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Reflections on Peer Micro-teaching: raising Questions about Theory informed Practice

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Reflections on peer micro-teaching: raising questions about theory informed practice

Abstract

This paper considers student teachers as reflective practitioners and argues that reflection processes can be established in university pre-service programmes, rather than the more widely acknowledged school practicum. Results from a small-scale study into micro-teaching sessions, where student teachers taught peers, indicate that ‘teachers’ and ‘learners’ benefitted from sharing knowledge, and from reflection afterwards, evaluating teaching and learning approaches and considering strategies for future practice. Increased confidence, teamwork and appreciation of practical considerations such as organisation, planning and production of resources were all highlighted by the students as consequences of the sessions. We conclude that stimulation of reflection in the university setting through peer to peer teaching offers a helpful perspective for teacher educators, so that when students enter school practicum, they can interrogate their practice effectively, to enhance their pedagogy. We also raise questions about theory informed practice and the role it plays in reflection.

Keywords: reflection, reflective practice, reflective learning, teacher education, peer micro-teaching,

Introduction

This paper should interest teacher educators wishing to support the development of reflection through collaboration between secondary student teachers with specialist knowledge and

generalist primary student teachers. The study investigated student teachers' perceptions related to four hour-long micro-teaching sessions where secondary specialist students taught their primary student peers. Findings from the study suggest that the students were able to reflect on their actions as teachers and learners with a view to enhancing their future practice in schools. We argue that the development of reflection may be repositioned within initial teacher pre-service university programmes, through applying theory learned in the university, to reflect effectively within the future 'real life' teaching environment.

Most teacher education programmes, encourage student teachers to become 'reflective practitioners', evaluating actions taken in the classroom and reflecting whether learners achieve the learning outcomes for each lesson (Furlong and Maynard, 1995). Reflection is predominantly associated with the locus most valued by student teachers: school practicum (hereafter designated school experience or SE) (Hobson & Malderez, 2005), where students rehearse planning, teaching and evaluating lessons. Indeed, the term, 'reflective practitioner' suggests that reflection is rooted in practice. However, it is widely acknowledged that theory plays a large part in reflection as teachers evaluate actions taken in the classroom with a view to determining future planning (Winkler, 2001). We conducted a small-scale study into peer-teaching sessions, to identify whether students considered them useful and to determine the status of theory in students' subsequent reflections. Secondary specialist modern languages student teachers (SMLSTs) taught four one-hour French micro-lessons to their primary generalist student teacher peers (PSTs) for four weeks before SE. University tutors supported both cohorts of students to reflect on their experiences, taking into account educational theories, before providing written reflections on their learning and teaching. After a brief review of literature related to theory-informed practice, reflection in initial teacher education (ITE), and the practice of micro-teaching, this paper provides details of the study, findings, acknowledges limitations and finally discusses how theory may inform reflection.

Theory informed practice

Ramsden, (1992: 8), highlights the importance of theory in informing practice: ‘A distinctive characteristic of a professional is that they retain theoretical knowledge on which to base their activities’. ITE students are introduced to theories of learning, to understand how children and young people learn, so, when planning lessons, they include a range of experiences to enrich learning in the classroom. Related theories around motivation, inclusion, behaviour management, assessment and learning environments are explored, as are relevant policy and curricular frameworks. Exposure to these allows the students to choose the ‘best fit’ of learning activities for learners and justify their decisions (Hobson and Malderez, 2005), deepening understanding of different approaches to teaching for learning. Without this awareness, students risk displaying ‘instrumental understanding’, selecting classroom strategies without being able to explain why they may be effective, rather than ‘relational understanding’, demonstrating why a particular approach can be considered successful (Skemps, 1989, in Lim and Tan 2001).

ITE programmes supporting student teachers to connect theory and practice significantly affect feelings of preparedness for teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2010), however, both components of a meaningful ITE programme, theory and practice, are perceived to function in isolation from each other (Hennisson et al., 2017). ITE programmes in universities are seen as theory-based, with little connection to students’ experiences on SE (Zeichner, 2010, Skilbeck, & Connell, 2004, Britzman., 2003). Students themselves comment on a lack of theoretically informed teaching when on SE (Crichton and Valdera Gil, 2015), yet they also assign greater importance to practice undertaken in SE over theory studied in the university in developing teaching skills (Allen and Wright, 2014). Hobson and Malderez (2005: vii) suggest that student teachers have various interpretations of theory, many stating ‘if it isn’t

practice, it is theory'. Students with a weak grasp of how theory informs practice, may concentrate on the 'what' and 'how' of teaching, without considering the 'why', unable to draw on theory to explain why learners were engaged or not (Lim and Tan, 2001). Our experience as teacher educators meant that we were aware of a gap in students' perceptions between theory and practice, which often appeared to be reinforced by the comments of staff in the schools where they undertook their SE. Informal observations made by our students suggested an uncertain picture of teachers' understanding of the value of theory informing practice, leading to students' insecurity when planning and evaluating lessons.

