

Reflective Teaching To Understand Pre-Service ESL Teachers’ Lesson Planning Skills: A Study

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Abstract

Reflective teaching has received prominence across the globe over the past few decades. It has been used as a tool to deepen content knowledge and develop critical thinking (Shermis,1999). However, in the Indian ESL context , despite NEP (2020)’s recommendations for development of critical thinking among the teachers and learners there is a dearth of studies that use reflective teaching. The present paper addresses this gap and studies the reflections of ESL- pre-service teachers in India with the use of stimulated recall as a reflective tool. The paper tries to exemplify how researchers can quantify reflective thinking in a systematic manner to understand the pedagogic content knowledge of pre-service ESL teachers while creating lesson plans. It also gives a qualitative representation of the participants’ pedagogic content knowledge across the stimulated recall data. The paper has implications for the field of ESL teacher training as it provides a model of reflective practice that can be emulated. ESL teachers can also use the model to reflect on their teaching practices.

Keywords: *Reflective teaching, stimulated recall, pre-service ESL teachers*

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I. Introduction

Reflection is any act of thinking about the performance of an action, either prior to the performance, during the performance or after its performance. The act of reflection encourages one to learn from their own experience. Reflective teaching has been accepted as a pedagogical tool which acts as “the process of bridging the gap between experience and learning” (Shalabi, Sameem & Almuqati, 2018, p.40). The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (2009) also recommends reflective practices in teacher education (p.19). Also , National Education Policy of India (NEP) (2020) has recommendations for developing critical thinking and social skills which play a central role in teacher-learner development and can be achieved mainly through reflective teaching (NEP, p.3-4). It comes as a surprise that despite these recommendations, the impact of reflective tools in Indian ESL teacher training remains an under-researched area.

In the context of academic research in the Education field, a researcher studying teachers’ reflective practice has access to immense data on teachers’ thought processes, and hence an understanding of the strategies employed by the teacher while performing the pedagogic activity. Shulman (1986) articulates the reason why researchers should study verbalisation of teachers’ classroom choices in the following statement,

“To understand adequately the choices teachers make in classrooms, the grounds for their decisions and judgements about pupils, and the cognitive processes through which they select and sequence the actions they have learned to take while teaching, we must study their thought processes before, during and after teaching” (p. 23).

These verbalisations can be collected as part of any of the numerous pedagogic activities that the ESL teachers engage in that require decision-making. These pedagogic activities, like creating lesson plans, giving classroom instructions, and providing feedback to the learners involve decision making. In the ESL training classroom, the activities are often followed by self-reflection reports submitted in the written format. The pre-service teacher training provides hands-on experience for the student-teachers to perform the activities. The problem however seems that the pre-service teacher training courses are perceived as hectic by these teachers, and hence they might resort to mechanical writing of their reflections without putting thought into it. This results in losing the purpose of the written report. The teacher training programmes however insist on written reports, when oral reports could be a viable option to not lose the purpose of the creation of reports, which is, creating genuine reflections from the student teachers. The dependence on written forms of reflection is at the cost of spoken forms of reflection that can turn out to be more beneficial (Walsh & Mann, 2013). However, reflections through verbalisations are overlooked due to time constraints, and a lack of a systematic way to evaluate the verbalisations.

A major criticism against the studies conducted on teacher reflective practices is that these studies lack clarity and specificity (Mann & Walsh, 2013). Mann and Walsh (2013) recommend data-led accounts of reflective practice across a range of contexts. To offer clarity and specificity, Farrell (2015) proposed a theoretical framework for a systematic, data-led account of reflective practices. Another criticism about these studies is that the majority of studies on reflective practices is done on in-service teachers, and not on pre-service teachers (Sarab & Mardian, 2022).

