

**FOSTERING AUTONOMY IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING
THROUGH PROJECT WORK / FAVORISER L'AUTONOMIE DES
FUTURS ENSEIGNANTS PAR L'INTERMÈDE DES PROJETS /
ÎNCURAJAREA AUTONOMIEI IN PREGATIREA VIITORILOR
PROFESORI PRIN INTERMEDIUL ACTIVITĂȚILOR DIN
PROIECTE¹**

Abstract: *Developing learner autonomy during teacher training in Romania is a key matter when we talk about the student-centered approach to learning embraced by the new curricula at all levels of study. The present paper focuses on how to raise teacher trainees' awareness of their teaching techniques during the micro-teaching sessions, through project work. We will describe an activity developed during the English as a Foreign Language Methodology Course where foreign language pre-service teachers had to prepare small-scale project work on teaching English at pre-university level. The presentation of the project work was part of their final evaluation and involved micro-teaching sessions: one lesson was prepared and taught by all project partners, each partner teaching a 10-15 minutes session. The Group Project could be described as follows: students got together in groups of 4 and then decided on what aspects of teaching/learning they were going to teach; they planned the lesson together and then each partner prepared his/her micro-teaching session that he/she then performed during the seminar. At the end of each teaching session, teacher trainees were asked to give self-evaluations and peer-observations on the lesson sequence which allowed them to reflect upon the teaching process.*

We believe that reflection resulting from self or peer observation is the key element of a good professional teacher development and makes teacher exploration possible in a plan-perform-reflect cycle. The evaluation of the Group Project was done assessing the written assignment and the overall presence and contribution of each trainee in the Group Project.

Key words: *teacher trainer, self/peer-evaluation, learning-by-doing-and-reflecting, micro-teaching, reflective teacher.*

Learner autonomy means taking responsibility for someone's own learning, which signifies that the learners study on their own in a very effective way. Thus, the learning process can be more effective when learners take control of their own process of learning, because they learn what they are ready to learn. In the foreign language classroom, since the aim is to make language learners more successful in terms of acquiring the language itself, learner autonomy is to be developed and exploited in a sense.

Most Romanian teachers and teacher trainers seem to believe that students learn best by doing and reflecting upon their learning process, but they find it rather hard to put this into practice while teaching, as it involves radically changing or redesigning their courses. Most commonly, courses at university level can be described as either practical or theoretical. The course holder – the academic teacher - may present the theory in a lecture form, in the classroom, whilst a practical teacher conducts and supervises the follow-up practical activity

¹ Adriana Lazăr, University of Pitești, Romania, oadaro@yahoo.com.

in a workshop or seminar. There are also courses which contain both practical and theoretical elements but they usually tend to be sharply divided.

However, experience and student feed-back have shown that both types of courses have limited success for academic development. Relating theory to practice is not sufficient for the learning process to be successful. Students will not learn unless they take some degree of initiative and make some commitment to taking the learning process forward. Without reflecting upon a particular experience, students can easily forget the information provided by their teachers and thus its learning potential is lost. It is exactly from the feelings, emotions and personal thoughts emerging from reflecting upon that particular experience that new concepts and generalisation can be produced and then used in new situations effectively. During the learning process, it is essential that students make the link between theory and practice, by transferring the information to action, while taking the following steps:

- firstly: planning the action;
- secondly: carrying out the action;
- finally: reflecting upon the action, i.e. relating the experience back to the theory.

Thus, the 'learning by doing and reflecting' approach involves links between the actual doing of an action and the thinking about that action. When applying this approach during the English as a Foreign Language Methodology Course designed for pre-service teachers, we will observe how it can significantly contribute to the development of the future English teacher as an autonomous learner. At the end of this course, the teacher trainee should be able to critically reflect upon his/her own and others' teaching, enabling him/her to make informed choices and take decisions in the classroom and beyond. Through awareness-raising tasks, experimentation, reflection, adaptation and transfer of training contents to their teaching situations, the teacher trainees should develop their teaching competence as well as appropriate strategies to continue their development after the training period at the university is over.