This study was conducted in a Scottish university, where Education and ITE are the responsibility of the Scottish Government and strictly regulated (General Teaching Council, Scotland (GTCS), 2013). Students studying the postgraduate diploma of Education (PGDE) primary and secondary, the focus of this research, undertake 18 weeks of university study and 18 weeks of SE, underlining the equal weight given to development of theoretical and practical proficiency. One of the benchmark standards for registration with the GTCS stipulates: 'teachers have research-based knowledge relating to learning and teaching ... critical appreciation of the contribution of research to education ...' (GTCS Standard 1.3.2). Our study aimed not only to contribute to research on student teacher development, but also to explore whether students considered research and theory when planning and evaluating lessons in the university.

Reflection

The GTCS standards also underline the importance of reflection: 'teachers reflect on and act to improve their own professional practice' (GTCS Standard 2.4.3). During SE, student teachers must evaluate each lesson they teach, identifying areas of strength and those

requiring improvement (Alger, 2006). Reflections may be guided by Schön (1991) who distinguishes between ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection on action’. Killion and Todnem (1991) added ‘reflection for action’ where issues in lessons are considered, to improve subsequent learning experiences and outcomes. Our research aimed to explore students’ reflection ‘on action’ in the university, by evaluating a series of lessons, so that they could identify strategies ‘for action’ ensuring subsequent lessons were effective, preparing them to interrogate their practice more efficiently in schools.

Brookfield (1995), identified four lenses which can be used to facilitate reflection into the teaching and learning process, ‘in’, ‘on, and ‘for’ action:

- the autobiographical, exploring one’s own beliefs and experiences;
- our students’ eyes, using learners’ feedback for reflection;
- colleagues’ experiences, where peers exchange insights into practice;
- theoretical literature, the link between teachers’ ‘private troubles and broader political processes’ (p. 37-8).

Although not always acknowledging them, student teachers have found Brookfield’s lenses incrementally useful for evaluating lessons in SE (Crichton and Valdera Gil, 2015). As students progress through SE placements, their reflections become less self-centred and more learner-centred (Kyriacou and Stephens, 1999). As they become more confident about planning and being seen as a ‘real teacher’, they start to focus on whether or not the learners are actually learning, taking into account colleagues’ feedback and theory to help them design the effective lessons, rather than focusing on their own performance (Tantoy and Gemota, 2017). Lacking understanding of how theoretical knowledge assists reflection, what is designated as ‘reflection’ may end up as a description, rather than critical analysis of the

lesson (Boud, 2009). This study, therefore, is timely, as it sought to support students to engage with theory while in university, through discussion of actual lessons, having experienced being a 'teacher' or a 'learner'. After micro-teaching sessions, students' reflections were focused through discussions, referencing theory to support the students to evaluate their actions critically.

By providing the SMLSTs an opportunity to plan and deliver lessons and reflect on them with a view to improving their practice, we wanted to challenge the perceived relative importance of university studies and SE. By asking PSTs to reflect on their learning and teaching strategies employed by their peers, we intended to stimulate awareness of learning and pedagogical theories before SE.

Micro teaching

Within the university where the study was conducted, the researchers had organised similar micro-teaching sessions in the preceding four years within the modern languages specialism, although no other specialist areas did so and it was not university policy for ITE. Initially, they were organised to provide both cohorts of students with practical skills for teaching modern languages before the school placements. In Scotland all primary teachers are expected to teach a foreign language (Scottish Government, 2012) and the sessions were designed to equip PSTs with a minimum level of basic French or Spanish that they could build on to increase their confidence in delivering the curriculum. At the time of writing, there is still no mandatory language qualification for those wishing to become primary teachers. Whereas the content of many subject areas in the primary context can be prepared ahead of lessons, it could be argued that the teaching of foreign languages demands a deep understanding and wide knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Furthermore, in line with the current Scottish curricular framework, teachers are expected to make links to

literacy development and cultural issues through the learning of foreign languages (Education Scotland (n.d). By offering an opportunity to experience ML teaching strategies as learners which might be helpful to them as teachers, we aimed to stimulate PSTs' awareness of the approaches that might be useful to them, while at the same time SMLSTs were able to rehearse classroom management and pedagogical approaches with a sympathetic audience.

When micro-teaching takes place within ITE programmes, it usually takes the form of students teaching an activity to others in the class, all of whom already know the content (Fernandez 2010; Fernandez and Robinson 2007). While acknowledging the benefits that this can bring to both 'teachers' and those taught (Arsal 2014; Ralph 2014) we aimed to provide SMLSTs with practice in delivering lessons to an audience of mostly relative beginners, as they would in schools, while also addressing some of the major concerns of the PSTs, such as pronunciation and language structure. The micro-teaching sessions were part of the course; however, they were not assessed, their purpose being to facilitate reflection and rehearse strategies for the classroom.