Hence, while addressing these critical issues this study uses Farrell's (2015) theoretically flexible framework which directs teacher reflective practice. It proposes a comprehensive five-stages for the process of reflective practice including philosophy, principles, theory-of-practice, practice, and beyond practice. .. The advantage of the model is that it provides "specific techniques for language teachers to employ at each stage of reflection in their practice" (Sarab & Mardian, 2022, p.5). Based on Farrell's proposition, the present study provides a systematic model in which reflections of pre-service ESL teachers which are collected using stimulated recall can be analysed to understand their lesson planning skills. The study uses a deductive approach to understand the participants' 'theory-of-practice' It employs a reflective tool, namely stimulated recall, to collect the pre-service ESL teachers' reflections(Zainil, 2018). Stimulated recall is also an introspective verbal protocol tool supported by information processing theory that can be used to collect cognitive data .. In stimulated recall conditions, verbalisations are elicited from the subject with the aid of a stimulus. In order to validate the cognitive data collected using this method, we resort to information processing theory which states that the verbal reports are produced by the same cognitive processing faculty that is involved in the performance of the task.

II. Objectives of the study

The aim of the study was to understand the complex cognitive processes of pre-service teachers involved in creation of a lesson plan, and to understand the teachers' mental representations of teaching through reflections. To fulfil these objectives we arrived at the following research questions.

III. Research Questions

1. What are the categories of pedagogic content knowledge evident in the pre-service ESL teachers' stimulated recall reflections?
2. What considerations do ESL teachers make while planning their lessons?

IV. Methodology

The study was conducted on a group of three pre-service Indian ESL teachers, with the aim to understand the complex cognitive activities that guided them during the performance on a pedagogic task, i.e, lesson plan creation. The study used a stimulated recall protocol to analyse the decisions teachers make for creating lesson plans. The participants described their decisions about micro-aspects of lesson plans through stimulated recall interviews. The verbal data was coded and analysed to determine the participants' teaching knowledge base as reflected in their lesson plans. The verbal data collected from the participants was analysed using Shulman's conception of the knowledge base required for teaching, which has been discussed in detail in the analysis section.

V. Participants

The participants of the study were enrolled from a Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE) course offered by The English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad. All of them were postgraduates in English aged between 23 to 27 years. The selection of participants was based on their interest in participation. This group of pre-service teachers had less than one year of teaching experience.

Research Design: The research was based on a lesson plan they created specifically for their peer-teaching activity, which was performed as part of their course requirement. After the creation of the three lesson plans, the participants took part in a stimulated recall interview. They were shown their lesson plans as a stimulus to recall their decisions while planning the lesson. The following cue questions served as the basis for their stimulated recall reflections.

Table no 1: Cue questions used and the rationale for the cue questions

Cue questions	Rationale
1. Why did you choose the objectives that you set for your lesson plan?	To gather information about teachers' decisions about setting the aim and objective for the lesson, considerations made for level check, considerations of language elements.
2. What did you have in mind when you formulated the lesson plan?	To gather information about the suitability, and the appropriateness of the lesson and materials selected
3. What were you trying to achieve by giving them activities?	To understand the suitability of the activity to the materials, aim and the objective of the lesson and the rationale behind its selection
4. Did you have in your mind what they already knew before, like the level of the learner?	To understand the suitability of the lesson plan to the level of the learner
5. Is there anything more about making this lesson plan that you would like to say?	Self-reflection/ self-critique
6. What were the lags and ambiguities that you found in the lesson?	Self-reflection/ self-critique

VI. Analysis

The data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Qualitative analysis was intended at identifying the major categories teachers dwelt upon while creating the lesson plans. A deductive approach was taken for data analysis. The quantitative analysis aimed to illustrate how the themes emerging from qualitative analysis spread across the participants.

Segmenting the data: The sentences were segmented into thought units. Each thought unit was given a code for identification (Example: P1_28 indicates the first participant's 28th utterance)

Categorising the data: The thought units sharing the same theme were placed in one pedagogical knowledge set based on Shulman's conception of pedagogic knowledge (1986).

Defining the categories: Each thought unit category was defined in such a manner that there was no overlap between categories.