We will present a methodology we have used with our students in order to raise teacher trainees' awareness of their teaching techniques during a set of *micro-teaching sessions*, through project work. Therefore, we will describe an activity developed during the English as a Foreign Language Methodology Course where pre-service teacher trainees had to prepare small-scale project works on teaching English at pre-university level. The presentation of the project work was part of their final evaluation and involved micro-teaching sessions: one lesson was prepared and taught by all project partners, each partner teaching a 10-15 minutes session.

The small-scale project work was integrated into the seminar activities. The projects focused on observation and evaluation rather than on theory-based research. The trainees were encouraged to work on projects in pairs or groups. We believe that a collaborative attitude towards the learning process and the professional development is a central aim of any teacher training program. Thus, the overall aim of the English as a Foreign Language Methodology Course is to help trainees become aware of the issues and processes involved in learning/teaching a foreign language in an educational context as well as gain confidence in their ability to contribute positively to these processes. A great value was placed on the integration of practical exercises, the use of different social forms, educational games, awareness-raising tasks, experimentation, reflection, adaptation and transfer of training

contents to the trainees' teaching situations. On the whole, the Methodology course reflected the principles of the 'learning by doing and reflecting' approach by embodying participants' experiences and fostering the exchange of their ideas, proposals and materials. The course also provided opportunities for self-evaluation, assessment by peers and offered opportunities for trainees to evaluate their peers' teaching performance. A very important part of the course took the form of micro-teaching and lesson observation followed by constructive feedback.

The Group Project was one of the major tasks that students were assigned with and had to accomplish before the final examination. This could be described as follows: students got together in groups of 4 and then decided on what aspects of teaching/learning they were going to develop during the micro-teaching; they planned the lesson together and then each partner prepared his/her micro-teaching session that he/she then performed during the seminar. At the end of each teaching session, teacher trainees were asked to give self-evaluations and peer-observations on the lesson sequence which allowed them to reflect upon their teaching process as well as on their peers' performance. In the end, students were asked to prepare the Group Project Dossier where they had to include relevant information about the lessons they taught, their self-evaluation and the evaluation of the Group project procedure, how they interacted with their peers while developing the project and samples of any materials they had used during the teaching sessions. Each member of the group had to prepare his/her own dossier. Teacher trainees were asked to follow the points below when preparing the Group Project Dossier.

The following points had to be considered in the Group Project Dossier:

1. *Description of class and course* (level of the course, number of participants, any other relevant information) in which the theme of the assignment was implemented.

Example taken from a teacher trainee's dossier: "The class consists of 20 students in the 11th grade between the ages of 17 and 18: 4 boys and 16 girls. The class meets on Thursday morning, from 10 to 12 a.m., which is an appropriate time for study and makes the learning process very effective, as students are always fresh, receptive and eager to learn."

2. *Description and purpose/goal of the assignment* (description of the lesson goals in a way that they can be easily verified).

Example taken from a teacher trainee's dossier: "The aim of our Group Project is to try and motivate our students to become more autonomous in their learning style. In order to achieve this, we need to encourage them to think about how and why they are learning and to facilitate their learning by introducing them to a variety of learning strategies and learning aids. We hope to help them evaluate which strategies are most effective for each of them individually and to show them ways of assessing and reflecting on their progress. Parallel to this, we also realize the importance of these aims for us as facilitators. Are we providing our students with the help and guidance they need, and are we developing our abilities to guide our students and to become more autonomous ourselves?"

