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INITIATIVE FOR EFL TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract: *The aim of the present teacher development initiative is twofold: to help EFL teachers develop critical reflection skills through various means such as video recording, journal writing, peer observation and a support group and to create what Hargreaves (cited in Johnston 2009) calls a "culture of collaboration". It is believed that teachers, students and the educational institution as a whole would benefit from such an initiative.*
Keywords: *collaboration, critical reflection, EFL, self-awareness, teacher development.*

1. Introduction

The lack of opportunities for EFL teacher development in Romanian schools, such as talks, workshops or travel grants for conference attendance, perpetuates the use of a routinized repertoire of teaching practices. This lack of opportunities combined with a rather short period of teaching practicum determines the teachers to teach as they were taught - the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie cited in Bailey et al. 1996). My awareness of the need for an EFL teacher development initiative in Romanian schools was raised by my experiences teaching English in a high school, a prestigious educational institution but at the same time a site where English teachers were professionally isolated from one another in a competitive, individualistic culture.

The initiative proposed here is intended to take place for one school semester and to include all the EFL teachers in the English department of a school. At the end of the semester, questionnaires consisting of both closed and open-ended questions will be given to the teachers, the students and the principals in order to determine the impact of the initiative. The questions will be holistic: they will be linked with the aim of the initiative - critical reflection and collaboration.

In order to achieve the aim stated above, a combination of various elements will be used. The main focus of the initiative will be on critical reflection, which will be achieved through different procedures: video recording, journal writing, peer observation and a teacher support group. The teachers' critical self-reflection process will first take place through video recording of their lessons and journal writing. The teachers will watch the videos of themselves teach and identify areas for improvement, as well as strengths. Then, they will write the reflections emerging from the videos in journals. The teachers will also describe and reflect on critical incidents in their journals. Next, the teachers will observe a colleague of their choice in a non-evaluative manner in order to gain insights into areas of teaching that they would like to improve in their own classrooms. The observed colleague will receive feedback in a nonjudgemental way. In turn, the observed colleague will observe his/her peer. In the teacher support group, the teachers will discuss the insights gained by watching the videos of themselves teach and critical incidents taking place in their classrooms, which are

recorded in their journals. They will also discuss journal articles and books that contain practical teaching ideas (activities and techniques). The four procedures will be repeated cyclically until the end of the semester.

2. Rationale and Procedure

As stated above, the present initiative aims to help teachers become critically reflective practitioners. The key word is reflection, which is defined as "the process of critical examination of experiences, a process that can lead to a better understanding of one's teaching practices and routines" (Richards and Farrell 2005:7). Thus, Richards and Farrell view reflection as a critical process which can result in enhanced self-awareness. With regard to the relationship between reflection, experience and expertise, Tsui (2003:13) states that:

> "Experience will only contribute to expertise if practitioners are capable of learning from it. To learn from experience requires that practitioners constantly reflect on their practices".

Tsui thus draws attention to the essential role that reflection plays in turning teachers' experience into expertise.

2.1. Video Recording

The professional development process will start with the use of videos as a means of critical self-reflection. The teachers will only watch the videos of themselves teach, not their colleagues' videos. The teachers' task will be to identify areas for improvement, as well as strengths by watching themselves teach in the videos. In order to make the most of the video recording procedure, each teacher will video record lessons focusing on different language skills: speaking, listening, reading, writing.

An interesting study which highlights the use of videos as instruments for professional development is Gun's (2011) study. The author investigates ways of developing EFL teachers' critical reflection skills and their effectiveness through training. Through reflection training, teachers can improve their classroom practices by becoming more self-aware. The study was carried out in an intensive ELT programme at a Turkish university. The participants consisted of four teachers, who were also colleagues, four students and three teacher trainers. The four teachers were observed by their colleagues, the trainers and the students, and they received feedback on their teaching from these different sources. They also received feedback by watching videos of themselves while they were teaching. Interestingly, Gun found that, although the teachers learned from all the feedback sources, they perceived the videos of themselves teach to be the most valuable and powerful type of feedback that they received. The reason was that, by watching the videos, they became more aware of their teaching behaviour and, implicitly, of the areas that they needed to improve. The main implication of Gun's study is that videos raise teachers' awareness on their teaching behaviour. Gun (2011: 133) mentions that:

> "(…) the teachers (…) stated that they were able to transfer their critical reflection into 'on the spot' strategies in their classroom".

