olivero, 2009), for its usefulness in promoting reflection-on-action which relates to the kind of reflection that occurs in thinking back on practice (Schon, 1987; Hatton & Smith, 1995).

Numerous studies have provided evidence to show the effectiveness of video recordings and analysis of microteaching in promoting collaborative learning and in serving as a stimulus for reflection. However, only a few have explored pre-service teachers' own perceptions in this regard especially in the field of English language teaching (ELT) (Orlova 2009; Baecher, 2011; Kuter et al., 2012; Erozu-Tuga, 2013), and none of these studies was related to primary level. To address this gap, this study aims to explore whether the practice of microteaching, which has been criticised for being based on a more traditional approach to teacher learning, provides opportunities for collaborative discourse among student teachers and social reflection with the intended goal of fostering professional growth in relation to their language teaching skills, when supported with video technology.

Review of Relevant Literature

Reflective Practice in Teacher Education

The theory-practice divide is a dominant theme in the literature on reflective practice which owes much to the scholarship of Dewey and Schon, both of whom advocated that learning was contingent upon the integration of experience with reflection and of theory with practice (Humphreys & Susak, 2000). Dewey (1933) maintains that the crucial action of constructing meaning is mental; therefore, while hands-on experience may be necessary for learning, it is not sufficient; activities which engage the mind as well as hands should be provided, which means that he calls for an approach that requires learners to both experience and reflect. He also points out that such activities have to be embedded in a social context, such as a classroom, where learners are given opportunities to interact with others and construct their knowledge together. Based on the work of Dewey, Schon (1983) was the first who introduced the concept of the reflective practitioner, trying to discuss the role of reflection in professional practice. Schon, (1983, 1987) makes a distinction between two different concepts of reflection, 'reflection-in-action' which refers to reflection which takes place during practice and 'reflection-on-action', which is related to the kind of reflection that occurs in thinking back on practice. He asserts that the outcome of the former type of reflection is our knowing-in-action which is often left unexplained or unmentioned when teachers describe what they do but is revealed in the ways teachers perform. Teacher trainees should therefore be enabled to bring this tacit or implicit knowledge to their awareness by reflection-on-action. Allied to this premise, Freeman (cited in Bailey, 2007, p. 36), argues that one acts or responds to the aspects of a situation of which one is aware. This certainly implies that unless teacher trainees become cognizant of their deficiencies or strengths, they are unlikely to improve their teaching and grow professionally.

In reflective approaches to teaching, teachers are seen as reflective practitioners who, instead of merely practising experts' views in their teaching, they are encouraged to make

sense of different dimensions of teaching individually and collectively (Abednia, Hovassapian, Teimournezhad & Ghanbari, 2013, p.504). This suggests that both the tasks and instructional approaches used by teacher educators should no longer be understood as merely putting theory into practice; rather, they should be seen as learning opportunities in which students engage in the process of thinking of *what* and *how* they are doing and an adequate base of facts, principles and experiences from which to reason. In this sense, learning to teach should become the process during which student teachers are helped to make explicit their needs and concerns for teaching (Nilsson, 2008) and to develop the core competences of a language teacher, which include observation skills, self-reflection, critical thinking and decision-making (Kalebic, 2005, p.109).

Pollard et al. (2008, p.5) argue that “reflective teaching should be personally fulfilling for teachers, but also lead to a steady increase in the quality of education provided for children”. This statement highlights the pedagogical value of reflection not only regarding the quality of teaching practice but also regarding the quality of the education provided in schools. It is, therefore, crucial for teachers when they are still trainees to be able to show in their teaching more than the standard competencies and have those experiences that are part of becoming a reflective practitioner (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005).

The Potential of Video-Mediated Microteaching in Teacher Education

Research has built upon Dewey’s and Schon’s ideas and opened new avenues for exploration, accounting for both social as well as technological advances. In addition to the more traditional modes of fostering reflection such as journaling and writing, the power of video as a tool for enhancing student teachers’ reflective and analytical skills (Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2007; Fadde, Aud & Gilbert, 2009; Savas, 2012) is now widely acknowledged.