3. *Action – Group Project procedure*

In this section, teacher trainees were asked to provide the names of the Group Project members (4 members) and their responsibilities in the project (i.e. Ana covered the listening

part, Peter covered the ice-breaker, etc.), what they decided to teach and the procedure they followed in preparing the lesson. By describing the procedure of the Group Project, teacher trainees became aware of the importance of collaborating with their peers in order to improve their teaching process. Firstly, all four members got together and through brainstorming and *exchanging ideas* they all decided on the procedure to be followed. Secondly, they *performed the teaching sessions* during the micro-teaching, each partner teaching 10-15 minutes during the lesson. Finally, when they were asked to describe the procedure in their Group Project Dossiers they *reflected upon the whole procedure* and thus discovered the weak and strong points of their actions that should be developed in the reflection-evaluation part of their Dossiers.

Here is the description of an example that took place during one of the seminars. The teacher trainer organized a discussion in order to help the teacher trainees understand what learner autonomy is and thus understand the main goal of the Group project activity – foster their autonomy as future English teachers. This discussion led to the preparation of a sample Group Project for students to understand what they had to prepare later, by themselves, through collaborative work. During the seminar, they (the teacher trainer – as a facilitator and moderator and the teacher trainees – as future English teachers) started to discuss the topic of the sample project – how to help English students to become more autonomous learners. Each of the teacher trainees then thought about the project and researched the topic of learner autonomy. After a lively and interesting discussion they decided it would be sensible to start by finding out how their students had learned in the past and they agreed their project would be based on the following theme: “*What experience did our students have learning a language during their time at school? How can we motivate them to become autonomous learners? Did we succeed in our efforts or did the students reject our proposals?*” Teacher trainees then discussed how the lesson should be structured. They decided to compile a common questionnaire to establish how English students had learned during their school time up to now. They would then evaluate the questionnaires and, based on the individual results, would provide a number of activities to show the students how they may be able to learn and retain vocabulary more easily. They discussed criteria which they felt was important at their observation sessions and determined that each would write a list of questions which were particularly important for him/her. Here are the aims of the lesson that the teacher trainees decided upon:

- to encourage English students to develop learner autonomy by showing them a number of strategies to facilitate this;
- to present a lively and varied lesson which will involve all learner types;
- to introduce strategies which will help students learn and retain new vocabulary;
- to incorporate all the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking with material which will interest all the teacher trainees;
- to motivate the students in their learning process and help them to reflect on and evaluate their own progress and expectations.

This preparation stage was very useful for teacher trainees as they could work together, as a large group (the whole class contributed to this sample of Group Project), conduct research, come up with ideas and decide upon the best structure of the procedure to be

followed during the Group Project. The whole discussion was monitored and guided by the teacher trainer.

4. *Reflection - Evaluation of the lesson:* The teacher trainee had to give a full description of the lesson emphasizing the session that he/she had to conduct during the micro-teaching, giving details on how students reacted to the different activities he/she had included in the course of the lesson. This stage is important for teacher trainees to show that they can give a full description of their actions during the micro-teaching session and remember all the points of the lesson.

5. *Reflection- Self-evaluation and consequences for the future:* Teacher trainees had to demonstrate how the project was planned together with the colleagues and how the cooperation among the colleagues was designed. They also had to analyze, evaluate and reflect upon the cooperation in writing. Here are some questions students had to think about: *What have you learned through the group work, e.g. what have you discussed or developed together? How was it like working with the others?* The Group Project Dossier also had to include the feedback of lessons observation:

- Result (*What was the outcome?*)
- *What conclusions can you draw concerning your teaching?*
- Documents (lesson plans and other materials)

This part of the Group Project Dossier is very important as it helps teacher trainees become aware of their own styles of teaching, the ups and downs of their teaching performance.

Example taken from a teacher trainee's dossier: "On the whole I was pleased with the outcome of this lesson. I tried to include activities which covered all four skills and which would appeal to all learner types and I think the students picked up a few tips on how to influence their learning styles. A negative aspect was that I knew I was "rushing" them. There was no breathing space between the exercises and I am sure they would have liked to expand on some of these tasks. Often in a language lesson "less is more". Particularly in the picture exercise where they were bringing in many of their own ideas, I would have liked to take a much more passive role and let the students control the direction. I must admit that this is probably the first time that I have consciously tried to change the role of student and teacher and to actively encourage learner autonomy. You can imagine my enthusiasm when, on our last lesson before the summer break, one student suggested that we all e-mail one another over the summer to practice our English and learn from each other."

