



TEACHER PORTFOLIO TO REFLECT AND INTERPRET ELT TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to gauge the scope of applying 'Teaching Portfolios' to the English language teachers at the under graduate colleges in India. Teacher portfolios reflect the applicability of teachers' beliefs in the practical classroom framework. Invariably teachers' attitude and beliefs strongly affect students' learning. Though many English teachers' at the tertiary level are aware of the newer methodologies of imparting English language skills it is still at a superficial level of delivery in the ELT classes in India. The awareness of the need to reflect on the insights of an individual teacher' talents and beliefs about ELT could be beneficial for the ELT teaching fraternity. This paper prods on the productivity of Teaching Portfolios' as an assessment endeavor to recognize the teachers' parity on their reported beliefs of teaching, their approach and inclination towards pedagogical strategies and effective ELT approaches execution in the classroom. A window view of how teachers contrive their teaching, and their teaching practices and the classroom reality therein are shaped by their belief is deliberated with their portfolio interpretations. It can be clinched that aspects of reflective teaching that teachers reflect in depth consideration are those that are also the most visible in their teaching practices.

Keywords: communication, classroom, competence, philosophy, portfolio, learner

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Introduction

The interlocking issues of teaching and learning are regularly shaped by the teacher beliefs. It is this combination that is generally reflected through their teaching practices. The teaching beliefs are emulated in actual classroom activities and the following outcomes. A teaching portfolio could enable a teacher at any level of teaching to deliberate critically about her/his teaching style and to build on new methods of teaching. They can discuss their pedagogy with colleagues, peers students and other stake holders with the help of the portfolio created.

A discussion is presented here by briefly compiling three English language teachers' teaching portfolios developed at a local institution in Udupi, India. The participants have accounted their thoughts on ELT classroom teaching preparations and practices at the tertiary level. They have also noted in their reflections' the reasons and related insights for their selection of methods and activities for their ELT classes.

In the field of academia, there are different types of portfolios, including the course portfolio, the professional (scholarly) portfolio, and the teaching portfolio. The teaching portfolio describes and documents multiple aspects of the teacher's teaching aptitude. It provides samples of classroom material as well as a mechanism to adapt it. The data of one's teaching is accounted in the portfolios in a simple, readable format which focuses on quality and basically allows for self-reflection. 'Teaching Portfolio' as a method can accentuate the means to improve teaching skills and develop new strategies and techniques to assist effective language teaching.

Goodyear and Allchin, (1998), identify another purpose:

"In preparing a statement of teaching philosophy, professors assess and examine themselves to articulate the goals they wish to achieve in teaching. . . . A clear vision of a teaching philosophy provides stability, continuity, and long-term guidance. . . . A well-defined philosophy can help them remain focused on their teaching goals and to appreciate the personal and professional rewards of teaching."

(pp. 106–7)

In an ESL context in India, two questions are often heard: Are teachers' aware of their ELT approaches, methods, and techniques - in the daily classroom practice? And do they really raise concern in this regard? According to Brown (2002), methods are "no longer the milestones of our language teaching journey" because they are too prescriptive and over-generalized. Johnson (1999) refers to teaching as a "highly situated and interpretive activity" which "hinges on the robustness of teachers' reasoning "involving"

critical reflection." Stevick (1998) sees language teachers as "*neither mere technicians nor mere improvisers*" but as professionals who make informed decisions based on their experiences, research findings, and the "*accumulated, crystallized experiences of their peers.*"

Teachers seeking effective and ideal methods of teaching L2 need to be insightful. Their reflection can be evolved through their personal philosophies. The philosophies are invariably translated into the choices they make in the classroom. Johnson (1999) agrees that this is not easy to sustain without "*supported opportunities*" and is best carried out collaboratively. Cuban suggests, "*The knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes that teachers have shape what they choose to do in their classrooms and explain the core of instructional practices that have endured over time*" (Cuban, 1993, p. 256). Teachers very often form beliefs about the level of their students' abilities to do certain activities, when they claim that they need to prepare the learners for exam and thus based of that belief they choose of a certain approach. The suggestions of teaching effectiveness can be deliberated with the help of teaching portfolios in the given teaching contexts which may converge beneficially for the stake holders.

