

Teaching as a Reflective Practitioner

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Abstract. This paper is a summary of my development in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching as a reflective practitioner. Within 8 years' EFL teaching experience at Yunnan Agricultural University, I came across some problems that many EFL teachers in China are trying to work out such as large class teaching and how to deliver feedbacks effectively. Through working as a reflective practitioner, with learning and practicing some well-accepted teaching theories, I finally moved from a teacher-centered floor to a student-centered stage, which is beneficial to my teaching and students' learning as well.

1. Introduction

With 8 years' teaching experience at Yunnan Agricultural University, I thought I was an "experienced" teacher. Unavoidably, there were problems that occurred in my teaching, but I just tried to work them out through my experience, never thinking of learning from others' experiences or theories. Although mostly good teaching results occurred, some problems remained unsolved. I was like a blind soldier, keeping running and fighting without any complete strategy, not knowing how much I had got and how much I had lost. One day when I could open my eyes, I found I could have achieved much more without so many failings if I had developed a framework of teaching theories to help explain and build on my experiences.

I began to challenge my own teaching and rethink what teaching was. I found my own understanding before was like a combination of Ramsden's ideas: teaching being about transmitting knowledge to students and student learning being associated with teaching, so problems in learning can be fixed by adopting the right teaching strategy[1].

However, through exploring teaching theories and reflecting on the activities I applied in my teaching, I have a deeper understanding of teaching and learning. I agree with Ramsden[2] "[that] the aim of teaching is simple: it is to make learning possible", so hereinafter, I account for my reflections on some theories and activities I've applied in my teaching, explaining how a blind soldier got her vision back and what she could see now.

2. Theory and Practice

2.1 Large Class Teaching

When I was an English-major student, we had only 16 students in a class. But In the modules I teach, the number of the students ranges from 40 – 150, usually 90. The Increasing number of students brings challenges since students are individual learners with different approaches and learning styles. I always try to organize my teaching activities well, writing clear module plans, assigning related class and homework, and providing necessary feedback. But I found the learning of my students was not as effective as I expected and achievement of the learning outcomes was not very good. The PGCert encouraged me to make changes in my teaching activities.

First, I take Biggs's 3Ps [3] into account, using the concept of constructive alignment to create effective learning environments. It is difficult to help every student actually improve their oral English proficiency and check their improvement in a large-scale class. So I want to encourage them to practice through pre-class presentations. Before the PGCert, I set the topics and presentation orders

for my students, but the result was frustrating. When I thought about their different ‘presages’ and left enough freedom on the topics and preparing time, for them, I found the outcomes are encouraging.

Second, I changed my approach to session planning, taking into account different student conceptions of learning. Previously, I lectured every 50-minute session in one or two themes with me usually lecturing. This is a teacher-centered approach, where “knowledge is information; information is a product delivered to the student”[4] and can be seen as ineffective. Biggs suggests that “lectures are quite ineffective for stimulating higher order thinking” and that they “cannot be relied on to inspire or change students’ attitudes favorably”[5]. Wilson and Fowler assess the impact of learning environments on students’ approaches and show that it is possible to encourage deeper approaches to learning[6]. Now, I divide sessions into several parts, each part is different with others, so it can assure students can have different class activities in every 15 minutes. This student-centered approach draws on the ideas of constructivism and active learning to create a positive learning environment. Students can focus more on the content; fewer students appear bored or tired. As Ellen *et al.* suggest “for students, a high quality learning environment at universities confronts them not with missions impossible but with safe challenges”[7], this is what I hope to create. I also prepare handouts for students so that they can keep their attention more on class activities rather than taking notes.

