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Designing personas

a new approach to TESOL Microteaching practice.

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Introduction

One of the common criticisms of microteaching practice on teacher training programmes is the inauthenticity of the task (He & Yan, 2011). While students appreciate the opportunity to plan and teach lessons, they often comment on the challenges of planning a lesson for an imaginary group of learners and having to teach it to their peers who act as learners.

This has also been my experience as a teacher trainer on an intensive one-year MSc TESOL programme. My students often comment on the difficulties of acting as language learners and the challenges of designing lesson plans for an imagined group of learners. Therefore, the lesson plans produced by the trainee teachers often do not successfully demonstrate an understanding of the teaching context and present a homogenous picture of a target learner. This then leads to problems in teaching e.g. insufficient time for task completion or grading of language.

To address these issues, I have used the concept of personas from the User Centred Translation theory (Suojanen et al., 2014) where personas are defined as 'imaginary characters who represent real user groups' (ibid. p.70) and in the context of this project are the students.

Context and procedure

I conducted the project with a group of MSc TESOL students at the University of Glasgow on a core methodology course in semester 2 of the programme. The participation in the project was voluntary. The students who were interested in the project took part in a one-hour workshop which introduced the concept of personas, discussed their application to microteaching lesson planning and teaching and gave the students an opportunity to design their own personas. To design a persona the

students were asked to select a class profile from the four used in microteaching practice, draw a picture of a target learner and describe them using a previously given set of guidelines (see Figure 1). The personas were then stored in a secure folder on the university's OneDrive and the students were asked to use them when planning their lesson plans.

The trainees were asked to complete a short reflective open-ended questionnaire after each time they taught to explore how they used the personas and whether they felt that the personas helped with lesson planning and teaching. The trainee teachers were also asked to suggest how they could improve their use of personas.

Name: Jackie

Nationality: China

Background: Jackie is a high school student who is studying photography. He is also taking English courses aiming to apply for a university in the UK.

Aims: To improve his General English, working on the four skills and language systems. He aims to take the IELTS test after graduating from high school.

Personality: Mostly outgoing, active, and get along with peers and family members well. However, he is easily distracted when the teacher talks for approximately 5-8 minutes and is sometimes lazy to revise what he has learned after class.

Preferred activities: Group work or pair work such as role play, making a story together, and idea-sharing. He loves to create or design things. For instance, drawing a picture, taking photos, and making a poster. In addition, he listens to music and [play](#) video games in his spare time. He is sometimes [lazy](#) so he wants to know some general techniques with high learning efficiency. He loves stories and he is expecting some personal learning experiences shared by the teacher.

Activities that Jackie finds not attractive: He [find](#) it hard to focus when the teacher talks for too long (more than 8 minutes for instance). He also does not like writing essays or reading long articles by himself.

Persona:



Figure 1. Persona- sample profile

Findings:

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. The reflective questionnaire was completed by 23 teacher trainees after lesson 1 and 15 teacher trainees after lesson two.

One of the most mentioned themes in the data was the help personas provided with lesson planning.

Yes, it really helped me make some predictions to pre-empt or alter some negative and withdrawn behaviors by thinking of some solutions in advance, enabling me to be more proactive instead of passive. (...) I get sth to rely on when making some pedagogical decisions. (S1) (...) and the personas can help me analyse_my learners better, such as their level, interests.(S5)

Other students commented on how personas helped them with selecting teaching materials.

'(...) material choosing became more targeted since the persona provides information about their language level, preference, motivation, relevant resources.' (S4).

Analysing the learners also allowed the teacher trainees to move out of their comfort zone and try out new approaches in their teaching ' (...) and also we noticed the students are all active students so we decided to plan a lesson of TBL for the sake of a better teaching method to motivates them while having class.' (S4).

However, there was also an indication for more support e.g. *sometimes, for teachers like us, new to the field, It;s really hard to have an adequate understanding on students' proficiency of English (S7)* and more guidance in applying personas. e.g. *(...) it is not feasible to make a personalized lesson plan_for each individual. (S9)* Therefore, more support in how to negotiate and address the needs of a varied groups of learners is still needed.

Conclusion:

This small-scale study indicates that personas have the potential to offer support for pre-service teachers in microteaching practice. However, more research into how teacher trainees engage with personas in microteaching both as teachers and learners is needed to understand how they can support lesson planning and teaching.

References:

He, C. & Yan, C. (2011) Exploring authenticity of microteaching in pre-service teacher education programmes, *Teaching Education*, 22:3, 291-302.

Suojanen, T., Koskinen, K. and Tuominen, T., 2014. *User-centered translation*. Routledge.

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