A number of studies have emphasised the significance of incorporating video in teacher education with respect to its use as a tool for fostering productive discussions and negotiation among trainees within microteaching, leading to the enhancement of teachers’ professional development (Glazer, Hannafin & Song, 2005; Ng’ambi & Johnson, 2006; Kuter, Gazi & Aksal, 2012) and the development of their reflective and analytical skills (Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2007; Harford & MacRuairc, 2008; Fadde et al., 2009; Savas, 2012). Findings drawn from two studies (Fernandez, 2010; and Kpanja, 2001) revealed that video-enabled and video-oriented discussion followed by peer feedback and critical reflection helped pre-service teachers to identify areas for improvement and increased an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. The use of video also gives teachers the potential to isolate and capture important and puzzling moments that can occur and might slip their attention in the constantly moving place the classroom is (Galvis & Nemirovsky, 2003); this can help teachers build a more realistic picture of their own performance and support their understanding of the observed lessons during post-observation conferences (Baecher, 2011). Baecher (2011, p.2) also interestingly argues that, frequently, a review of video generates a sense of disequilibrium between what teachers believed to have occurred in their lesson and what really occurred, which can lead to new ways of thinking.

Data from a relevant study conducted by Kuter et al. (2012) demonstrated that student teachers’ involvement in collaborative dialogue following a video-recorded microteaching session helped them improve their weaknesses in planning lessons and assisted them to gain awareness and develop themselves concerning the aspects that they were not aware of at the beginning of their microteaching. Collegiality in the form of collaborative reflective dialogue was found to help trainees interrogate their personal theories and constructs and the taken-

for-granted (Francis, 1997) and to gain awareness due to the incorporation of self- and peer-evaluation under the guidance of the teacher educator.

The Role of the Teacher Educator

Research has provided evidence to show the effectiveness of video recordings and analysis in promoting collaborative learning with peers and in serving as a stimulus for reflection. However, as pointed out by Dewey (1933), reflection is not a habitual process; rather it is a learned process that requires encouragement, reinforcement, supervision and training. Likewise, Valli (1997) stresses the importance of supervision in encouraging reflection, explaining that the role of a supervisor in a reflective process is one of a guide who prompts and encourages pre-service teachers to ask questions for self-analysis in reflective conversations. Such views are based on the premise that teacher educators should move away from their prescriptive, assessing roles and take on the role of the facilitator, triggering change through raising the trainees' awareness (Freeman, cited in Richards, 1989, p.7).

Background to the Study and Rationale

In Cyprus Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for primary school teachers takes place via a four-year university programme of study leading to a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. Graduates from this programme are qualified as teachers and are eligible to teach all the subjects of the primary curriculum. The teaching approach promoted in this programme seems to reflect the broader educational system in Cyprus, which is centralised and is characterised by an emphasis on top-down directionality. Upon graduation from this programme, student teachers should be able to teach all the subjects of the primary curriculum. At the university where this study took place, students are required to complete four English modules in the four years of their studies. The first two focus on the enhancement of their language skills whereas the other two aim at exposing students to the theoretical aspects of language teaching. They are however obliged to teach English at least twice during their teaching practice, which is actually the only opportunity trainees have, to develop their practical competences and an understanding of the theory they learn in the relevant modules. Another shortcoming of the programme is that the teaching practice still follows a more traditional knowledge-transmission approach to teacher learning; student teachers are first exposed to unfocused observations of cooperating teachers in schools in order to see how 'good' teaching should be done and then implement these ideas in their teaching without being given the opportunity to question their effectiveness. The role of the teaching practice supervisors, who are not subject specialists, also seems to reflect the traditional model to teacher learning which treats student teachers as passive receivers of knowledge rather than active sense-makers. The feedback they provide student teachers with during classroom observation is rarely verbal and when it is, it centres on the aspects of general pedagogy and classroom management (Kourieos, 2012). This means, that teacher trainees are never really made aware of their strengths and weaknesses in relation to their language teaching skills which leaves very little space for improvement.

