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INNOVATION IN PRESERVICE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: APPLYING MICROTEACHING TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Abstract: The paper studied the application of an innovative model of microteaching video activity in preservice English language teacher education and its impact on student teachers' ability to restructure experience through reflection. As the major challenge in preservice English language teacher education today is to bridge the gap between theory and practice and foster autonomy in teaching, the paper aimed to determine the preservice teachers' perceptions of the requirements of microteaching and the impact of microteaching video activity on the development of their teaching skills and ability to reflect effectively on their own teaching behaviour. The participants were preservice English language teachers (N=5) attending English Language Practicum at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina, Serbia. Mixed method was used in the study and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected with questionnaires, narratives and transcripts of video recordings. The findings indicate that microteaching experience contributed to making student teachers fully aware of their anxieties and needs for developing their own teaching skills, constructively changed their beliefs, and guided them towards problem detection, reflection and proposition of solutions. Pedagogical implications of these results involve the application of microteaching as a tool in improving teaching skills, conducting performance assessment, and practising innovations in teaching.

Keywords: preservice English language teacher education, microteaching, effective reflection, video recording, microlesson, innovation in teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) today is a field of much change and innovation focused on "refiguring the reified relationship between theory and practice" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, 170). The major challenge is to bridge the gap between what is learned, i.e. theory, and how it is learned, i.e. practice (Savić, 2009). Since "*what* is learned will be fundamentally shaped by *how* it is learned" (Johnson, 2013, 75), the quality and character of teacher education programmes and activities for student teachers' learning are of primary

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importance. It is widely accepted that student teachers will not learn to teach "just by being told what to do or how to do it" (Freeman & Cornwell, 2002, xiii), but, to be able to teach effectively, they should construct their own understanding of the classroom and their role in it.

Applying microteaching in L2 teacher education is one of the possible ways to narrow the gap between theory and practice and to enhance a reflective approach to teaching. This method can help student teachers connect the relevant pedagogical concepts to practical activities and construct their own concepts of language teaching and true expertise in the profession. The first step is to encourage student teachers to reflect deeply on actual practice, both real and simulated.

REFLECTION IN L2 TEACHING

Current research suggests that to be effective, pre-service L2 teacher education curricula should provide student teachers with reflective practicums involving opportunities for observation, lesson planning, teaching, tutoring, feedback and reflection (Hyland & Wong, 2013). Rodgers (2002, 848) argues that the purpose of reflection is to make meaning by formulating the "relationships and continuities" among one's own experience and knowledge and the knowledge produced by thinkers. Experience itself is insufficient for teacher development, because to become productive, it must be analysed and examined systematically (Richards & Lockhart, 2004). A deeper understanding of one's own practice can be achieved through critical reflection that can be performed either individually or in collaboration with a colleague (Richards & Lockhart, 2004; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). It is crucial for a student teacher to stay open-minded and to interpret the experience from a number of different perspectives, which may result in "professional knowledge developed through effective reflective practice" (Loughran, 2002, 40) and in a new outlook and change of practice. Reflection on experience is "a process of learning that starts during preservice training" (Savić, 2009, 169), and it can be? purposefully developed if given appropriate time and commitment.

The simultaneous focus on content and pedagogy can enable teachers to understand both what to teach and how to teach, like in the study reported by Johnson (2013). This innovative team teaching project which offered novice L2 teachers (two undergraduate and two graduate ones) a number of opportunities to reflect on their experience and to "materialize their emerging understandings of both pedagogical and subject matter concepts within the authentic activities of L2 teaching". Microteaching simulation was combined with careful and critical reflection, involving multiple opportunities for reflection and support in several

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stages of microteaching, i.e. in the process of microteaching, when viewing video recordings of microteaching sessions, and when writing reflective papers on the whole process, which made the project highly innovative.

MICROTEACHING IN L2 TEACHER EDUCATION

Microteaching is a teacher education technique that has been highly valued (Bell, 2007; Wallace, 2001) and successfully implemented in its many variations for several decades. It involves having student teachers simulate teaching a short session to their peers, view a video recording of the performance, and evaluate it in discussion with peers and the supervisor (teacher educator), reflecting deeply on the 'teaching' experience and the viewed performance. The technique originated at Stanford University in the 1960s as a three-step programme for developing clearly defined teaching skills of science teachers through carefully prepared lessons that were recorded, reviewed and evaluated (Allen, 1967), and has been used extensively in teacher education throughout the world for half a century. It has been applied in language teacher education as part of the practicum, with the main objective to develop student teachers' understanding of how to connect theory to practice by providing them with the opportunities to reflect on their own simulated teaching upon viewing a video recording of it, to share experiences and thoughts with the peers and the supervisor, and to give and get constructive feedback in a less-stressful environment than the one in a real classroom. The video is, therefore, used in microteaching as a learning tool that should enable student teachers to master a number of teaching skills and to gain confidence in teaching (Allen & Ryan, 1969).