The study

Aims

The research study aimed to investigate SMLSTs' reflections on four hour-long peer micro-teaching sessions where they taught French to their PST peers, developing their teaching skills.

A secondary aim was to track evaluations of the PSTs' understanding of language and activities for use in primary classrooms, whether they could reflect on their learning to inform understanding of primary learners' foreign language development. While early learning of

modern foreign languages (MFLs) is seen as a good thing in Scotland (Education Scotland, 2015), their mandatory inclusion in the primary curriculum since 2012 (Scottish Government, 2012) has caused some stress for primary teachers, most of whom have little foreign language proficiency, nor understanding of effective pedagogy (Valdera Gil and Crichton, 2018), thus the practicalities regarding pronunciation and grammar structures of a foreign language (Myhill et al., 2013) are a pressing concern.

Background

Peer Assisted Learning ‘... *teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher*’ (Boud et al., 1999: 2) features in most UK Higher Education institutions (Capstick et al., 2004). Benefits for students taking responsibility for learning through group projects, collaborative problem solving and/or peer feedback are widely recognised (Boud et al. 1999, Topping 2005; Keenan 2014). Students who take part in peer learning have reduced anxiety, greater communication confidence and engagement with learning (Keenan, 2014). Stigmar’s critical literature review (2016) highlighted development of students’ critical thinking, motivation, collaborative and communication skills, although not significantly greater learning gains (Rees et al., 2016). Acknowledging that four hour-long micro-lessons were unlikely to result in deep learning, we hoped, nonetheless, to assist SMLSTs identify strategies, based on theoretical underpinning, to teach French using interactive pedagogy to the PSTs to facilitate learning of language they could employ in the primary classroom. Because the micro-teaching took place within the university, students were encouraged to link their reflections to the theory discussed in class, rather than focusing only on practical considerations regarding delivery and content of the lessons.

Our research questions, therefore, focused on whether students' reflections revealed understanding of the underpinning theory related to their evaluations of teaching and learning, as well as how much support the micro-teaching sessions provided as preparation for SE.

- How does micro-teaching enhance students' pedagogical awareness/understanding of teaching MFL before SE?
- How do student teachers make links to theory in reflection on their experiences in the micro-lessons?

Methodology

22 SMLSTs and approximately 200 PSTs were studying the PGDE in the university when the study took place. The SMLSTs all had degrees in the language(s) they would teach. The PSTs had degrees in a variety of disciplines. PSTs had a weekly one-hour lecture in MFL, on pedagogical content knowledge and French and Spanish language skills, providing little opportunity for students to practise either language. Student feedback indicated that they wanted more MFL in seminar-size groupings (25-30 students) to increase confidence and allow practice in a less face-threatening setting than a large lecture hall. Numerous reasons precluded any increase in input; however, we wanted to support the PSTs' language learning while providing the SMLSTs with teaching experience before their SE. The 200 PSTs were divided into 8 groups of approximately 25 and allocated a group of SMLSTs, who were also divided into 8 groups comprising 3-4 students, as teachers.

Each group of SMLSTs designed a one-hour interactive lesson with resources, on a topic area covered in the primary school. Core language was simple and limited in structure, so that PSTs could envisage the lessons being taught in the primary classroom and would not feel

daunted by language beyond their understanding. SMLSTs' plans re-used structures to reinforce common expressions and provide a basis for discussion of language. Thus, the SMLSTs planned primary language lessons and taught them to the PSTs as if to a class of primary children, enacting the theories of learning and ML pedagogy about which they were learning.

The 8 groups of SMLSTs taught one lesson to all the PSTs each week, that is, the same lesson was taught to all the PSTs. The 'extra' four lesson plans were placed on the student Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for students to download and use as they wished. In the lectures (PSTs) and seminars (SMLSTs) after each session, time was allocated for students to reflect on the lessons and discuss how theory had informed learning and teaching. After all four lessons were completed, all students were invited to email reflections on the teaching and/or learning experience to the researchers. Reflections were guided by open questions on the student VLE (appendix 2).

SMLSTs were asked to reflect on collaboration regarding planning and teaching the lessons referencing appropriate theoretical literature regarding pedagogy and learning theories. They were encouraged to use Brookfield's lenses to reflect, considering reasons for learners' engagement and how PSTs' responses informed subsequent lessons regarding content, pace and transitions between activities.

PSTs were asked to reflect on their engagement in the lessons and how this related to learning theories they had studied. They were asked to consider whether SMLSTs' teaching strategies were useful, not only for teaching French but also other areas of the primary curriculum.

All PGDE students participated in the micro-teaching sessions, which were regarded as part of course requirements. As the written reflections were being used for research, students were advised that they were voluntary. As we were the students' tutors, we were aware of potential

power issues and strove to maintain as transparent and objective a stance as possible, so that the students would not feel obliged in any way to take part. We kept Mitchell's (2004) assertion in mind: '... the sorts of data collection that require student assent are very likely to fail to give useful data if there is any perception (let alone reality) of coercion'. (p. 1430). We strove to be transparent throughout the research process (BERA, 2019). Students were promised that every effort would be made to ensure their anonymity. Each emailed reflection was anonymised once it had been downloaded and filed and the students were assured that there would be no repercussions of any kind if they decided not to take part or to withdraw at any time during the research process.