The philosophy which underpins this programme seems to be associated with the applied-science model within which the process of learning to teach is limited to the acquisition of the theoretical knowledge of the subject-matter (language teaching theories) and it does not attend to how prospective teachers transform these theories into pedagogical practice. There is no doubt that providing student teachers with an adequate theoretical base

of language teaching should form an integral part of the learning to teach process; this process will, however, be fragmented if student teachers are not provided with learning opportunities which aim at facilitating the development of their practical 'know-how'.

Considering the limitations of the Teacher Education programme currently offered in this particular University in Cyprus with respect to its usefulness for preparing prospective primary teachers for language teaching, this research study intended to investigate whether the use of video-mediated microteaching could turn the process of learning to teach English into a more meaningful and useful experience for teacher trainees by helping them raise awareness of their teaching practices and grow professionally. Based on the aim of the study, one research question was developed:

- What impact, if any, does video-mediated microteaching have on the process of pre-service teachers' learning to teach English?

Seeking answers to this question can be useful in creating an awareness of how the practice of microteaching can be modified or improved in order to become a process that would really support the initial development of primary language teachers, especially in countries with a more centralised educational system.

Methodology

For the purposes of this paper, a case study was conducted within the qualitative research paradigm, using a variety of data sources; recordings of videotaped micro-lessons, a pre-observation self-reflective form, a post-observation evaluation form and a classroom discussion.

Participants

The subjects of this study were eleven 4th year student teachers (5 male and 6 female) enrolled in a Teacher Education programme at a private university in Cyprus whose proficiency level ranged from low-intermediate to advanced, and whose participation in the study was voluntary. All students attended a compulsory English language module at the time of the study, which focused on the theoretical aspects of English language teaching at primary level. Although students had never been involved in microteaching activities as part of this module, they were asked to voluntarily take part in this study which required them to collaborate with their peers and in groups of four, prepare and present a lesson in the light of the methods and skills they had attained theoretically. Eleven out of 24 students agreed to participate under the condition that they would remain anonymous.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher acted as a facilitator throughout the post-observation classroom discussion. Her role was simply to encourage debate and foster reflection in a safe and collegial environment. She therefore posed questions throughout the session and asked participants to support their comments by providing justifications or suggesting alternative ways of approaching the lesson.

Materials and Procedure

Data were collected in two stages towards the end of the spring semester of the academic year 2014-2015. In stage one the three groups of trainees which participated in the study, were involved in microteaching which was videotaped to be viewed and discussed in the second stage of the study. At the beginning of the session, each group had to inform their peers about the level of students they were expected to address during the microteaching activity. Although they were not informed about the aspects on the self-reflective form, they were given clear instructions by the lecturer which they had to follow when planning the particular lesson. After deciding on the level (school grade) they would teach, they were expected to identify the new language that should be introduced and practised in that lesson, decide on the activities they would use to fulfill the aims of the lesson and think of the language they would use to introduce these activities. They were also advised to carefully consider the syllabus and philosophy which underpin the English curriculum in primary state schools in Cyprus (with which they had already been familiar), in order to prepare a lesson that would not only be motivating and fun but one that would encourage their students to use and practise the new language to the maximum. Finally, student teachers were told that regardless of the activity that each student would teach, they had to cooperate as a group to plan the lesson and choose the right activities and materials.