Wallace (2001) defines microteaching as a range of experiential learning techniques aiming to contribute to developing professional action. To the key question of how experiential knowledge should be acquired , Wallace (2001, 88) answers that language teachers should be given "opportunities for safe experimentation while learning their profession, and, when qualified, for developing new skills and extending their professional repertoire" through microteaching. Microlessons as products of microteaching have been found useful both as a form of preservice training and inservice professional development of English language teachers. The effectiveness of the technique has been studied in different contexts, showing that it can effectively prepare student teachers for the realities of the foreign language classroom. In the model proposed by Sole (2002), the trainees prepared longer presentations using visual aids, examples and questions to check understanding. The sessions were videotaped to be viewed and evaluated by the whole group using a short form prepared either by the teacher educator alone or in cooperation with the group. The strengths and weaknesses of the microlesson

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were critiqued and analysed in a small group, by stating what had been good and what could be improved.

The model of training novice language teachers proposed by Houser Pineiro (2002) involved teacher journal reflections on the lessons they had taught and on three lessons videotaped at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the semester. The novice teachers considered journal reflections very useful for focusing on certain aspects of teaching and for understanding their own teaching, while the video recordings were reported as a successful tool contributing to personal growth through reflection. Similarly, Menti (2002) described a process of preservice language teacher training in which self-observation with the help of video recording was applied. The focus of the recorded lesson was an aspect of teaching to be improved, while viewing of the recordings enabled student teachers to successfully determine their strengths and weaknesses. More recently, Savas (2012) reported on EFL preservice teachers' beliefs about the usefulness of microteaching in the practicum, emphasizing the gains observed not only in the improvement of teaching skills, but also in the English language proficiency of the student teachers. The most frequently mentioned teaching skills developed in the process of microteaching were giving instructions, time management, classroom management, monitoring students and giving feedback, while pronunciation, speaking and vocabulary were the language skills and knowledge upgraded most in the process of microteaching. The author concluded that microteaching video technique had a great potential in English language teaching methodology courses for enhancing preservice teachers teaching skills and foreign language proficiency.

THE STUDY

Based on the literature review, the study aimed to determine preservice English language teachers' perceptions of the impact of microteaching video activity on the development of their teaching skills and ability to reflect effectively on their own teaching practice. The objective of the research was to determine possible benefits and/or disadvantages of applying this technique in a methodology course for student teachers of English.

Research questions

The paper focused on the following research questions:
1. Do EFL student teachers' attitudes to and beliefs about the requirements of microteaching differ before and after the experience with microteaching video activity, and if so, how?

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2. Does microteaching video activity contribute to the development of effective reflection of EFL student teachers, and if so, how?

Method

A mixed method was used in the study and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Narrative inquiry (see Bense, 2012) was applied to collect and analyse the narratives of student teachers, as a way of gaining insight into their microteaching experience, attitudes and the ability to reflect effectively. Transcripts of video recordings were used for gaining a deeper insight into the student teachers' disposition to reflection.

Participants

The study involved five student teachers in the final (eighth) semester of their undergraduate studies (N=5, aged 22), attending the Practicum of Teaching English to Young Learners at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina, University of Kragujevac, Serbia, in spring 2018. Considering the fact that microteaching is a technique applied with small groups of preservice or inservice teachers, this group of five participants was formed of the preservice teachers studying to become class teachers (major) and English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers (minor). All the participants were informed of the aims of the research and advised that their identity would remain anonymous. The consent to be video recorded was obtained from all the participants before the research.

Instruments

Four instruments were applied in the study: 1. Microteaching Attitudes and Beliefs Questionnaire, with 15 statements related to different aspects of microteaching, and an agreement scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); 2. Microlesson Self-Evaluation Questionnaire, with 15 open questions; 3. Microlesson Evaluation Questionnaire, with 15 open questions; and 4. Transcripts of video recordings of group discussions, reflections and feedback given by the peers and the supervisor on teaching performance (post-microlesson discussion).