The methodology of language teaching runs parallel with the philosophy of education in general. A teacher has to be able to collaborate with his or her students in order to help facilitate learning. All this depends on communication with others, what Vygotsky called interaction with the knowledgeable others. Creating communicative atmosphere for learners has be a basic component in their education. "*The basis of success-through-others is language and communication... success in learning depends on creating a communicative framework for learning*" (Fisher 1995, p. 90).

Teaching portfolios

Edgerton et al (1992) defines the teaching portfolio as "*a structured collection of evidence of a teacher's best work that demonstrates a teacher's accomplishments over time and across a variety of contexts*". Wolf (1991) declares teaching portfolios as documents unfolding both teaching and learning over time" as it "*provides the connection to the context and personal histories of real time teaching*". Writing the portfolio can stimulate self-evaluation and reflection, and as it affords an excellent opportunity to discuss the teacher's on-going development. Viagra (2005; 2007) noticed that by means of this approach prospective teachers can evaluate their own work, constantly keeping in mind how the particularities of their situations affected their plans. The teachers have the freedom to perform their profession in seemingly similar, but rather different workable ways.

Methodology

The objective of this study was to record the engagements in the ELT class in India from the practicing teacher's viewpoint. The study was conducted during the 2016 academic year at a semi urban college in south India. All the participants were from the same institute.

The portfolio presentation was on the following lines:

1. Do you have discernible lesson plan?
2. What are your teaching goals, methods and strategies?
3. What kind of methods you use in teaching? Was it mainly lectured?
4. Do you involve students in your teaching learning segment?
5. What is your belief about the role of grammar in language teaching and learning at the tertiary level?
6. Do you think you have reached your set goal?

Since classroom practices are reflections of the teacher's philosophy, we randomly obtained the teaching philosophies of three language teachers at the institution to see how they translated into choices made in the classroom. Pseudonyms are given to the participants to maintain anonymity for the purpose of the study. The three participants have been working in the department of languages at a college in a semi-urban place in south India.

Seema (pseudonym) has 24 years of teaching experience and is a very passionate teacher. She comes from an affluent background and has joined the profession influenced by her social context. A post graduate in English she is an active member of the university English training workshops.

Mhetri (pseudonym) coming from a rural farming community is a first generation educated person of his family. He feels very responsible towards his profession and enjoys being an English teacher. He has been teaching in the same institution for the past 17 years.

Pramod (pseudonym) is an enthusiastic young English teacher who joined the profession three years ago to serve the society through education. He is a voracious reader and regards teaching as a noble profession.

Their accounts are summarily presented here to comprehend their preparation, beliefs and views on teaching English as a second language at the tertiary level as a prescribed compulsory subject for learning by the state university they work under.

Teacher 1 – Seema

Seema saw her role as a facilitator in building confidence of her learners. She sees herself as a catalyst in motivating and improving the English language skills of her learners. The facilitation rather than dictating the knowledge remains at the core of her teaching philosophy. She is inclined towards inductive teaching approach which she integrates with the reading and writing activities. Her lesson planning is evolved around student participation. She said: *“I’ve tried to condense the lecture part on knowledge transmission so that students can have more time for discussion and writing. I think this becomes vital for developing interest and learning among my students. Language learning at this level is about English language skill improvement.”* No single method can be pursued to improve their language skills she philosophised. Language learning in the ELT context cannot follow any one approach as facilitation of the language skills entails student’s interest and participation.

She acknowledges the need to make students take responsibility for their own learning. She groups them together to read the text and present their interpretation. She assesses her students’ level of language competence initially before planning how best they could be led to the next level of learning. Her pre classroom teaching initiatives include the goals students’ need to set for themselves. The students were set tasks for :
i) independent and group work ii) reporting on activities such as new vocabulary in the language iii) keeping a journal and sharing entries with other students iv) compiling news items on issues of interest for display on the forum boards v) a report on their learning at the end of the semester.