Each microteaching session was timed for twenty minutes and followed by the completion of a self-reflective form (cf. Appendix A), which required participants to reflect and comment on their own teaching performance prior to watching the videotaped lessons. This form was developed by the researcher and required them to reflect and comment on any difficulties they felt they had encountered while delivering the lesson, paying particular attention to language use and choice of activities. The second stage took place the following week and lasted for about two and a half hours. During this session participants were asked to watch all the videotaped lessons and complete an evaluation form (cf. Appendix B) which focused on the same issues as the ones presented in the self-reflective form. The ultimate aim of this session was to raise student teachers' awareness of their instructional practices by involving them in a post-observation classroom discussion during which they reflected on both, their own and their peers' teaching performance by considering the aspects on the evaluation form. The discussion was recorded after seeking the participants' permission. Having the transcripts enabled the researcher to do a more thorough content analysis and to include actual quotes from the interviewees which may not have been possible if the researcher had simply taken notes. This provided credibility and reliability to the collected data (Kvale, 2007). Data were then transcribed and returned to participants for respondent validation. Considering some of the participants' low English language proficiency, the self-reflection, and the evaluation form were translated into Greek to avoid possible problems in understanding what was asked. The translation of the questionnaire from English to Greek was also reviewed by two independent translator-linguists to make sure that the translation was accurate. The post-observation classroom discussion was also conducted in the students' first language to ensure clarity of expression.

The content –thematic-analysis was employed to analyse and interpret the qualitative data obtained from the post-observation evaluation form and the transcribed classroom discussion, by considering the key themes in relation to the research focus and question (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008). The transcribed data were first grouped under the topics outlined in the three questions of the post-observation evaluation form: difficulties, language used and choice of activities. Following a qualitative analysis technique suggested by Patton (2002), the researcher looked at “the details and specifics of the data to discover important themes and interrelationships” (p.41). The main reason for using this technique was to ensure

that the obtained recurrent themes met the requirements of the research question and the purpose of the study. Participants' comments in relation to the first and second questions seemed to overlap as the difficulties they perceived to have faced while delivering the lesson had to do with the target language. These overlapping comments in relation to the same area were subsequently classified into one more focused category: Classroom language and error correction. Data related to the third question formed the second category. Data from the self-reflective forms were used to compare participants' perceptions prior to and after observing the videotaped lessons.

The next section presents the results under the two categories mentioned above, which have been developed based on the comments all or most of the participants made or agreed to. The names used for the participants are pseudonyms.

Findings and Discussion

The in-depth examination of the triangulated data drawn from multiple data collection instruments (see methodology section) yielded invaluable findings regarding the impact of video-mediated microteaching on the process of learning to teach.

The data from this study indicated that videotaped microteaching and collaborative discussions promoted trainees' awareness of classroom language and error correction and an understanding of the theoretical aspects of primary language teaching.

Classroom Language and Error Correction

During the video feedback session, the participants seemed more reflective and critical about their own performance and more insightful in commenting on their peers' performance than they were before watching the video. After watching the recordings of all the lessons, participants pointed to classroom language use as a common difficulty they all seemed to have faced to a certain extent. On the self-evaluation form which was completed right after the student teachers had carried out their lessons, only four participants out of eleven claimed to have had difficulties with language use. However, after having observed themselves teaching, a number of common language problems became evident.

Participants' overlapping comments on classroom language initially indicated that this was an area that was considered particularly important by the participants. Emphasis was placed on the language used to give instructions and to explain the new content. When they evaluated their language proficiency when carrying out the lesson, the majority (N= 9 out of 11) reported their awareness of inaccurate use of English. While watching her video, one student teacher admitted that even though she was not aware of her poor language proficiency during her teaching, after she had watched her videotaped lesson, she noticed that she would start a sentence using one tense and she would end up using another, which as she claimed, made the delivery of the new content really confusing. Similarly, another student teacher noticed a number of mistakes in his speech mainly related to syntax and choice of vocabulary, which he felt were 'unacceptable' considering his perceived language proficiency. He also made the realisation that even though he had been well-prepared on how to give the instructions for the activities he had planned and on how to explain the new grammar, most of the mistakes occurred when he tried to speak spontaneously. Despite the language mistakes participants identified in their speech, eight of them felt that their mistakes were mainly due to their stress and lack of experience in conducting a lesson in English.