All students were mailed a copy of a plain language statement which outlined the purpose of the study and their rights as participants and were encouraged to pose questions if they had any queries. As students are expected to produce written evaluations of lessons and weekly reflections in SE, we hoped that they would grasp the opportunity for practise, using the prompts provided on the VLE to frame their reflections.

Analysis

Although the PSTs appeared enthusiastic during and immediately after the lessons, only 71 of 200 students responded, approximately a quarter addressing the guiding questions. 19 out of 22 SMLSTs responded. The proportionally higher number of SMLST responses may be because discussions in follow-up seminars each week were in a smaller forum than the PSTs' lecture hall, perhaps allowing deeper thinking and discussion. It is also possible that the SMLSTs valued reflecting on the lessons, as they rehearsed evaluative actions regarding lessons on SE.

The analysis aimed to detect common themes arising from students' reflections on the micro-teaching, considering their different perspectives (Willis, 2007). A general inductive

approach is often used by researchers in the social sciences (Thomas, 2006) and after continuously rereading the data before agreeing a coding frame, we individually identified recurring patterns, which were then reviewed and refined into clear themes. We used Brookfield's lenses (1999) as a framework, within a thematic analytical approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), to scrutinise the email responses, looking to identify themes within the lenses he categorised. Thematic analysis allowed us to explore data from a variety of perspectives, using a structured process to ensure that as clear a picture as possible of the students' perceptions of their evolving teaching and learning was obtained (King 2004). Inevitably perhaps, a number of the same codes were allocated to different themes, indicating the interwoven nature of the professional skills required to be an effective teacher.

Data from the SMLSTs were scrutinised for evidence that Brookfield's lenses had been referenced in evaluations of the effectiveness of their teaching and the lessons. We also wished to ascertain whether they had consciously taken ML learning theories into account when reflecting. In addition, we aimed to identify perceptions of benefits or challenges of working collaboratively with colleagues.

When examining the PSTs' responses we aimed to determine whether they could be considered reflective learners, recognising patterns linked to past experience using theory to guide them, and using it to construct deeper learning (Sugerman, 2000). Guidance regarding reflections intended to facilitate contemplation of how an active constructivist environment supported them to learn (Prince, 2004). We were aware that a constructivist approach to teaching and learning might be different to that which they had experienced previously as learners.

Each researcher examined the data sets for both cohorts and individually identified areas of interest, which were then grouped under various categories. We hoped that, by interrogating

the data individually in the first instance that no important insight might be lost and that all relevant categories identified could be ratified and justified within the discussions that took place as a group subsequently and a collaborative interpretation of the data could be agreed (Cornish et al., 2014). Our aim throughout the analysis was to identify areas of interest on a practical and theoretical level, which could help us to answer the research questions. An example of some of the codes and groupings of samples of the data can be seen below in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Themes arising from SMLTs' data

Quotes	Codes	Theme
<p>'I learned how to react to the primary students'</p> <p>'I've learned not to make any assumptions about what [learners] know or don't know.'</p> <p>'Some of them just looked at us...'</p>	<p>Taking a cue from students;</p> <p>Reading the students;</p> <p>Being aware of learners' understanding.</p> <p>(Brookfield's second lens)</p>	<p>Growing confidence in professional skills (planning, delivery, pace, communication)</p>
<p>'We got better at organising the activities'</p> <p>'... make sure there are time limits to each activity'</p>	<p>Pace;Organisation;Planning;</p> <p>Scaffolding</p> <p>(All of Brookfield's lenses)</p>	
<p>'We went round the groups, helping them when they</p>	<p>Communication</p> <p>(Brookfield's second lens)</p>	<p>Communication</p>

<p>needed it’</p> <p>‘For the instructions, using a lot of gestures, as well as using very simple sentences, helped them with their understanding what was being said’.</p> <p>‘After the first lesson, we got much better at using the target language’</p> <p>‘It was actually easier to use the target language than I expected’</p> <p>‘from the second week, the activities went much better as they felt less pressured working and speaking in small groups rather than in front of the whole class’.</p>	<p>Communication;</p> <p>Modern languages pedagogical theory (Brookfield’s fourth lens)</p> <p>Modern languages pedagogical theory; social constructivist theory (Brookfield’s second and fourth lens)</p>	
<p>‘After hearing how some of the other groups worked to form more or a structured</p>	<p>Communication; planning; Lack of collaboration in the team (Brookfield’s third lens)</p>	<p>Teamwork</p>