In other words, by critically reflecting on their lessons, teachers are more likely to develop effective strategies that lead to an improvement in their teaching.

Another interesting project which used videos as professional development practice is the project conducted by Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (1998). Bailey, Curtis and Nunan were experienced teachers, teaching EFL in Hong Kong, when they engaged in the professional

development initiative described in the article. The authors report on a collaborative professional development experience which consisted of three procedures: videotaping, teaching journals and teaching portfolios. As far as videotaping was concerned, Bailey and Curtis were video recorded while they were coteaching, and they subsequently watched the video of themselves teach. Both of them acknowledged the value of "the visual support of the video" (Bailey et al. 1998: 552), which stimulates a more vivid recall than audio recording. Bailey and Curtis stated:

> "it led to vivid recall of what we had done as teachers and even of how we had felt during that lesson" (Bailey et al. 1998:552).

Thus, Bailey and Curtis describe videos as a powerful tool which not only reminds teachers of what they did during the lesson, but which also reminds them of how they felt while teaching that particular lesson. Another significant gain was the fact that, by watching the video, the two teachers were able to make connections "between what was revealed … by the video, and other aspects of the lesson" (Bailey et al. 1998:553). By making such connections, teachers engage in critical self-reflection.

2.2. Journal Writing

The next procedure for critical self-reflection is journal writing. As far as writing is concerned, Burton (2009:303) points out that "(…) writing has the potential to function as a uniquely - effective reflective tool". Therefore, Burton highlights the value of writing as a tool for self-reflection. As mentioned above, the teachers will use journals for two purposes, the first one being to record the reflections stemming from watching the videos of themselves teach. It is believed that the writing process will raise the teachers' awareness on the identified areas for improvement, as well as on their strengths.

As stated previously, Bailey et al. (1998) used journals as one of the procedures for their professional development project. In her account of her journal writing experience, Bailey emphasizes the benefits of keeping a teaching journal:

> "Making (…) entries in (…) journals can help us as teachers see (…) what procedures seem to work well for the students, which activities are less successful (…). (…). Writing (…) reflections in a teaching journal provides a place for questions to accumulate (…)" (Bailey et al. 1998:548-549).

Bailey highlights the fact that journals can help teachers to become more aware of what works well and what does not work well in their classrooms. Most importantly, by writing in their journals, teachers critically reflect on their teaching practices by asking questions. Teachers may ask questions about why certain activities were successful and why others were not effective, and the visual support provided by videos can help teachers find answers to such questions.

There were other benefits of journal writing reported by Bailey (Bailey et al. 1998). For instance, she mentioned that, when she became aware of an ineffective practice by writing in her journal, she made a conscious effort to change that particular practice in her classroom. Thus, critical reflection is extremely valuable for teachers as it can lead to changes in classroom practices, which in turn can lead to better student outcomes.

In addition to recording insights gained through video watching, journals will also be used to describe and reflect on critical incidents. Writing about critical incidents is a form of critical reflection and, as such, it is beneficial for language teachers' professional development. Learning reflectively by analysing critical incidents involves raising teachers' awareness and getting them to rethink certain events in their classrooms. Furthermore, critical incidents are a form of what Tsui (2003) refers to as "personal practical knowledge", defined

as "knowledge that is constructed and reconstructed as we live our stories and retell and relive them through processes of reflection" (Clandinin cited in Tsui 2003:48). According to Clandinin (cited in Tsui 2003), it is through reflection that teachers "reconstruct" the stories which take place in their classrooms.