When exchanging feedback on each other's language use in class, similar comments were made by almost all the participants. They felt that, their peers had made some noticeable

mistakes but again they seemed to have attributed this to their difficulty with English and their lack of language teaching experience. Most of the comments centred on grammar and vocabulary mistakes which seemed to have prevented some student teachers (N= 6) from giving clear instructions and consequently from making their peers understand what was expected of them. Two of these student teachers said that they had spent too much time trying to produce a well-planned lesson according to the guidelines given by their lecturer (see materials and procedure) but admitted having underestimated the need for preparing for the language they would use to carry out the activities they had prepared. As one of them asserted:

“The truth is that I am not particularly competent in English but I thought that introducing simple activities wouldn’t be a problem. I was so wrong! My inability to explain, what I had been preparing for since the beginning of the semester increased my anxiety and made me lose confidence in myself”. (Student teacher A)

Particularly interesting were the comments made by almost all participants (10 out of 11) in relation to a student teacher’s language use. This student was very competent in English both orally and in writing. Initially, everybody’s reaction was very positive. There was consensus among participants that the particular student had no problem explaining the lesson or giving instructions in a clear, comprehensible way. However, when the researcher prompted them to reflect on this student teacher’s language use in relation to the pupils’ level he was supposed to be addressing, there was one student teacher who criticised it negatively:

“Even though his language proficiency goes unquestioned, I feel that both the vocabulary and tenses he used would be too advanced for 3rd graders to understand”. (Student teacher B)

This comment proved to be particularly insightful as it seemed to have urged the rest of the participants to revisit their initial beliefs and to engage in reflective dialogue concerning the language level that should be used when teaching at primary level. All participants agreed that the language used by the particular student teacher was too difficult for that level. Two of them also admitted that the fact that they did not identify any mistakes in his speech and that the lesson was done in an artificial setting led them to ‘forget’ that the latter was intended for young language learners, which is why they felt that in this case, classroom language was not an area that needed to be improved or commented on. An interesting point was the realisation made by the same student teacher as regards the unsuitability of the language he used throughout his lesson; he claimed that because of his good language skills, he did not feel that classroom language was an area he needed to prepare for in advance and even when he explained the activities during microteaching, he did not consider simplifying his language as he was addressing his peers.

Another common theme among the participants’ written comments associated with their low language proficiency was error correction. After watching all the recordings of the lessons, the researcher pointed out many cases in which errors were ignored or went unnoticed. A reason given for that by three student teachers who were asked to justify their written comments was that they were mainly concerned with their own performance and in reality they paid little attention to the answers given by their peers. Two other participants admitted that they failed to correct any mistakes simply because they had not been aware of these mistakes, attributing this to their low English language proficiency. Another interesting remark was made by a student teacher who commented on the way one of her peers corrected mistakes:

“John always spotted all wrong answers and the truth is that he had no problem correcting them by using different words or giving examples. However, because of his excellent language skills, the examples and alternative words he gave were quite hard even for most of us to understand... this wouldn’t really work with young language learners who are likely to become even more frustrated”. (Student teacher C)

The above comment seemed to have generated a fruitful discussion on how mistakes should be corrected at this level, pointing to the way two student teachers managed to provide corrective feedback in a simple and non-threatening way.

“I really liked the way George dealt with our mistakes. He really treated us like children and it was real fun. Every time somebody made a mistake, he would frown or use gestures, in a really encouraging way though, just to show us that we had to think of a different answer ... and he gave us time to think”. (Student teacher D)

“Mary used recasts when we made a mistake, which I found quite useful considering that she was supposed to be addressing 2nd graders. I feel that some of the microteaching activities prospective teachers are exposed to during their initial education should focus solely on error correction at different levels”. (Student teacher E).