<p>lesson I would, in hindsight, perhaps have suggested we collaborate more as a group to form a coherent lesson with 3 different sections to it, rather than have 3 quite separate mini lessons.’</p> <p>‘It was very interesting to see how colleagues organised their own activities and also share ideas about the lessons’.</p> <p>‘Working with other colleagues has been invaluable ...’</p> <p>‘We shared ideas and discussed...’</p>	<p>Learning through observation of others; indirect reference to social constructivist theory (Brookfield’s third and fourth lens)</p> <p>Collaboration, planning (Brookfield’s first and third lens)</p>	
<p>‘Another essential factor has been to have a seminar between the teaching sessions to reflect on what worked and what did not. It was key to have the</p>	<p>Guided evaluation of lessons (All of Brookfield’s lenses)</p>	<p>Theoretical reflection</p>

<p>opportunity to think about what we did, consider what other colleagues did and try to implement changes in the following session’.</p>		
<p>‘I’ve read about language anxiety ... surprising to see it in adults’</p> <p>‘... we incorporated a range of materials and resources in the hope of stimulating all students and appealing to the array of different learning styles within the classroom’.</p>	<p>References to theory – language anxiety; inclusion; learning styles</p> <p>(Brookfield’s fourth lens)</p>	

Table 2: Themes arising from PSTs’ data

Quote	Codes	Theme
<p>‘They used language... I didn’t understand’</p>	<p>Target language use</p>	<p>Growing personal confidence in the subject area.</p>
<p>‘I felt very much out of my comfort zone in the first</p>	<p>Language anxiety</p>	

<p>lesson’</p> <p>‘over a period of 4 weeks, you get more confident’</p> <p>‘I didn’t know many people in my group to begin with so it was a bit awkward at first, then ...’</p>	<p>Growing confidence in using the language</p> <p>Growing confidence in interacting with others</p>	
<p>‘I picked up ideas that I will use in the classroom’</p> <p>‘a lot of the things they used to make us understand could be adapted for other curricular areas’</p> <p>‘We need more of this practical kind of support’.</p> <p>‘If you have EAL [English as an Additional Language] kids in your class, you could use body language and visuals to help them understand’</p>	<p>Practical support</p> <p>Links to other subject areas</p> <p>Connections to other teaching situations</p> <p>Communication</p>	<p>Growing professional confidence</p> <p>Communication</p>
<p>‘I suppose we were learning in a social-constructivist way in our groups’</p> <p>‘Some of our group had done</p>	<p>Theoretical observations</p> <p>Conscious/unconscious links to theory</p>	<p>Theory informed learning</p>

languages at uni, so were able to help those of us who hadn't a clue' 'I was definitely in my ZPD! [Zone of Proximal Development]		
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The research questions aimed to determine whether the micro-lessons enhanced students' pedagogical awareness/understanding of teaching MFL before SE and whether students' reflections were linked to the theoretical literature they were studying in university. While the first research question appeared to have been answered clearly, the second question did not appear to have been answered so unequivocally.

Both sets of reflections identified similar themes, with some differences depending on whether they were PSTs or SMLSTs. All students who responded approved of the practice of micro-teaching as a preparation for future practice. Over three-quarters of all students did not mention theory explicitly; however, SMLTs' responses showed theoretical influences on practice in their reflections on decisions they and their peers had taken in the micro-teaching sessions, such as asking the PSTs to work in groups and scaffolding the activities through modelling and support as they interacted together. Without it being mentioned explicitly, it seemed that theory had informed their actions. Previous research indicates that students often acknowledge theory without associating it explicitly with practice (Crichton and Valdera, 2015). The findings will be discussed below. Quotes can be assumed to be typical of students' comments and reflect the main themes identified in Tables 1 and 2.

Findings

Increased Confidence

The most common theme identified, mentioned by all the students who responded, was increased confidence over the four weeks. Both cohorts appeared focused on the future SE placement, starting two weeks after the last micro-teaching session. SMLSTs' reflections indicated that each lesson informed planning for subsequent lessons to increase success, having evaluated the perceived effectiveness of their teaching, reflecting 'on action' 'for action' (Schön 1991; Killion and Todnem 1991). They appeared to have used Brookfield's (1995) second and third lenses: our students' eyes, using implicit feedback from their learners, and colleagues' experiences in their discussions. The PSTs' reflections centred more on their confidence using the language and activities useful for the classroom. Although their reflections centred on their own experiences (Brookfield's first lens) they were also able to look ahead to possible actions they themselves might take, having observed the SMLTs teaching strategies. (Brookfield's third lens). All students emphasised how valuable the experience was before their forthcoming SE placement.

Communication

The SMLSTs' focus oriented towards use of target language (French) as a medium of communication in the classroom, task organisation and learner engagement. As the weeks passed, SMLSTs' confidence in using French to communicate in class increased: *'[French] proved a little difficult at first... by the last lesson, we realised the power of body language and keeping it simple'* (SMLST 12). It seemed that the SMLSTs were developing the ability to 'read' the class, taking decisions as they reflected 'in action' (Schön 1991). with a view to supporting learner understanding of the language.