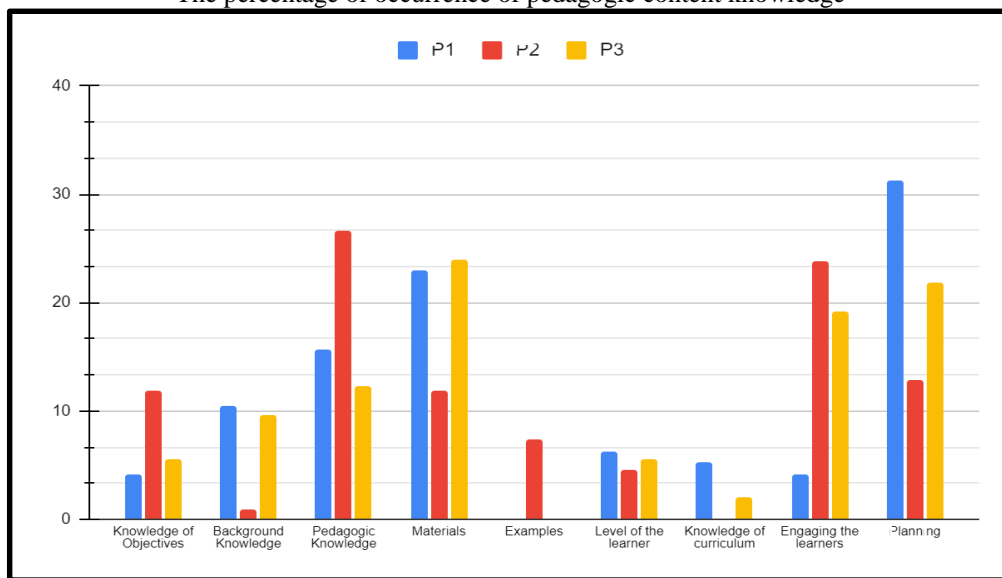
Table no 2: Categories of pedagogic knowledge and its definitions

Categories	Definition
Knowledge of Objectives:	It can be defined as the knowledge about the primary objective of the lesson, which is usually a language feature or a language element. It entails knowledge about the primary goal of the lesson being taught, and whether or not the activities involved and the materials used meet the objectives of the lesson plan.
Background Knowledge:	It involves the knowledge about the topic being taught, and the knowledge about what was previously taught.
Pedagogic Knowledge:	It is the specialised knowledge of teachers for creating effective teaching and learning environments for all students.
Use of Materials:	The knowledge about the use of different teaching aids and the use of teaching aids
Providing Examples:	It involves the ability to use examples, and instances of giving appropriate examples
Level of the learner:	It involves considerations about the age, experience, proficiency and the prior knowledge of learners.
Knowledge of curriculum:	The knowledge about objectives stated in the curriculum falls under this category.
Engaging the learners:	The ability to capture the interest of the learners, through the lesson plan, considerations for engaging the learners.
Planning	It involves anticipating problems, considering the amount of time spent on lesson planning.

Measuring the data: The frequency of occurrence of each pedagogic thought unit was counted. It was converted to percentage for uniformity.

The pre-service teachers' responses were varied on 'what they planned to do', what they reported they did, and what they considered important. However, their reports were all related to teaching activities. The thought units related to pedagogy were only considered for analysis. Based on the verbal protocol analysis, the following graph was prepared.

Figure 1
The percentage of occurrence of pedagogic content knowledge



From the graph, it is evident that the different categories of pedagogic content knowledge are not equally distributed. There is much variation in the presence of each category. The rank ordering of various pedagogic categories for each participant is different.

VII. Results

RQ 1: What are the categories of pedagogic knowledge evident in the pre-service ESL teachers' verbal reports?

None of the participants' verbal protocol data showed all categories of pedagogic content knowledge. Planning was the most prevalent category of pedagogic knowledge thought unit (M= 22%) Thought units on knowledge of curriculum (M=2.42 %) and providing relevant examples (M=3.13 %) have the least frequency of occurrence. All participants' verbal data showed elements of pedagogic knowledge, the use of materials, and planning.

Table no 3: The categories of pedagogic content knowledge as evident from the analysis

	PCK Thought Units	P1 (%)	P2 (%)	P3 (%)	Mean (%)
1	Knowledge of objectives	4.17	11.93	5.48	7.19
2	Background Knowledge	10.42	0.92	9.59	6.98
3	Pedagogic knowledge	15.63	26.61	12.33	18.19
4	Materials	22.92	11.93	23.97	19.61
5	Examples	0	7.34	0	2.45

6	Level of the learner	6.25	4.59	5.48	5.44
7	Knowledge of curriculum	5.21	0	2.05	2.42
8	Engaging the learners	4.17	23.85	19.18	15.73
9	Planning	31.25	12.84	21.92	22.00

Pedagogic knowledge : The participants showed knowledge about scaffolding, the necessity to set a safe environment for learners, and the necessity to provide language inputs to the learners. They also considered the warm-up activities as quintessential scaffolding tools.