Considering participants’ comments, in relation to their own, and their peers’ language use, it seems that student teachers’ fluency and knowledge of the appropriate classroom language was one of the main problems identified and discussed extensively in post-observation discussion. Data have also shown that inaccurate language use and low language proficiency resulted, in some cases, in poor performance of the activities planned and unsuccessful error correction. It is also worth mentioning that effective classroom language was not always associated with language proficiency, but also with the specific needs of classroom language, an area that is not dealt with in their English language course.

Findings have also highlighted the instructor’s role in the reflective process, as, in many cases, it led the primary pre-service teachers to deeper reflection on important aspects of primary language teaching, such as appropriate language use and error correction, which they would not have noticed or become aware of otherwise. The role and importance of an awareness-raising component in a Teacher Education programme in relation to classroom language was investigated and highlighted in a study carried out by Tuzel and Akcan (2009) who found that systematic language awareness activities which occurred under the guidance of [University lecturers] have helped student teachers gain confidence in risk-taking and identify their needs and problems in a more focused way. Likewise, the pre-service teachers in the study of Weiss and Weiss (2001) reported that they found supervised collaborative peer analysis effective, since it provided alternative perspectives to analyse their own teaching. Participants in a study by Kuter et al. (2012) considered the teacher’s feedback critical for the collaborative evaluation process and asserted that what they found particularly beneficial was the fact that the teacher did not provide them with ready-made thoughts but with the foundations of how to think. Engagement in supervised collaborative dialogue, through critical questioning gives student teachers the opportunity to become aware of their beliefs and assumptions, and question the grounds of these assumptions, which consequently, leads to transformation and reconstruction of knowledge and experiences (Miller, 1990).

Gaining Awareness of the Theory

Data have provided further evidence that the use of video followed by collaborative dialogue and peer feedback helped trainees to gain awareness of the gap between their instructional processes and the theory they learnt in their English language module. The analysis of the pre-video observation self-reflective forms indicated that all participants were quite pleased with the way they had planned the lesson and their choice of activities, arguing that they felt their peers really enjoyed the lesson. However, when they were asked to watch the recordings of all the lessons with a more critical eye and write down their reflections on the post-observation evaluation form, they came up with more specific comments as regards the use of more student-centred activities and the choice of activities based on the objectives

of the lesson. Four trainees belonging to the same group highlighted their incapability in planning student-centred tasks especially when it came to grammar teaching and admitted having conducted a very traditional lesson in all aspects. This realization also raised their awareness of language teaching issues discussed in the English module. As two of them commented:

“In class we talked about doing a lesson using the communicative approach, which at the time we felt we fully understood what that entailed. However, when we did our lesson we realised that we ended up using a more traditional approach which proved to be quite boring and unsuccessful”. (Student teacher F)

“During microteaching I tried to focus on my teaching performance so I paid little attention to how the latter affected my peers. But when we watched the recordings we could also see our peers’ feelings and reactions to the activities...and the truth is that they looked quite bored and uninvolved even though they were trying hard to be supportive”. (Student teacher G)

Other comments made by six student teachers regarding the same lesson were related to their peers’ lack of enthusiasm when introducing the activities or explaining the grammar, their explicit explanation of grammatical rules and lots of emphasis on fill-in-the gaps exercises with hardly any opportunities for interaction. “This”, as one student teacher explained, “made us keep very quiet during the lesson, passively following the instructions given to us on a number of tasks. But the truth is that we did not enjoy that lesson as we enjoyed the other two, where a more child-friendly approach was used”. (Student teacher H)