The PSTs also had some difficulty at the beginning: *'Most of the first lesson, ...they used language that I didn't understand... (PST 62)*. Extensive target language use in classrooms is regarded as essential for increasing learners' communication skills and learning (Crichton 2009, Pachler et al. 2014, Dobson 2018). Possibly, SMLSTs, preparing the first lesson, had used Brookfield's first lens: 'the autobiographical', unaware that their experiences learning languages were not replicated for most PSTs. The PSTs also appeared to draw on previous learning experiences of a foreign language. *'The first lesson was not what I thought we were going to be doing' (PST 43)*. After the first lessons, the SMLSTs used Brookfield's second lens, 'our students' eyes', to evaluate their communication. Subsequently, they increased understanding by restructuring their language, using exaggerated body signals and props. The SMLSTs recognised that these approaches could be useful in SE: *'I will take that on for my placements' (SMLST 15)*. The PSTs also developed understanding of communication strategies with inexperienced learners *'They used body language and pointed to things so we understood. I picked up ... ideas that I will use in the classroom' (PST 39)*. Several PSTs mentioned body language and visual support as useful for other subjects and pupils: *'... made me think about the way we communicate in the classroom ... a lot of the things they used to make us understand could be adapted for other curricular areas' (PST 10)*. The PSTs may have reached these conclusions when on SE, but the opportunity to reflect on experiences in the micro lessons meant that they started to understand how to communicate in the classroom, involving all children in learning. Increased confidence was perhaps developed through increased familiarity between both cohorts: *'... from the second lesson, I felt I was getting to know them better' (SMLST 12)*. *'It was good to see them over a period of 4 weeks, you get more confident ... because you know them' (PST 43)*. Not only did the 'teachers' and 'learners' get to know each other, but the students became more familiar with the others in their groups. The PTSs noted increased personal confidence in using the language to

communicate with others in class as their language anxiety (Kitano 2001, Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert 1999) reduced. *'At first, I didn't know that many people ... I didn't enjoy that. Later we built up a group atmosphere ...'* (PST 7). Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) stress the importance of building a group dynamic, where learners are supported in a cohesive and productive atmosphere. Perhaps, as SMLSTs became confident about the delivery of lessons, PSTs also relaxed and engaged more easily. None of the PSTs explicitly identified any actions that the SMLSTs had taken to foster a group identity or the constructivist nature of the activities they took part in. However, the interactive nature of activities which involved pair and group work may have contributed to their engagement. Both sets of students' responses underlined increased professional confidence as a result of the micro-teaching.

Teamwork

SMLSTs' reflections highlighted the importance of team working, considering successes and development areas together. *'Working with other colleagues has been invaluable ... consider what everyone did ... implement changes in the following sessions'* (SMLST 2); *'... great to collaborate as a group. We shared ideas and discussed ...'* (SMLST 14). Given the expectation of teamwork as part of professionalism in subject departments and wider school contexts (Hargreaves, 2000), practising teamwork 'for real' before SE allowed the students to reflect using Brookfield's third lens: colleagues' experiences. Insights shared in their groups appeared useful as a reflective tool for planning the next lesson.

All SMLSTs mentioned the adaptation of lesson plans as the weeks passed. *'Some activities seemed good but actually ... we realised we would have to adapt them for our group. ... it really made the lesson go better'* (SMLST 13). As the students became familiar with their learners, it was clear that they were reflecting 'for action' (Killion and Todnem 1991), using Brookfield's second and third lenses, that of learners and colleagues. The overriding concern

became the PSTs' learning. It could also be argued that the fourth lens had been used implicitly, as the SMLSTs chose learning activities and approaches which they felt were more appropriate for their groups because of the thoughtful reflection which had been facilitated by group discussion.

Increased professional confidence

Around a third of the PSTs liked fellow students teaching them. *'I felt more free to try as a learner, because they were also trying out being teachers' (PST 23). 'I didn't really mind making mistakes as there was a really friendly atmosphere' (PST 68).* It seemed that each cohort was seen as sympathetic by the other, because almost all the SMLSTs also remarked on the enjoyment they derived from teaching their peers. *'I didn't realise that university students can behave just like schoolkids. There are ones that you have to draw out and others that can be a bit naughty. It was brilliant to practise classroom management with them' (SMLST 8). 'I think I've learned a lot about how to encourage people to use French in activities. Really helpful.'* (SMLST 18). Although many of the students' reflections were focused in practical aspects of the experience, the value of preparing for SE by rehearsing with peers indicated that the SMLSTs had identified teaching and organisational strategies which they believed appropriate to incorporate into the classroom to support their future learners. Comments from PSTs also indicated that although the SMLSTs were viewed as the 'experts' with responsibility to teach their peers, that they were also learners appeared to reduce the power differential, creating a collaborative atmosphere.

