

The Use of Reflective Journals in Outcome-Based Education During the Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of reflective journals as a learning tool in the training of future English teachers via the outcome-based education system. At the onset, the concepts of outcome-based education serve as the research framework. Based on the journal entries of three teacher trainees who underwent a twelve-week teaching practicum in a suburban school in Klang, Selangor, the research explores evidence of learning through an outcome-based education programme. The evidence is then scrutinized further by matching it to the concepts of outcome-based education. Three major categories which represent the concepts of outcome-based education serve as references in the analysis. The categories are 1) what the participants know, 2) what the participants can actually do with what they know and, 3) the participants' confidence and motivation in demonstrating what they know (Guskey, 1994; Kirk & Welborn, 1992; McNeir, 1993). Data are qualitative in nature as they come in the form of written narratives. The data analysis adopts the Constant Comparative Method (Wellington, 2000). This paper is expected to enlighten not only trainees but also trainers on how to manipulate reflective journals in training future English teachers via outcome-based education.

Introduction

Outcome-based Education (OBE) is a method of teaching that emphasizes what students can actually do after they are trained. Decisions on teaching and learning are made based on how best to facilitate the desired outcome which in turn leads to a planning process that is different from traditional educational planning. In OBE, the desired outcome is first identified before the curriculum is created to support the intended outcome (Fitzpatrick, 1995; Furman, 1994).

In industrial training programmes such as the teaching practicum for graduating Education students, the students are required to keep journals or learning logs. Journals, particularly the type that emphasizes the students' reflections on their performance, are believed to enlighten the students and their lecturers on issues such as the students' level of motivation, the challenges faced and how those challenges were overcome (Faizah, 2004). Indirectly, this could lead to better observations of the students' demonstration of what they have been trained for. Hence, it is the aim of this paper to address the manipulation of reflective journals in training future teachers in the light of Outcome-based Education which focuses on the facilitation of the desired outcomes.

Literature review

Outcome Based Education (OBE)

There is no one single model to describe OBE. The Literature indicates that the frameworks for OBE “share an emphasis on systems-level change, observable, measurable outcomes, and the belief that given time, all students can learn” (Faouzi et al, 2003, pp. 204). Glatthorn (1993) and Guskey (1994) postulate that the shift towards OBE resulted from worries about the traditional education system. According to them, there is a classic belief that the input the traditional education system provides cannot prepare students for life and work in the twenty-first century. Hence, there exists a need for a more effective approach which focuses on the potential and actual abilities of the students after they are trained.

It is worth noting that in OBE, the learning outcomes need to be clear, and observable. The observations are on the “demonstrations of students' learning that occur after a significant set of learning experiences” (Faouzi et al, 2003, p. 205). Faouzi et al further comment that the learning outcomes are not “values, attitudes, feelings, beliefs, activities, assignments, goals or grades” (2003, pp.205). In simpler terms, learning outcomes in the context of OBE are the observable and measurable performance of the students.

The following are the three aspects of OBE; 1) the focus on outcomes, 2) the curriculum design process which starts from the exit level outcome downwards, and 3) the responsibility of the institution and teacher/trainer to supply appropriate learning experiences for the success of all students. On the part of the curriculum design and implementation of the curriculum, there are several conditions which are controllable and they include 1) where the instructional focus is placed, 2) how long, how often, and when

the time for learning is provided, 3) what learning is expected from whom, and how it is rewarded, and 4) how the curriculum is designed and organized (Gerber, 1997).

Universities in the United States for instance are moving towards an OBE education framework, hence abandoning the traditional grade-point average framework (Faouzi et al, 2003). As a result, accreditation institutions such as the North Central Association now require universities and colleges to present a method of assessing the students' learning outcomes (Faouzi et al, 2003). Based on the OBE framework, several approaches could be applied in observing and measuring students' learning outcomes. Since "demonstrations of students learning that occur after a significant set of learning experiences" (Faouzi et al, 2003, p. 205) are at the core of OBE, industrial training and internship are some of the possible assessment formats. This paper investigates the use of reflective journals as a learning tool in the training of future English teachers via the outcome-based education system. Specifically, it investigates how the learning outcomes expected of TESL trainee teachers can be observed and measured through the trainees' reflective journals besides the observations of their classroom teaching. It plans to do so by tracing 1) what the participants know, 2) what the participants can actually do with what they know and, 3) the participants' confidence and motivation in demonstrating what they know (Guskey, 1994; Kirk & Welborn, 1992; McNeir, 1993) through a document analysis of the trainees' reflective journals.