What was interesting, however, was the fact that when students were asked by the researcher to suggest other ways of approaching the same lesson, nobody could suggest alternative activities. They asserted that even though they were aware of the fact that engaging young learners in explanations of grammatical rules and focus-on-form exercises is likely to bring counterproductive results, they would most probably result in doing the same thing as they did not understand what it meant to teach grammar communicatively. It seems that primary language teaching at higher levels (3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th grades) which involves the teaching of more complex grammar rather than the teaching of simple words and phrases, is likely to lead student teachers to adopt more traditional teaching approaches which perhaps reflects the way they were taught, despite being aware that this, is not compatible with the current methodological thinking which underpins the primary English language curriculum in Cyprus. The general picture to emerge here is that student teachers’ teaching practices were in some cases guided by their personal beliefs of teaching and learning developed through their prior language learning experiences, what Lortie (1975) called ‘the apprenticeship of observation’, as a way of compensating for their lack of knowledge in relation to grammar teaching. While novice teachers are likely to benefit from following such an approach to learning in their first days of teaching, it can limit them to teaching the way they were taught and prevent them from moving beyond that, which is an important step in the developmental stage of learning to teach (Johnson, 1999, p.22). Thus, providing pre-service teachers with opportunities to become cognizant of this tacit or implicit knowledge about learning and teaching should become an important focus of teacher education. Only then can changes in novice teachers’ teaching practices occur (Golombek, 2000).

Comments were also made regarding the choice of activities. When participants were urged by the instructor to reflect on whether they felt they had accomplished the lesson objectives they had set, two participants from the same group realised that while they managed to create a pleasant classroom atmosphere and keep their peers’ enthusiasm throughout the lesson through the use of games and fun activities, they failed to provide them with sufficient opportunities to practise the new grammar. Participants seemed to attribute

their avoidance to include more grammar exercises to their lack of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) regarding communicative grammar teaching and they all thought that this was an area they needed training on.

The above findings indicate that concrete experiences followed by opportunities for reflection and negotiation of feedback under the guidance of the course instructor assisted trainees in bridging the gap between theory and practice and in gaining awareness of aspects of their teaching on which they require more training and practice. These findings are further confirmed with research in the field which has consistently suggested that video analysis supports the development of teachers' reflective skills, but only when direction and scaffolding are provided (Lazarus & Olivero, 2009; Kuter et al., 2012).

Conclusions and Implications

The results from this study suggest that merely bombarding the trainees with language teaching theories, as is currently the case in the university where this study took place does not ensure an integration of the language teaching skills required of prospective primary teachers. To attain this, a reflective component must be included in the learning to teach process, which will bridge the gap between theory and practice. Trainees need to develop the ability to observe and reflect upon others' and their own teaching in order to make sense of their leaning experiences. The incorporation of video into the practice of microteaching seemed to have had a positive impact on student teachers' awareness of the relevant theory and of aspects of primary language teaching through focused observation and reflective feedback. It has become evident that reflective feedback did not only involve the individual reflecting on his / her practices but it also promoted reflection as part of dialogue, in which case reflection was seen as social rather than individual and self-directed. Along the same lines, Richards (1996) insists on the importance not only of including teaching observation in training programmes but also of ensuring that there is adequate discussion of it. Participants' involvement in post-observation discussions with their university tutor and peers urged them to respond to each other's comments and ideas, as a way of evaluating the effectiveness of what was observed, rather than passively adopting a set of prescribed techniques and activities. Peer interactions during the post-observation classroom discussion were the medium through which the participants articulated their personal interpretations of the recorded lessons they had watched and were assisted to identify gaps in their professional knowledge and skills. In this way, they were enabled to gain an understanding of their practice from an external perspective and learn from their own teaching experiences in a way that may not have been possible through self-reflection alone. Structured in this way, microteaching sessions are likely to raise student teachers' awareness of knowing and doing, increase an understanding of themselves as learners, and teach observation and feedback skills (Allen & Ryan; McIntyre, McLeod & Griffiths, Wabda cited in Legutke & Ditfurth, 2009, p.213).

Guidance during the post-observation discussion was also commented on positively by participants. The instructor was perceived to have played an important role in guiding them to move their reflectivity further by raising their consciousness towards broader perspectives of language teaching. Hatton & Smith (1995) state that supervised peer discussions are valuable tools for the promotion of reflection in pre-service teacher education since they encourage dialogue among student teachers and guide them to become aware of multiple perspectives. Such views have important implications for the teacher educator who has an important role in guiding and assisting teachers in the process of becoming reflective practitioners.