The SMLSTs had worked hard to prepare colourful materials, help sheets, and interactive songs, tasks and games, designed to optimise learners' use of the target language. It was therefore unsurprising that the PSTs were enthusiastic about the activities, stressing their practical nature: *'We need more of this practical kind of support. I can use everything that we*

did in my own classroom' (PST 53). The large number of similar PST observations appear to bear out research which found that students view university studies as less relevant for future practice than SE (Zeichner, 2010, Skilbeck, & Connell, 2004, Britzman, 2003). Peer-taught lessons can perhaps bridge the gap, allowing students to rehearse appropriate teaching and learning strategies within a relatively benign environment. The experience also offers space to reflect on their own and others' actions and plan accordingly.

Theoretical reflection

A minority (14 out of the 71 PSTs) noted socio-linguistic aspects of the interactive, collaborative activities: *'Now I understand what the More Knowledgeable Other is all about. I was definitely in my ZPD! [(Zone of Proximal Development) (Vygotsky 1986)].PST 34.* *'We've talked about socio-cultural theory ... now I understand how it works in the classroom' (PST56).* Those students had looked beyond purely practical advantages of the lessons, using Brookfield's fourth lens for reflection, theoretical literature, to unpack their learning experiences. Those students had thought about how their learning experiences were facilitated by the SMLSTs and more knowledgeable peers within a social-constructivist environment. In PSTs' modern languages lectures, the social nature of learning was stressed with the aim of promoting a mind-set that understands the interwoven nature of theory and practice.

SMLSTs were also encouraged to look to the research and theoretical literature to interrogate their practice after each lesson. Each week in their seminar, for the duration of the micro lessons, 20 minutes were set aside to prompt reflections on the successes and challenges encountered each week. Links to learning and modern languages pedagogy theories were discussed with a view to raising students' awareness of how theory informed practice. However, while it could be argued strongly that they had planned the micro-lessons

according to theoretical considerations, such as those related to best practice ML pedagogy and collaborative learning strategies, and those had been revisited in the seminars, there was little mention in their email evaluations whether what they had accomplished was connected to social constructivist theory. Four of the 19 linked PSTs' first responses to research on communication anxiety (Kitano 2001, Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert 1999) and willingness to communicate (Clément, Baker and MacIntyre 2003, MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels 1998). *'Most of the primary students seemed really scared to answer out in the class ... surprising to see it in adults'* (SMLST 12). Observing the PSTs in their lessons provided the SMLSTs with a heightened awareness of possible similar situations arising in their SE and strategies to address them. It seemed that the students' reflections had focused on practical considerations regarding teaching and learning approaches which had overridden specific theoretical links to practice.

Discussion

With regard to the first research question: To what extent does micro-teaching enhance students' pedagogical awareness/understanding of teaching MFL before SE?, there is little doubt that all the students who responded viewed the micro-teaching sessions as valuable for future practice. The PSTs valued the practical nature of the sessions, which reinforced language for instruction and everyday classroom organisation, which they considered useful for their own classrooms. They liked being taught by peers who were perceived as also learning, and they felt enabled to participate. They enjoyed the seminar-sized groups where they could practise the language in a relatively comfortable, non-judgemental atmosphere and some recognised links to socio-cultural learning and how it plays out in the classroom.

While four lessons may not seem much in preparation for the classroom, for the SMLSTs certain aspects, such as practising strategies to deal with learner incomprehension and

reluctance to participate, so that learners did not lose face, were viewed as important to have experienced before SE. Both cohorts stressed increased confidence going into the SE. *'It will be harder with kids, but I really feel confident... that I can actually teach'* (SMLST 3). It can therefore be argued that, although the numbers responding to the call for email feedback was relatively small, those who did respond were positive about the benefits regarding greater confidence and enhanced understanding of pedagogical approaches for teaching MFL for their future placement.

The SMLSTs appreciated planning and delivering lessons in collaboration with peers to a sympathetic audience, losing some fear of the unknown. They used Brookfield's four lenses to evaluate their lessons and could adapt the lesson plans provided to suit their 'learners'. Working with others also reinforced the constructivist nature of their team planning discussions, although they did not make the connection explicit. They appeared to have an awareness of theory and illustrated its application, without actually mentioning it. Students' lack of explicit theoretical referencing when reflecting echoes findings in previous work (Valdera and Crichton, 2018) which found that students, although clearly conscious of the theory underpinning their planning and evaluations of lessons, did not articulate it unless prompted. This raises the question of whether it is more important that student teachers can identify theories and label actions taken accordingly, or use the theory that they have studied implicitly to plan and deliver effective lessons, where constructivist principles, for example, are evident. This issue will be discussed in the next section where the second research question is addressed.

Regarding the second research question: To what extent do student teachers make the link between practice in the micro-lessons and theory?, although the PSTs reflected on their learning, only around 20% of those who responded actually made links to learning theories or literature that they had studied in university. Because of the challenges and workload of the

one-year course (Challen, 2005), when PSTs have to gain understanding of concepts and good practice in all curricular areas of the primary school, it is perhaps not surprising that their focus was predominantly on the practical support that the micro-teaching sessions provided. Despite prompts in lectures and questions on the VLE, most responses indicated a focus firmly on practical benefits from the lessons that they could implement in their SE placements.