Reflective Journal

Reflective journals are a kind of "annotated chronological record or a 'log' of experiences and events" (Wellington 2000: 118). The data collected from the reflective journals are those that are generated by the participants themselves which might be difficult to trace via other instruments. According to Marefat (2002: 105), researchers are interested in journals because they are "records of opinions and perceptions important for the learner – ideas which cannot easily be tapped in other ways." The importance of reflective journals in a study like this one is further supported by Goodson and Sikes (2001):

Not only is a document of this kind useful for providing factual information, it can also help with analysis and interpretation, in that it can jog memory and indicate patterns and trends which might have been lost if confined to the mind. (2001: 32)

In administrating reflective journals, a researcher is not confined to any specific formula or rules (Wellington 2000: 119). Wellington further clarifies by suggesting that the rule of thumb for the conduct of reflective journals is to ensure the participants write "a chronological account of events with the diarist's (participant's) own interpretation or version of them, and reflection on them". He continues by recommending a particular approach, that is, to ask the participants to "look out for, and record critical events in their experiences". It is believed that "by recording critical or significant incidents, the participants can often convey far more than could be achieved by a daily, blow-by-blow account" (Wellington 2000).

In this study, each research participant was asked to reflect on their daily teaching experiences. Specifically, besides commenting on the difficulties they encountered while teaching, they were asked to describe the strategies they used to overcome the difficulties. They were also encouraged to cite specific examples whenever necessary. Each diary entry was numbered according to the lesson and day.

Research Methodology

To investigate how the learning outcomes expected of TESL trainee teachers can be observed and measured through the trainees' reflective journals, a qualitative study design was adopted. The rationale for choosing one methodology over another is connected to the background of the research participants and the aim of the research. Since the investigation involves an in-depth inquiry of a process and meaning of a situation, qualitative research is most appropriate (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). Most importantly, it can be a valuable research method as it "reveals a wealth of enlightening information through words and descriptions that a quantitative study might not be able to produce" (Van Dalen and Meyer 1962: 199 cited in Rahmah 1996).

In this qualitative study, document analysis was used as the main data collection instrument. Three participants' reflective journals were analyzed. The participants were encouraged to write in their reflective journal on a daily basis for 12 weeks. However, since the daily journal entry was not compulsory, it resulted in a varying number of journal entries by each of the three participants. Nonetheless, the total number of journal entries investigated was sufficient to enable the investigation. Data was collected until it reached the 'saturation stage' when newly collected data shared similar theme(s) with the existing data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The investigation began with tracing the evidence of learning in an outcome-based education system that took place amongst the participants. The identified evidence was then matched to the concepts of outcome-based education. Three major categories which represent the concepts of outcome-based education serve as references in the analysis. The categories are 1) what the participants know, 2) what the participants can actually do with what they know and, 3) the participants' confidence and motivation in demonstrating what they know (Guskey, 1994; Kirk & Welborn, 1992; McNeir, 1993).