Although trainees reported to have benefited greatly from this experience, their comments revealed that in some cases, they lacked the knowledge required to provide any feedback. Similar findings were reported in two other studies which found that student teachers lacked the skills and knowledge to analyse lessons and provide meaningful feedback (Kurtts & Levin, 2000; Ovens, 2004). This clearly calls for more formal support from the Teacher Education programme. One context for this formal support is a more practical methods module which will make extensive use of video technology, providing teacher trainees with multiple opportunities to develop their practical competences and reasoning skills through social reflection. Language use is also an area that should be taken into serious consideration. Student teachers seemed to have experienced difficulties mainly with classroom interaction patterns. Their needs seem to be more related to features of communicative competence rather than with English as an academic subject, a finding which calls for teacher educators to revisit the content and structure of the English language module within teacher education curricula bearing in mind the specific needs of prospective primary language teachers.

Findings from this study could be particularly informative to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturers, programme designers and teacher trainers working in the field of teacher education. These findings emphasise the need for the inclusion of collaborative awareness-raising tasks within Initial Teacher Education programmes which will enable student teachers to form meaningful links between relevant educational theory and actual practice as a way of addressing and reconstructing their personal theories, and, eventually take responsibility for their own teaching. It is therefore recommended that teacher educators set up similar learning opportunities in contexts where knowledge is constructed and understood in collaboration with others involved in the process of learning to teach (university teachers, peers). Manouchehri (2002) interestingly argues that by promoting peer interactions and by orchestrating situations in which pre-service teachers are challenged to exchange ideas, articulate their thinking, and attempt to understand their peers' perspective, teacher educators can help prospective teachers develop the capacity to take on new perspectives and build new understandings about the profession. Findings also highlight the importance of listening to the voices of those directly involved in learning about primary language teaching (student teachers) and to consider the difficulties that they face within the process of learning to teach. Encouraging them to reflect on and interpret the teaching situations they are engaged in is surely a fundamental basis for quality in Teacher Education programmes.

Future Research

The results outlined in the present study are context-specific and are limited because of scale as the sample was taken only from one University, thus they cannot be generalized. It would be therefore useful to replicate the study with a larger sample size taken from more Universities where similar undergraduate Teacher Education programmes are offered in order to confirm and/or add to the findings of this study.

Evidence has been provided that the use of video and the learning opportunities generated by the use of it have contributed largely to student teachers' sense-making of the theory learnt in University and their awareness of aspects of their teaching that need improvement. However, there is no indication that student teachers will turn this awareness into pedagogical practice, thus, it does not claim to trace any changes in behaviour over a period of time. Future research should therefore examine through observation of sequential videotaped microteaching whether and how teacher trainees implement these new

understandings into their future teaching practices. An investigation of possible factors which may hinder the internalisation by trainees of these new understandings and their adoption to their teaching would also provide useful insight into teacher learning and would subsequently aid teacher educators in refining their instructional approaches and the learning opportunities in which they engage student teachers.

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Appendix A: Pre-Video Observation Self-Reflective Form

1. How do you feel the lesson went? Did you face any difficulties while teaching any of the activities you had prepared?
2. How do you feel about the language you used while delivering the lesson?
3. How do you feel about the choice of activities? Were they suitable for the age group being addressed?

Appendix B: Post-Observation Evaluation Form

Lesson 1

1. How do you feel the lesson went? Did you notice any difficulties you encountered while teaching any of the activities you had prepared?
2. How do you feel about the language used by you or the rest of your group while delivering the lesson?
3. How do you feel about the choice of activities? Were they suitable for the age group being addressed?

Lesson 2 & 3

1. How do you feel the lesson went? Did you notice any difficulties your peers encountered while teaching any of the activities they had prepared?
2. How do you feel about the language used by your peers while delivering the lesson?
3. How do you feel about the choice of activities? Were they suitable for the age group being addressed?