Third, I have noticed the importance of reflection to me as a teacher and think it is equally important to encourage students to reflect as part of their own learning, Moon [8]“links the idea of approach to reflection in the proposition of a continuum from surface to deep approaches to learning”, identifying five stages in her “map of learning”: “noticing, making sense, making meaning, working with meaning and transformative learning”. I used a 2-minute paper and question time more frequently at the end of sessions to encourage each student to reflect. Previously, I left questions to break-time and told students to call or e-mail me if they had any questions. But few students came to me for questions. By leaving time at the end of sessions to write 2-minute paper or encourage questions is effective to check their learning and my teaching outcomes and to allow me reflect-on-action [9]. This is a way of analyzing personal experiences, evaluating and moving on for both teacher and students. Besides, the 2-minute papers are quite useful to keep attendance record so as to improve the attendance percentage at the same time. Understanding how students learn is very important, if the teacher designs activities that encourage a surface approach [10] the students are more likely to choose a surface approach, with students engaging in inappropriate and low-order learning activities. Prosser *et al.* talked about the relationship of “surface approaches with perceptions supporting surface approaches, and deep approaches with perceptions supporting deep approaches”[11].

2.2 Feedbacks

Although many studies emphasize the meaning of feedbacks, particularly formative feedback, I underestimated its importance. Through reflecting on the learning in the PGCert, I have realized this flaw in my teaching. Delivering effective feedbacks has become an important part in my teaching now. Effective and appropriate feedback should be timely, focused, sufficient, understandable, relevant to assessment criteria, developmental and personal to the student. I have used the three ideas of the ideas of Gibbs and Simpson to deliver effective feedback for students, who suggest eleven “conditions under which assessment supports learning” [12]. I also applied peer-feedback and self-feedback into the assessment so as not only to save my limited time but to get the students involved in to improve their motivation to achieve their learning outcomes. The biggest advantage I get from feedback is I feel that my teaching is integrating with students’ learning, or I could say that my students and I are doing cooperative teaching and learning.

3. Reflections

When I reflect all my improvement as a reflective practitioner, I see myself as a different teacher, just like I admitted earlier, I thought teaching was a profession to “transfer” knowledge, so a good teacher should try his/her best to “make teaching possible”, just like Biggs’ Level 1 teacher [13].

Since I reflected on my approach, my expectation on teaching gradually changed into another floor, from Level 1 to Level 3 of Biggs' levels of thinking about teaching, this is also similar to the ideas of Kugel who said, "when they begin their teaching careers, professors focus their concern primarily on their own role in the classroom (stage 1)" [14], moving through floors to "helping students to learn on their own (stage 5)". Just as Ramsden said "the aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible" [15]. Such an understanding drives me out of from behind the teacher's table, walking into the students, thinking over the relationship between my teaching and their learning, which sometimes is between my learning and their teaching, and involves me reflecting more critically, no matter it was in-action, on-action, or for-action.

3.1 What Biggs's 3P Model of Learning and Teaching Says?

The 3P model of teaching and learning of Biggs illustrated as presage – process – product, elaborates that each student has different motivation to study, different interest in the topic, different ability, different commitment to university. So it is unreasonable to expect all students to accept the same teaching activity in the same way and get same learning outcomes. "In his model students' perceptions of the learning and teaching context are seen to be an interaction between their previous experiences of leaning and teaching and the learning and teaching context itself. They approach their studies in relation to their perception of the context, and that approach is related to the quality of their learning outcomes." [16]

In order to make learning possible, teachers should always think about students' learning presage at first. This has been a key change for me as I apply Biggs' 3P model into most of my teaching behaviours. I make different teaching plans and design different class activities for different groups in the same module. Although it is too early to get evidence to show how students' learning outcomes are improved, I can definitely say some of my teaching outcomes are easier to accomplish and evaluation from students has been positive. The presence of students is also higher. (I always keep the record of presence as part of the criteria for final assessment.) Just like Biggs says, "no two classes are ever the same..." [17], learning about students' presage can help me, a reflective teacher, make practicable teaching outcomes and strategies to make learning possible.

3.2 How Large-Class Activities Can Be Improved?

The first year I stepped on the teacher's floor was the very year China began to carry out the enlarging enrollment policy. So I got 60 students in my first module and the number keeps rising. Now I have 90 students in one classroom for my College English Module. Large-class teaching could actually help solve the problem of inadequate faculty in some way and also got its own advantages, but it also unavoidably brought some difficulties in teaching itself. "Large classes actually allow a teacher to achieve quite easily some things that are more difficult to achieve in small groups." [18] On the other hand, "large-class teaching is difficult and requires self-assurance and experience". [19]