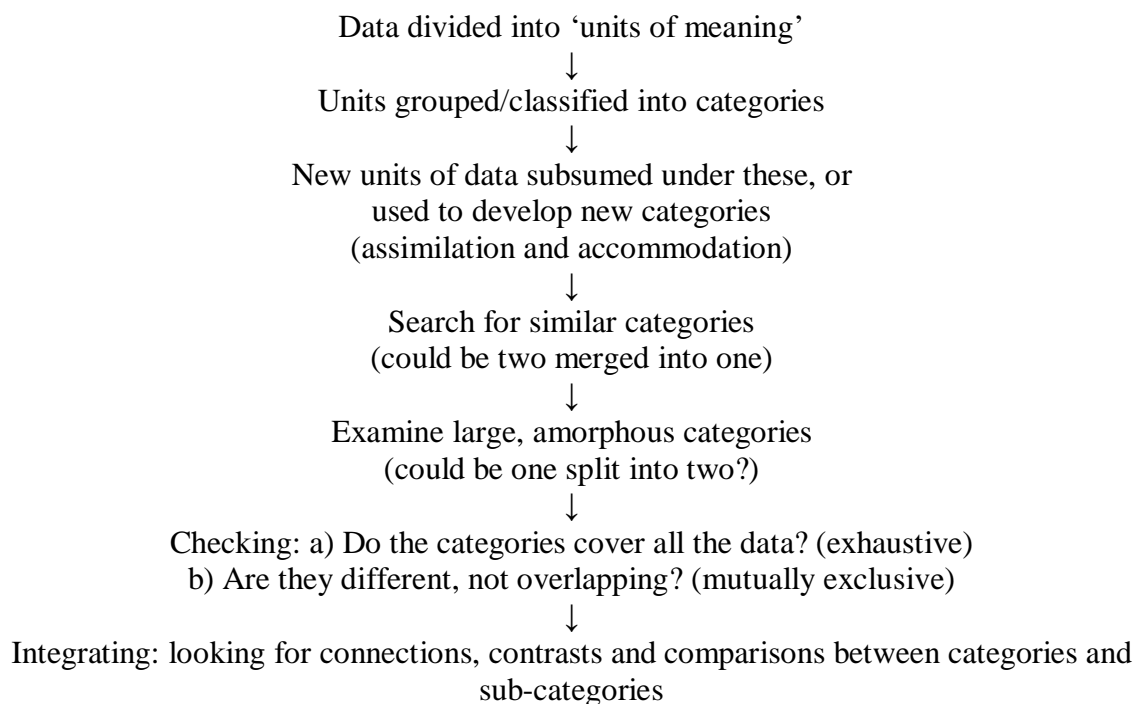
The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis.

- 1) What do the participants know about English language teaching?
- 2) What can the participants do in their teaching practicum with what they know?
- 3) How confident and motivated are the participants in demonstrating what they know during their teaching practicum?

Data Analysis

Data in this study is made up of written narratives from the participants' reflective journals. Hence, in analyzing the data, the Constant Comparative Method was employed (Wellington, 2000). The following illustration depicts the flow of the data analysis procedures.

Figure 1: The 'Constant Comparative Method'



(Source: Wellington, 2000: 137)

From the written narratives, relevant excerpts were identified. The excerpts are the "units of meanings" (Wellington, 2000). The excerpts were identified based on their representativeness of categories initially identified from the literature review, namely, 1) what the participant know, 2) what the participants can actually do with what they know and, 3) the participants' confidence and motivation in demonstrating what they know (Guskey, 1994; Kirk & Welborn, 1992; McNeir, 1993). For reference purposes, the categories were coded. At this point, it is important to highlight that the codes and their definitions played an important role especially in data reliability assessment, that is, through the Cohen Kappa's degree of agreement. According to Fleiss (1981: 218), values "exceeding .75 suggest strong agreement above chance" while Gardner (1995) recommends that Cohen Kappa's values should exceed .70 before the researcher proceeds with the additional data analysis. The mean value obtained for the present case study was .85 which enabled the data analysis to proceed.

Findings and Discussions

Relevant excerpts from the reflective journals serve as data in the analysis and are referred to in the findings. In answering the research questions, relevant excerpts are drawn upon in addition to the interpretations thus providing a clearer understanding of the issue under investigation.

Research question 1: What do the participants know about English language teaching?
and

Research question 2: What can the participants actually do with what they know?

Basically, the participants already had the basic knowledge and skills of an English teacher when they started their teaching practicum. The categories identified in the excerpts suggest that the participants were aware of aspects such as 1) teaching strategies, 2) learning activities, 3) class control, 4) time management, 5) learner diversity, and 6) command of the subject matter. However, the participants' journal entries indicate that although they knew or were aware of the necessary aspects of teaching, they were not able to do their best in all the said aspects. This is suggested by the difficulties they had when faced with related problems. The discussion that follows links the participants' ability to demonstrate what they knew during the practicum to exploring the areas which they were not able to handle to the best of their ability.