In his article, Farrell (2008) focuses on a critical incidents study which was conducted in an ELT education programme in Singapore. The participants were eighteen Singaporean trainee teachers who spoke English as a mother tongue. Each participant needed to report on two critical incidents that had taken place during his/her teaching in a secondary school. The trainee teachers described and reflected on the critical incidents in a journal that they kept during the study. The findings of this case study suggest that reflecting on critical incidents can be helpful for language teachers. By analysing the critical incidents which occurred in their classrooms, the trainee teachers engaged in critical reflection. Consequently, they became more aware of the complexity of issues involved in the teaching and learning of English and, implicitly, of the fact that there are no simple solutions to such problems.

Although Farrell's (2008) study was conducted in the context of an ELT training programme, the procedure can easily be adapted and put into practice at any educational institution as part of a professional development initiative. One of the problems mentioned in Farrell's study is that a large number of incidents that trainee teachers reported in the study were negative rather than positive incidents. According to Farrell, teachers should be encouraged to focus on both positive and negative incidents. Thus, the procedure will be put into practice as follows. In their journals, teachers will describe two critical incidents (a positive and a negative one), telling what happened in detail. Then, the teachers will reflect on the incidents, analysing and interpreting what happened.

So far, the focus has been on two procedures for professional development: video recording and journal writing. Both procedures were included in Bailey et al.'s (1998) project. With regard to their professional development project, Bailey et al. (1998:553) stated that, despite the fact that the project was time consuming, it was perceived as a natural process since it "grew out of and complemented" their teaching. Moreover, the project was rewarding "in terms of information, knowledge, and satisfaction" (Bailey et al. 1998:554). Bailey et al. (1998) stress the importance of such procedures for teachers' professional development, implying that teachers should take full advantage of such learning opportunities.

2.3. Peer Observation

The third procedure for professional development proposed in this initiative is peer observation. Since "the walls of classrooms become boundaries that separate teachers" (Lortie cited in Bailey et al. 1998:554), peer observation is one of the forms of teacher development which encourages teachers to collaborate and, hence, to overcome professional isolation. Johnston (2009:241-242) argues that "… overcoming professional isolation is of benefit not just to the individual teachers concerned, but to the entire context in which they teach". With regard to peer observation, Richards (1998:147) states:

> "Peer observation should be approached as an opportunity for teachers to develop a critically reflective stance to their own teaching" "rather than (…) as an evaluative procedure (…)".

In other words, Richards points out that, for peer observation to be truly effective, observers need to be critical towards their own teaching and reflect on it rather than to be critical towards the teaching of their observed peers. Therefore, peer observation will be conducted in a non-evaluative manner.

Cosh (1999) converges with Richards' (1998) view on peer observation as she also proposes a reflective approach to peer observation. According to Cosh (1999:25), the aim of

such an approach is "to encourage self-reflection and self-awareness about … teaching". She argues that such an approach prevents observed teachers from feeling threatened or judged by the observers. Cosh also states that, for peer observation to remain reflective and non-evaluative, the focus should always be on what the observer can learn from the peer observation experience. In other words, by using a reflective approach, peer observation becomes a learning vehicle rather than "a vehicle for the judgement of others on the basis of our own assumptions" (Cosh 1999:27).

One of the studies which used peer observation as a professional development tool is Vo and Mai Nguyen's (2010). The authors report on a professional development project in Vietnam, which focused on peer observation as part of a Critical Friends Group (CFG). The study was carried out for one semester, and four Vietnamese EFL teachers participated. The participants worked in pairs, observed each other teach and gave each other feedback. Observations and interviews were used to collect data. The interviews revealed that all the participants had positive attitudes towards the peer observation experience.

According to the teachers in Vo and Mai Nguyen's (2010) project, one of the reasons why they enjoyed peer observation was that it gave them the opportunity to learn from their colleagues. The participants improved their teaching skills by observing their colleagues' strengths and weaknesses. As for strengths, one of the teachers stressed the benefits of learning from her colleagues' effective teaching techniques. This particular teacher tried to use her peers' successful techniques in her own teaching, stating that it is truly helpful to watch a teacher put good teaching into practice and to see its positive effects.