She guided the classroom interaction with explanations of the text in terms of main ideas, structure and language items .The students were dispersed in groups’ to use the dictionaries for finding meanings and discuss the listed difficult words. On teaching grammar, Seema enables the students to derive grammatical rules from a meaningful context by both examining their comprehension of grammar knowledge as well as challenging her students’ language abilities with inductive and deductive approaches. The grammar rules were explicitly taught sometimes and later activities for practise was assigned as the exams evaluated it in isolated process. She tries to point out the errors in sentence structures in general but is not happy about doing it openly.

Canale and Swain (1980) agreed about the inevitability of building grammatical competence integrated within meaningful communicative learning. Seema noted, *“Some texts, they’re not part of our culture and environment so actually it can discourage the learner. So I have to localize the context. You have to allow them to think and use language to express their thoughts”*. She is not very sure to assert that she has been able to successfully impart English language skills to her students. But she believes that she has initiated

them to acquire some learning aids to develop their English language abilities. She is bound by the syllabus which is highly structured and is assessed in a memory based examination. The students are much focussed on scoring good marks and therefore she has to struggle more to draw them for the practical learning activities. She reflected that in the present system of imparting language skills the lack of appropriate teaching objectives and training programs hampers the teaching effort.

Teacher 2 – Mhetri

An atmosphere which gives a sense of buoyancy is routinely shaped in his session according to Mhetri's portfolio. He identifies the draw backs and problems of his students in the beginning to help them to correct their errors during the course of the study. He strives to find an altered teaching approach for each class if required as they have different educations and aptitude. Mhetri explicated that his philosophy of teaching is *"the more students are exposed to the language, the better it is for them. Exposure is one of the key terms in ELT. I believe in the merits of speaking English all the time."* He has realized the importance of linking language learning to daily life and embedding language learning into students' personal life experience. He believes in reducing the reliance on teacher lead instruction and allowing students to learn independently. The examination formats are kinds of accountability measures which are an obstacle to meaningful learning he identified.

He is sensitive to his learners' needs and responses. He give details, *"I design my lesson plans by incorporating oral and written language skills into activities that encourage social interaction and are personally meaningful to my students"*. He notes, *"I became the mediator for their discussion. They basically drive the content. They have some ownership in the class...I try to give my students frequent opportunities for independent (student-centred) learning in class, usually in small groups or pairs"*. He prepared them for the speaking task by telling them to write down what they were going to say before they started the activity. According to him at the tertiary level the importance of understanding learners' needs and interests is crucial. His solution is to look for creative ways of making students *"conscious"* with the language, and this thinking is translated into a focus on oral work in his classroom. He is not worried about the errors they make but he it is the confidence building in them that he pursues. Ryan (1985) noted that teachers' attitude and beliefs strongly affect students' behaviour.

On teaching grammar he revealed, *"I don't have grammar drills and worksheets in my teaching. They are ineffective in improving the understanding and use of grammar. The writing process itself teaches grammar. I make students learn grammar by carefully examining their own writing and identifying errors in a joint effort."* He gets a sense of satisfaction

from the students' active participation and response: *"The response of the students is very good. They all participate in the group discussion. They enjoy discussing with their classmates. I did not realize until then that the element of interaction is so important in the English class ... I think both students and I enjoy the class tremendously now."* He is disheartened by the structured syllabus which needs to be covered for the examination objective. The exam evaluation remains steadfastly at the forefront of the students' outlook. The lack of time to conduct more student centric activities heavily weighs his reflection.

Teacher 3 - Pramod

Pramod's teaching attitude is based on everything that he has learnt from as a student, his peers and colleagues. He is open to learning from any mistakes. He writes, *"In my teaching philosophy, I try to put the students in the centre then I think what I can do for effective teaching"*. The entire class needs to be involved, he observed, *"The vocabulary is an important aspect that needs my input regularly."* However, he also sensed that he cannot prepare to tackle so many unpredictable needs, wants and situations. He had to give extra inputs for students who necessitate it. He acted as an implementer and got the students involved in various activities and texts. Input was obtained through the negotiation as learners took part in various tasks. There is limited scope for practical sessions made available in the prescribed texts which is a hindrance he feels. He said, *"Unlike accounts or computer language which can be learnt with derivations an English teacher has to provide them with a second language skills which they can use throughout their lives."*

He presented grammar syllabus prescribed in a categorical way, by explaining the rules and giving examples which is followed by drill activity. Though he feels it not ideal method he is at a loss in implementing implicit approach as the university exams rates grammar knowledge explicitly. Pramod conveyed that he initiates several of the prescribed text lessons by organizing the class into pairs and circulates the grammar activities amongst students. In engaging students, he believes that he is helping students to value learning. He is not happy about disinterested faces in the class. It will have an impact on his future teaching goals he noted. He also plans to remain focused on his professional development.