It was found that the participants were aware of appropriate teaching strategies. They employed group discussions and presentations. On top of that, they knew how those activities could benefit their students. This is evident from the following excerpt taken from Participant 1:

I often do discussion and presentation because I want them to discover things by themselves and make use of the language by speaking it up. It is one of the ways that can boost their confidence in using the language. Plus, I could see cooperation among group members in accomplishing the task. I could also see their face full of curiosity in discovering the themes and moral values of the short story. P1 (6 Sep 2005)

In addition, they also knew that language games could serve well in ice-breaking sessions. The participants (Participant 2 and 3 respectively) were keen to have language games and were quite confident when conducting them as indicated below:

I was to be a relief in Form 1B. At first, I was nervous because I didn't know what should I do in that class but after thinking a while, I finally figured out some language games. I know of a few games that could attract their attention. P2 (17 July 2006)

They were so noisy but I tried to befriend them, played riddles and joked with them and it actually worked. P3 (19 July 2006)

Besides that, the participants (Participant 1 and 2) were also familiar with the need to understand learner diversity and what could be done in class to cater to the different needs as the following excerpts suggest:

...I asked the students to write a letter for a visit plan, I found out some of the students have never gone to any interesting place except their own home. I felt touched. Then, to solve the problem, I just asked the students to write about any place that they know, including their 'kampung'. P2 (20 July 2006)

The students' participation was OK. However, the Malay students were more passive than the Indian students. ...I felt a bit disappointed. Therefore, to avoid the Indian students from controlling the class, I had to call out the Malay students to give their opinions or answers. They participated after that. P2 (5 Sep 2006)

I could see that they already have schemata on this topic because they participated well and very cooperative. P1 (26 July 2005)

I stole their interest by bringing a necklace to the class. They were really excited when I took out the necklace at first. They looked so eager to know what was more in the short story... P1 (29 Aug 2005)

In addition, the participants (Participant 1, 2, and 3) also knew when to 'rescue' the class when 'dead ends' existed as signified by the following excerpts:

The 4PD students had difficulty in arranging the plot. It seems to me that they do not master the sequence of the story...The solution that I made with 4PD on the plot was, I explained the plot repeatedly until they understood. P1 (15 Aug 2005)

My lesson in 1A was successful. They were excited to see the pictures and I was happy because they knew what to do. I think my instructions are very clear today so that's why they knew what to do. Furthermore, I think giving examples is very crucial when we want to introduce an activity to the students. P2 (7 Aug 2006)

I asked them to give examples...they were just silent. After I gave them some examples to start with, then they provided some examples. P3 (8 Aug 2006)

Nonetheless, there were also some aspects of teaching with which the participants were not confident. Although they were aware of these aspects, they were still searching for the most appropriate solutions to overcome the difficulties. First, the participants had difficulties when it came to class control. They were disturbed by their students' misbehaviour such as being noisy. One participant (Participant 1) noted:

Today, 4PD was quite out of control because there were 3 to 4 students at the back who often distract and make noise in the class. It took time to behave them themselves in the class and certain activities were interrupted and could not be conducted. Teaching a class like 4PD really requires all strength in terms of voice projection, physical endurance (walking around the class, etc). P1 (21 July 2005).

She voiced similar concern two months later when she recorded:

I did not know what was wrong with 4PD students today. There were a number of student who did not pay attention...and made noise. At first, I felt out of control and gave up. Well, I had to eliminate this kind of feelings because I did not want them to see me as a loser. P1 (9 Sep 2005).

Her problem with noise was also a concern to the other participants (Participant 2 and 3) as shown below:

Then, they started to make noise again. They were really stubborn. I have to figure out something new. P2 (9 August, 2006).

I think the class is terrible. The class was so noisy. I could not control the class even though I had yelled asking them to be quiet. P3 (21 July 2006).

Interestingly, the following excerpt taken from Participant 2's journal indicates how she had successfully solved the problem:

I caught one naughty boy got on the table and jumped down from the table so I was really angry. I scolded the student and asked him to get out of the class...However, he apologized and didn't want to get out of the class...I felt very relieved and happy at that moment because the students kept quite and concentrated on their work. I felt very happy and satisfied because I had showed the students the strict side of me. P2 (27 July 2006).

| The excerpts indicate that the participants attempted an obvious solution to the problem through punishment. Unfortunately, the punishment only provided temporary relief.