As far as reflection is concerned, it is worth noting that both the peer observations and the feedback meetings stimulated reflection since the participants reflected on their own teaching. The teachers became more aware of their weaknesses and of how they could make improvements by watching and reflecting on effective teaching techniques. Consequently, the participants' motivation to teach increased, and they were able to change some of their teaching practices. This implies that the students also benefited from the professional development project by being taught by more motivated and creative teachers.

The findings of Vo and Mai Nguyen's (2010) study revealed that not only the teachers and the students benefited from the professional development experience but also the educational institution as, by learning from each other and helping each other develop professionally, the participants' work relationship improved. Vo and Mai Nguyen found that the peer observation experience enhanced a sense of professional community among the four teachers. This finding is especially significant since the study was conducted in a context in which EFL teachers "seem to work in isolation from one another" (Vo and Mai Nguyen 2010:206). Thus, despite the fact that the participants in the study acknowledged that it requires a certain amount of time, peer observation is worthwhile as it involves several benefits.

It is important to note that all the participants in Vo and Mai Nguyen's (2010) study were so pleased with the professional development project that they expressed their interest in participating in other similar professional development projects in the future. The main reason for their willingness to do so was their shared belief that the improvement in their teaching skills leads to better student outcomes. Therefore, by experiencing the benefits of the professional development project for their teaching skills, which resulted in better student outcomes, the teachers were more open to future professional development projects.

Based on Richards' (1998) and Cosh's (1999) reflective peer observation approaches and Vo and Mai Nguyen's (2010) study, peer observation will be carried out as follows. The observer will identify a specific area of his/her teaching that (s)he would like to improve. Before the observation, the observer will talk to the observed teacher about that particular area, and they will decide on a day and a time that is convenient for both of them. Before the

lesson, the observer will show the observation sheet to the observed teacher. While observing the lesson, the observer will collect information on the area that (s)he would like to improve in his/her own classroom. The information will be collected in the observation sheet. There will be a post-observation discussion/feedback meeting during which the observer will share factual information with the observed colleague. The feedback meeting will give the observed teacher the chance to critically reflect on his/her teaching. After the feedback meeting, based on the information collected during the observation, the observer will reflect on the area that (s)he wants to improve in his/her classroom, and (s)he will "record what he or she has learnt from the observation" (Cosh 1999:26). The process will be repeated with the observed teacher playing the role of the observer.

2.4.   Teacher Support Group

The teacher support group will now be discussed as the last constitutive element of the teacher development initiative proposed here. Like peer observation, the teacher support group will provide an opportunity for collaborative reflective learning. As Valli (1997: 86) points out:

> "If left unsocialized, individual reflection can close in on itself (…). Because reflection is not an end in itself, but for the purpose of action, communal dialogue is essential. Many different voices are necessary".

As mentioned above, the teacher support group will provide the teachers with the opportunity to talk about and reflect on the insights gained by watching the videos of themselves teach and critical incidents occurring in their classes, which are recorded in journals. The teachers will also learn from one another by discussing articles and books that contain practical teaching ideas.

It is believed that teachers will greatly benefit from taking part in a collaborative environment such as the teacher support group. Underhill (1992) discusses the important role that groups play in professional development, with a focus on their beneficial effects on self-awareness. He argues that a "facilitative climate" within the group is essential for the development of teachers' self-awareness. Underhill (1992:77) also points out that the main obstacle which stands in the way of a facilitative group atmosphere is a judgemental attitude on the group members' part, a "(…) tendency to judge, to evaluate, and to approve or disapprove of the behaviour or viewpoint of others (…)". Thus, the author conveys the idea that it is crucial for group members to have a non-judgemental attitude towards one another in order to create a supportive atmosphere in the group, an atmosphere of trust, honesty, empathy and respect. Such a climate can lead to enhanced self-awareness and, implicitly, to changes in teaching practices.