Discussion

The portfolios of the three teachers' presented in the study are versions around the effectiveness of student engagement convey salient reflections. The three participants are impressively attentive in bringing about self-induced changes in their teaching methodology. It is the student motivation and participation in the learning procedure

that are perceived as very essential facet of teaching by all of them. Their thinking and reflection is translated into different activities in the classroom. Seema intensely provides the input and guidance to the students to activate the course of learning. Mhetri initiates the learner to proactively participate in the learning process and the emphases is on oral work in his approach. He lays stress on student autonomy and collaboration. Pramod strongly balances between induced methods and practical experimentation of teaching approaches. Within the same college, the three teachers following the same English course work teaching a similar group of students are implementing personalized yet analogous teaching style of imparting English language skills. Teacher beliefs and practical execution cannot be compartmentalized into broad sequences. In providing focal objectives to reflect on the different facets of teaching the teachers' could be accounting quality reflection in their teacher portfolios. The effective reflection does help a teacher to perceive important components of her/ his teaching. By sharing their portfolios, they can utilize their reflections to share and enhance the teaching situation. On the broader perspective, the policy makers need to consider the teachers inputs when setting the objectives and guidelines for the course implementation. An intensive study with a larger sample group can broaden the understanding of the ELT scenario in the context of many vital paradigms that remain unexplored in India. The teacher initiative in any context is vital and useful for the improvement of academic infrastructure.

Both Painter (2001) and Lyons (1999) suggest a portfolio without reflection is merely a scrapbook. The main constituent of the portfolio is teacher reflection, and a quality reflection requires teachers to think deeply about what and how they are doing in the classroom. The teacher can alter some practices to make effective change but may fail to adopt the other scopes without changing their teaching beliefs. It may be discerned that the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and their motivational teaching behaviors is closely related.

Conclusion

Teachers need to interpret and evaluate teaching principles in relation to their classroom realities and the share outlooks in their work environment. Our teaching is vested by limitations of curriculum, working environment and the assessment modules that are strictly entailed within the system. The teacher of English language in the Indian context at the tertiary level come across many a constraints. Moreover, there are no clearly defined theoretical and/or practical approaches and teacher trainings which specifically laid out for teaching English as a Second Language in India. So the language

teacher needs to focus on the practical pedagogy of accessing language acquisition, and set themselves on the road to professional competence and growth. The importance of understanding learners' needs and interests is crucial and needs to be analyzed repeatedly.

The knowledge of teachers' beliefs is central to understanding teachers' decision-making facility in the classroom. Therefore, we can say that construction and use of Teaching Portfolios would document the efforts of teachers and set them on the path of reflection, collaboration and systematic teaching effort. According to Thornbury (1997), teacher language awareness refers to the knowledge that teachers have of the 'underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach the subject effectively'. We could further investigate comprehensively how portfolio use affects teachers in their teaching and related changes in teaching methodologies.

Varghese (2006) defined teacher professional identities in terms of the influences on teachers, how individuals see themselves, and how they enact their profession in their settings. The benefits of all this effort are better decisions about better faculty development, better discourse about teaching, and finally, greater personal clarity about one's strengths and goals. It the foundation of all teaching improvement as well as the commitments and resources needed for it to be localized in the given contexts. The ability of good rapport with the students is a relevant feature of a language teacher is reflected in the study. In stimulating their students on taking initiatives to use language creatively to express themselves these teachers' are tweeting the ELT approaches. The ELT teachers and researchers can contemplate effectively with teacher portfolios their teaching approaches and review their teaching approaches. The learning would initiate more clarity towards better teaching methodologies among the ELT teachers. The study reflected that there are too many factors permutations and combinations within an individual teaching space that needs to be reflected and studied.

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