The SMLSTs responses appeared more reflective, possibly as a result of prompts from tutors in the seminars. They appeared to use Brookfield's four lenses, adapting lessons as the weeks progressed, drawing from evaluations of learners' responses, adopting learner-centred approaches to teaching, which they stated they intended taking with them into SE. Working as a team meant that there were discussions with peers, using 'colleagues' experiences' to interrogate their practice (Brookfield, 1995) enhancing the reflective process within a social constructivist setting. The development of communication skills as they strove to support their PST peers' understanding of the language led them to develop strategies which encouraged a collaborative, social-constructivist atmosphere. None of the SMLSTs acknowledged that they themselves had been learning in a social-constructivist environment, collaborating with the other team members, learning from observation of their peers teaching and organising activities with the PSTs. Nevertheless, their comments showed implicit understanding of the benefits of collaboration for improved practice and it seemed that a model for planning and interrogating practice had been established.

Whether the students who responded actually performed more confidently in classrooms when they were in SE schools is beyond the scope of this study. Possibly the feeling of confidence expressed by all students enabled them to engage, aware of potential challenges and strategies for communicating with learners. Feelings of self-confidence are often associated with more effective performance in the classroom regarding specialist subjects

(Murphy and Mancini-Samuels 2012; Russell-Bowie 2010; Elliot et al. 2013), which demand particular knowledge and pedagogical skills. Practising in a sympathetic environment with peers afforded students a chance to reflect on their experiences either as a teacher or a learner. In addition, both cohorts described the lessons very positively. While links to theory and reflection appeared largely implicit, the SMLSTs indicated that they had used their reflections each week to improve subsequent lessons, arguably preparing them to undertake similar reflective evaluations in SE.

Limitations

This research is significant for teacher education, where it is acknowledged that a gap exists between theoretical and practical aspects of teaching. It provides groundwork for further research to explore in greater depth responses of students to peer micro-teaching. However, there are a number of limitations which could be addressed in subsequent research studies. Firstly, we recognise that the study could have been considered more rounded if students, when on SE, had been asked to share their weekly evaluations of their progress with us, so that more compelling evidence could be obtained as to whether their decisions regarding planning for learning while in school had actually been enhanced by the micro-teaching they had taken part in in the university and also whether they acknowledged the role that theory played in their planning and evaluations.

Secondly, it is possible that the limited time to engage approximately 200 PSTs in any deep discussion of theories of learning and teaching during the one-hour lecture meant that few of those who responded referenced theory. Given the external constraints regarding time to engage the PSTs, in subsequent studies it may be necessary to make links between theory and their learning in the micro-lessons more explicit in the lectures, instead of highlighting theories related to the social nature of learning as prompts for reflection.

Thirdly, the research focused on one subject area in the curriculum, modern foreign languages. It could be argued that other curricular areas such as STEM for example, also require conceptual understandings of subject knowledge and appropriate pedagogy before students can deliver lessons confidently and effectively in the classroom. Further research which included secondary students delivering micro-lessons to PSTs in a range of subject areas may not only provide greater insight into students' reflective processes across the curriculum, but also explore whether micro-teaching sessions prepare both cohorts to feel equipped for the planning decisions regarding teaching and learning in SE.

Despite the limitations, this research study has gone some way to inform the field in meaningful and practical ways. The implicit adoption of theory in the SMLSTs' lesson planning, delivery and evaluations raises the question about the purpose of learning about theory in the university. Is it to be able to identify explicitly theories employed to organise lessons or to be able to incorporate understanding of these theories into planning teaching for learning? This question is one which needs addressed by teacher educators, who may risk placing an overemphasis on students' skill at identifying learning and teaching theories at the expense of actually using them to plan and deliver lessons that lead to effective learning. The 'relational understanding' of theory and practice which supports learning (Skemps, 1989, in Lim and Tan 2001) perhaps does not need to be articulated explicitly as long as there is evidence that theoretical considerations have been taken into account when reflecting on lesson planning and evaluating progress.

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Appendix 1

Reflective writing (primary)

Please write 5-10 sentences reflecting on your learning during the micro-lesson. You can write anything at all, but you may wish to mention some of the following:

- Clarity of the learning outcomes
- Appropriateness of materials/activities
- Your engagement and understanding
- Any challenges to learning
- Next steps for you as a learner (if any)
- Links to theories about learning and teaching

Reflective writing (secondary)

Please write 5-10 sentences reflecting on your micro-lesson. You can write anything at all, but you may wish to mention some of the following:

- Execution of plan (how did the plan translate into the reality?)
- Appropriateness of materials/activities
- Student engagement and understanding
- Any challenges
- Possible changes in the light of experience
- Links to teaching and learning theories