So here I was trying to give some support, you know with the help they can do as you say. That level, that is known as ZPD. So I was giving this handout to give support. So in my writing part, so I have followed the procedure like by giving pre-writing activities so that I can prepare them for the actual writing part. And so I gave this for that I gave this warm up pre-writing task so that they carry with the main idea. So in my writing part, so I have followed the procedure like by giving pre-writing activities so that I can prepare them for the actual writing part. And so I gave this for that I gave this warm up pre-writing task so that they carry with the main idea. (Thought units P2_7 to P2_8)

The use of materials: All the participants reported to have made careful calculations about the resources to be used. The level at which the lessons were placed, the time available, suitability of the resources to the lessons, prior knowledge about suitable activities etc, determined the selection of materials.

Choosing vocabulary words because I already had lot of activities related to vocabulary aspect I had a few games and activities that suited vocabulary more than other skills like activities that I had noted from the teachers. (Thought units P3_1 to P3_3)

Engaging the Learner: Thought units representing the learner engagement is varied among the participants. It is the highest in participant P2 (23.85%) It is striking, since learner engagement factors are primal to most pre-service teachers. Earlier research (Gatbanton, 2008) has shown that novice teachers spend considerably more time evaluating the feedback of students than experienced teachers.

The learner engagement factors the participants mentioned included capturing the learner's interest, understanding when and how the learners will get bored of a particular session and ensuring that activities and materials kept the learner's at their toes.

I also wanted to make them finish the task as quickly as possible, to build a competitive spirit. It was to get them into the topic, provide a context and to make them keep guessing as to what they are going to be doing. (Thought units P3_32 to P3_33)

Verbal protocol as a tool can be used to capture a wealth of information about cognitive representations. It provided substance about which researchers could make pertinent follow-up inquiries. The results are in tune with Gatbanton's hypothesis (2008) that teacher education accelerates novice teachers' pedagogic knowledge. The resultant lesson plans looked structurally similar. But it was found that the aspect which each pre-service teacher concentrated on differed.

RQ 2. What considerations do pre-service ESL teachers make while planning their lessons?

The pre-service teachers put a considerable amount of time into deciding the topic, the time they will spend on each activity, how they will handle the creation of the lesson plan task and how to systematise the classroom.

Before going to the lesson plan I went through the activities in the lesson. Then I found that there are some lags and some ambiguities in the units. But I did not try to change the text at all. Then I chose to write the front page writing objectives and aim and while keeping in mind the learner. I had certain assumptions so that I could teach them. (Thought units P1_12 to P1_15)

Proper planning went into selection of activities, materials and teaching aids for the classroom

I chose the PowerPoint presentation because I had to show the pictures and also I had to show the answers within a certain time limit, within 1 minute or something. Then I try to discuss it and then going back to the board will take more time so I thought I will have answers in the PowerPoint. (Thought units P1_21 to P1_24)

VIII. Discussion

The present paper systematically examined the stimulated recall reflections of a group of pre-service ESL teachers, and their thought processes involved in the creation of a lesson plan. The following section will reflect critically on the findings of the study.

The paper uses stimulated recall to encourage reflective practices in ESL pre-service teachers. The pedagogic content knowledge of the participants were measured. The Pedagogic Content Knowledge elements that emerged in the stimulated recall indicates what the teachers notice when they are creating lesson plans. This kind of analysis gives a detailed representation of thought processes of the pre-service ESL teachers. This will be helpful for both researchers and teacher trainers. The teacher trainers can encourage the pre-service participants to notice elements that they previously did not put thought into like the use of examples, the knowledge of curriculum and level of the learner. The research establishes the framework proposed by Farrell (2015) as an adaptive tool. Moreover, the research establishes that teacher training courses for ESL pre-service teachers would benefit from incorporating verbal reflective practices.

However, this type of reflective practice comes with its own set of drawbacks. The first and foremost is time constraints. Manual analysis of stimulated recall interviews of the participants requires a lot of time. Moreover, it also expects expertise from the teacher trainers in identifying the parameters of PCK in stimulated recalls. The possibility that stimulated recall reflections collected from the participants is often made up. The elusive nature of the construct also provides a challenge to researchers.

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