In this part of the Dossier, teacher trainees had to show that they could evaluate the teaching events through self-observation and reflection and draw conclusions for future teaching. They were able to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses as teachers and formulate their needs for further professional development.

6. *Reflection – Evaluation of the Group Project*

Example taken from a teacher trainee's dossier: "Working on the group project was a valuable experience for me. The variety of ideas, the discussions on how best to proceed with a task and the cooperation and support all convinced me that pooling resources, working

on groups activities and assignments with colleagues and class observations can only be of benefit to us all. Particularly my fellow teacher trainees' feedback after observing the lesson was quite useful to me as it helped my developing as a future English teacher."

In this part of the Dossier teacher trainees provided evidence that they could recognize the potential of working with colleagues and sharing ideas in order to develop further. In addition, their reflection showed evidence that teacher trainees could make use of institutional support as well as personal contacts in order to find solutions to day-to-day teaching problems.

7. Lesson plans, materials and attachments: All teacher trainees had to provide their lesson plans and other materials they have used during the lesson, all being part of the written Group Project Dossier.

After each group had presented their projects and performed the micro-teaching session, the teacher trainer developed an evaluation procedure: the evaluation of the Group Project was done assessing the teaching sessions, the written assignment – the Group Project Dossier - and the overall presence and contribution of each trainee in the Group Project. The thematic evaluation criteria are described underneath:

- the teacher trainee has an understanding of different teaching strategies and is able to adapt to varying teaching situations;
- the teacher trainee can recognise development patterns in the target language, and is able to integrate these into the planning of language lessons, thus structuring and supporting the language learning process.

Within the context of the Group Project there was evidence that, in his/her planning and self-evaluation, the teacher trainee is able to:

- integrate learners' previous learning experience in his/her language lessons;
- present learning materials in a lively and relevant manner;
- take into consideration the needs and interests of the learners;
- recognise the level (CEFR) of language competence of the learners;
- anticipate possible language problems and show evidence of envisaged solutions in his/her planning.
- they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in different areas of knowledge and expertise;
- they are able to reflect on and evaluate their own performance in the classroom, to make use of feedback (from peers or teacher trainer) and draw conclusions for their teaching.
- they are able to identify resources (guided by their teacher trainer) to support them in their further professional development.

Conclusion

At the end of the English as a Foreign Language Methodology Course, all pre-service teacher trainees were equipped with the necessary knowledge in order to reflect upon the general "learning by doing, and reflecting" approach. They also learnt to recognize learners as individuals with their own learning styles, motivation and aims and act

appropriately in their teaching. In addition, teacher trainees gained confidence and acquired skills in managing processes in the classroom, such as: develop a repertoire of teaching skills and techniques and become able to make judgments as to when and how to use them, develop the ability to make judicious choices with regard to teaching/learning materials and to adapt or supplement them to cater for the specific needs of groups and individual learners, develop observation and analytical skills in order to evaluate what is going on in the classroom, and to become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in different areas of knowledge and expertise.

What is more important, during the Group Project work, teacher trainees developed their ability to understand the context of their teaching and acquire a clear view of what their responsibilities towards the learners, develop a cooperative attitude both in relation to learners and colleagues. In the end, they developed strategies for further development as professionals beyond the training course, through activities such as observation, materials development projects and action research.

Overall, we believe (together with our teacher trainees) that the Group Project work focusing on the development of learner autonomy has been a success. Apart from learners with a high communicative proficiency (at different levels), the result has been learners/teacher trainees who have:

- developed enhanced self-esteem;
- acquired an evaluative competence of self and others;
- learned how to learn and to accept responsibility;
- gained social competence by experiencing social forms of learning
- and prepared for life-long learning.

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