To make large-class teaching more effective, I begin to do something differently. I write module plan and session plans based on how my teaching and students' learning is going on, so that they could focus on specific outcomes. Using an outcome-based approach to organize teaching brings advantage for large-class teaching (I also believe it can be fit for any size of class), which can be better concluded by Vaneeta-marie D'Andrea ----- "It allows teachers to clarify for themselves the implicit outcomes that are always part of any teaching and learning activity. It allows for a reflective interrogation of all aspects of the pedagogical practice and assists in the selection of appropriate teaching/learning and assessment strategies. It allows students to have a clearer understanding of what they can expect from their educational pursuits and avoids any unnecessary guessing games about what is important to learn." [20] Since "the attention span of students ... can be maintained for about 10-15 minutes, after which learning drops off rapidly. A short rest period, or simply a change in activity, after about 15 minutes leads to a restoration of performance almost to the original level", I carefully designed my class activities, taking the teaching-outcomes into account of course. I found students are more active in the lectures, participating not just listening or sleeping. During the "rest period" or the interval between two activities, I usually reflect on the effectiveness of my teaching, through which I could make necessary "compensation" or "strengthening", another example of reflection-on-actions. The 2-minute papers students handed in and the question-time are very helpful

to let me reflect on the effectiveness of my teaching and for making improvements. “Teaching involves finding out about students’ misunderstandings... creating a context of learning that encourages students to engage with the subject matter” [21]

3.3 How Important an Effective Feedback Could Be?

“Feedback on performance is arguably the cornerstone of all learning, both formal and informal.” [22] “A lecturer or course applying a sophisticated understanding of teaching is aware that every evaluation of a student should be valuable to the students as well as to the lecturer.” [23] Effective feedback from the teacher can greatly motivate students and the student’s feedback can improve the teacher’s teaching strategies so that both the teaching and learning can get good outcomes. No matter what assignment the students are supposed to accomplish, they should be rewarded by certain feedback from the teacher. Constructive feedback can deeply affect students’ motivation and construction of themselves as learners in future learning. “...it makes sense to ensure that a lot of feedback is given to students very early on in the process when they are being coached to perform well; as they progress towards the end of a module, when they are well aware of what is required of them, they need less feedback.” [22] So an effective and appropriate feedback is necessary to improve students’ learning progress. “It is impossible to overstate the role of effective comments on students’ progress in any discussion of effective teaching and assessment.” [23].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, all of my practices and reflections suggest that I am moving from a teacher-centered floor to a student-centered stage, which is beneficial to my career and the learning of my students. As far as my strengths as a university teacher are concerned, I’d like to critically analyze myself through Ramsden’s six principles of effective teaching in higher education. [24]:

Principle 1: Interest and explanation

I am good at arousing students’ attention and interest in the lectures and deliver clear explanation of the subjects in different ways to acknowledge different presage.

Principle 2: Concern and respect for students and student learning

Maybe I do not have a very close relationship with my students but I do have concern and respect them in terms of their learning, so that I have very good relationship with them which can be easily felt through the class atmosphere – this was noted during my teaching observations.

Principle 3: Appropriate assessment and feedback

I frankly admit that I am not good at this and this is just one direction I am working on. Although I have dictation, essay-writing, oral-presentation, mid- and final exams, and I also give certain feedback for each kind of activities, the huge quantities of students in each module do stop me to work this out in a good way.

Principle 4: Clear goals and intellectual challenge

I always put clear teaching goals (learning outcomes) in my session plans and make them explicit for my students at the beginning of each session. I also assign different after-class activities for different students, which are in order to guide them to learn in a deep way.

Principle 5: Independence, control, engagement

When designing teaching activities, I ensure they encourage students’ engagement and can scaffold their learning in a positive way. I take students’ presages into account and give them confidence to solve problems independently, supporting with sufficient resources and needed help.

Principle 6: learning from students

Good teaching is open to change [24]. I now reflect critically in-action, on-action, and for-action, which means I am ready to accept students’ opinions and improve my teaching with their feedback.

All in all, I am happy to see myself as a reflective practitioner, and a brave soldier in my field. I would like to do more practices for improving my teaching. I believe that would be a whole-life course and I am very happy to fight for it.

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