The benefits related to teacher groups are also emphasized in Smith's (2001) article on the social construction of knowledge in teacher education programmes. In an attempt to shift from a transmission model to a social constructivist one in the TESOL Master's programme she directed, Smith used various means: literacy instruction, portfolio assessment and cooperative learning. As far as cooperative learning was concerned, the teachers in the programme worked in small groups to complete the same task or different tasks. When completing small group work, teachers engaged in large group discussions or group presentations. The author found that cooperative learning helped teachers to achieve a better understanding of their feelings and experiences. Smith (2001:227) concludes with the idea that a social constructivist perspective, which consists of models such as cooperative learning, draws teachers "(…) into the rich, complex (…) community of (…) students and professional peers". It can be inferred that, by being part of a professional group, teachers feel that they

belong to a professional community. Moreover, participation in teacher groups can be an incentive for teachers to enhance a sense of community in their classrooms.

As for the insights emerging from watching the videos, which are recorded in journals, teachers will first share them by working with a partner. After pair work, the teachers will have a whole group discussion on the insights offered by the videos. They will focus on what they have learned by reflecting in their journals on the strengths and weaknesses revealed by the videos.

Next, the emphasis will be placed on the critical incidents recorded in journals. In his study, Farrell (2008) mentions that the trainee teachers discussed the critical incidents with their colleagues when the period of teaching practice finished. During the discussions, the trainees reflected on different issues related to the incidents, expressing thoughts and questions generated by such classroom events. With regard to critical incidents, the discussion in the support group will follow the suggestions in Farrell's study. Thus, the teachers will work in pairs or groups of three, and they will read the description and analysis of their critical incidents to their partner or group members. The partner or group members will reflect on and offer their own interpretations of the incidents. Eventually, there will be a discussion involving the support group as a whole, during which the teachers will critically reflect on the incidents together, adding new meanings to them (Farrell 2008).

The last group activity will focus on a discussion of useful journal articles and books which contain practical ideas for teaching. As Bartels (cited in Fenton-Smith and Stillwell 2011:251) points out, "(…) teachers value practical connections to classroom instruction (…)". Therefore, reading discussions in which teachers share and reflect on practical ideas found in books and articles are another valuable learning opportunity. The teachers can become more aware of the importance of reading about teaching ideas and discussing them with colleagues. As a result, it is more likely that the teachers will make time to read such books and articles not only during the professional development initiative, but also when the initiative ends.

3. Conclusion

There is a twofold aim as far as the present initiative is concerned: to help teachers become critically reflective practitioners, as well as to create professional cohesion through collaboration. First and foremost, such an initiative requires teachers' willingness to develop professionally. As Underhill (1992:79) points out, "no one else can do it for us (…)". Teachers need to be willing to engage in procedures such as video recordings, journal writing, peer observation and teacher support groups in order to improve their critical reflection skills, become more self-aware and enhance a collaborative culture. Such a professional development initiative requires teacher resources in the form of time and energy (Johnston 2009), but it is only with the support of the institution that teacher development projects can flourish (ibid.). Teachers need to be supported to embrace their roles of learners and put time and energy into developing as teachers. As shown above, the teachers, the students and the whole institution will benefit from the initiative. The teachers will become more self-aware, creative, knowledgeable and motivated. As Tsui (2003:82) argues, "it is when they refuse to get into a rut and seek new challenges (…) that their performance becomes exemplary". As a result of teachers' professional growth, there will be an improvement in student outcomes. The institution will also have various gains from the initiative. Although there are costs involved - the institution would need to invest in purchasing video cameras - it is believed that the benefits will far outweigh the costs. Firstly, the teachers' professional relationship will improve, creating a collaborative, mutually supportive atmosphere within the department. Secondly, the professional development initiative in the EFL department can serve as a

springboard for professional development projects in the other departments in the school. Thirdly, an improvement in teachers' teaching skills implies that there will be more students who will want to attend that specific school. It is for these reasons that the present initiative should be put into practice in Romanian schools.

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