Besides class control, the participants (Participant 2 and 3) also had difficulties with their command of the subject matter as evident through the following excerpts. Not only were the participants unaware of various presentation techniques besides repeating and translating the content of the lessons, they also lacked confidence with their resourcefulness when they needed to refer to relevant references.

They are always confused and lost. Maybe my explanation was not clear. Next time, I have to come to their groups and translate a thing or two. By doing this, I can make sure that they are on the right track. P2 (19 July 2006).

My second class for today was quite bad. I'm so devastated. Their English proficiency is below average and they didn't understand what I said. I had to repeat so many times. P3 (18 July 2006).

I planned to teach possessive pronouns to 1 C. However, I must find a good exercise for them to do. I cannot think of an easy one right now. Plus I must revise this grammatical item too. P3 (26 July 2006)

I had a class with 1C today. And I am rather frustrated with the lesson. Actually, I have planned to do two activities with them...But everyone was confused and it took them a long time to discuss as well as present. P3 (28 July 2006)

Besides class control and command of the subject matter, the participants (Participant 1, 2, and 3) also had problems with time management that was affected by interference from school activities and the poor pace of the lessons:

I had prepared everything for those 2 classes today. However, the lesson could not be conducted because the students were having "Juvenile Talk" at the school hall...I will bring this lesson to the next class, if I have the time.. P1 (2 Aug 2005)

I planned to teach them the theme first and watch the movie later. However, not all students turned up early. Therefore, I had to let them watch the movie for the whole period. P1 (27 July 2006)

When I entered the classroom, there were only female students. The male students were in the workshop...I was frustrated.. And I was more frustrated because not everybody brought the textbook. I told them that I have reminded them last week. P2 (31 July 2006)

I had a class with 1C today. And I am rather frustrated with the lesson. Actually, I have planned to do two activities with them...But everyone was confused and it took them a long time to discuss as well as present. Therefore, I only managed to do the first activity only. I am still not sure of what should I do with the second activity. Should I continue or should I leave it? P3 (28 July 2006)

Research question 3: How confident and motivated are the participants in demonstrating what they know during their teaching practicum?

Based on the previous discussions on what the participants knew and what they could do with what they knew, it is quite acceptable to conclude that the participants had areas of strengths and weaknesses. While the areas of strengths signify their high level of confidence and motivation to demonstrate what they know, the areas of weakness reveal otherwise. Briefly, the participants were confident and motivated to apply and try the teaching strategies and learning activities they were exposed to during their years of training before the practicum. In this context, the participants were found to be resourceful in providing suitable learning activities to make their lessons interesting. In addition, they were aware of the different needs of their students who possessed different levels of proficiency.

Nonetheless, the participants were still struggling with some important aspects of teaching such as class control, their command of the subject matter, and time management. There is evidence of them applying the disciplinary approach while attempting to control their students who misbehaved. Most of the time, the participants resorted to punishment and this only exhausted them because they had to yell and walk around more frequently. In terms of their command of the subject matter, the participants

admitted that their students showed difficulties in comprehending class instructions and lessons. To solve this problem, the participants admitted to repeating instructions and translating in Malay. Additionally, with respect to the command of the subject matter, the participants lacked resourcefulness. They were still in the dark when it came to troubleshooting time management problems. The problem was due to either the poor pace with which their lessons progressed or interference from school activities. Most of the time, the classes or lessons were postponed or cancelled. The trainees had no other back-up plans although they faced this problem quite often. Thus, it could be concluded that the participants lacked confidence with class control, command of subject matter, and time management.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings reveal how reflective journals could be used as a learning tool, and as an assessment method in teacher training via the Outcome Based Education system. Evidence of what the participants knew, what they could do with what they knew and self-reflection on their confidence and motivation levels are obvious and easily traced through their reflective journal entries. Such evidence could be put to better use in assessing their level of performance which is the ultimate aim of the OBE system. Furthermore, the evidence could also be used to plan and prepare for follow-up training of the participants. The participants' areas of strengths and weaknesses could be emphasized in attempts to produce quality English teachers expected by the stakeholders that include students, schools, parents and the Ministry of Education.

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