Data collection and procedure

An introductory lecture about the principles of microteaching was conducted by the supervisor, and a demonstration video of a simulated microlesson was viewed and discussed in the regular Teaching English to Young Learners Practicum lessons held in the higher education institution with the purpose of training

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the participants in the skills of evaluating and giving constructive feedback on a specific teaching behaviour observed. After that the participants were asked to express their views on microteaching by filling in the Microteaching Attitudes and Beliefs Questionnaire. This instrument was purposefully applied before the microteaching activity in order to measure quantitatively the participants' views about different aspects of microteaching. After that, the microteaching procedure was started by the supervisor's presenting a microteaching task. The procedure was based on the instructions given by Duminy and his associates (2006): 1. Identifying specific teaching skill and content to be taught; 2. Developing an evaluation instrument with a scale/descriptors for measuring the achievement of the teaching skill; 3. Determining the duration of the microlesson (5–10 minutes); and 4. Deciding on the plan of action.

The process of planning a microlesson involved all the participants in collaborative group work. The skill chosen to be practised was 'giving instructions in English', and the content was 'reviewing animal names by playing a bingo game' in a simulated young learner classroom; the criteria for evaluation involved clarity, appropriacy and sequence of instructions. The microlesson was then performed by three participants consecutively (with the other participants role playing young learners), video recorded, viewed, discussed, evaluated and self-evaluated. For the purpose of the research, the discussion and evaluation sessions were also video recorded to be used for data collection. Finally, written narratives (see Bense, 2012) were collected from all the participants in the form of (self)evaluation of microteaching experience.

Data analysis and discussion

Due to the limited length of this paper, only a part of the data collected in the study will be presented, analysed and discussed in the sequence of the research questions.

Student teachers' attitudes to and beliefs about the requirements of microteaching

The participants' attitudes to and beliefs about the requirements of microteaching were measured before and after the microteaching experience. Table 1 shows the quantitative measure of attitudes collected before the microteaching activity from all the participants (N=5).

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Table 1. The participants' attitudes to aspects of microteaching (scored on 5-point Likert scale from 1 to 5: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

Statements related to aspects of microteaching	Median score
1. I understand the principles of microteaching.	3.2
2. I look forward to cooperating with peers on planning a microlesson.	4.8
3. I think I know how to plan a microlesson.	3.0
4. I believe I know how to define the objectives of a microlesson.	3.2
5. I believe I know how to develop activities for a microlesson.	3.2
6. I feel I know how to evaluate different aspects of microteaching.	3.2
7. I feel I know how to reflect on my teaching experience.	4.2
8. I feel I have a good command of English to teach a microlesson effectively.	4.2
9. I feel I know how to manage a micro lesson.	3.6
10. I think I know how to use my knowledge of TEYL methodology to teach a microlesson effectively.	4.0
11. I think I know how to use different techniques to teach microlesson activities effectively.	3.2
12. I think I will feel embarrassed to watch a video recording of my teaching.	2.8
13. I think I will feel insecure to teach a microlesson in English.	2.2
14. I feel that being observed by my supervisor will negatively affect my confidence in microteaching.	1.6
15. I feel that being video recorded will negatively affect my confidence in microteaching.	2.0

The scores indicate a positive or very positive attitude of the participants to a variety of aspects of microteaching (from M=3.0 to M=4.8), give evidence of the participants' readiness and self-confidence to participate in the microteaching video activity (questions 1–11), and testify of low or medium anxiety levels related to teaching in English, to being observed by the supervisor, and to being video recorded in the course of 'teaching' (questions 12–15, scores from M=1.6 to M=2.8). More specifically, all the participants looked forward to cooperating with peers on planning a microlesson (M=4.8), felt prepared to reflect on their teaching experience (M=4.2), felt they had a good command of English to teach a microlesson effectively (M=4.2), and felt confident to transfer their theoretical knowledge into practice (M=4.0). Moreover, they expressed no anxiety about being observed by the supervisor (M=1.6) or about their own confidence suffering

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from being video recorded (M=2.0), but there was some anxiety related to viewing the video recording of their own teaching (M=2.8).

The above positive attitudes to and beliefs about the requirements of microteaching can be explained by considering the participants' solid knowledge of EFL methodology and TEYL methodology, their high proficiency in English, and their extensive experience in practice teaching of other primary school subjects in local practice schools, their major being class teaching. What is more, being in a small group of their peers whom they had known for four years, helped them express a rather low anxiety related to their future microteaching activity. Some anxiety related to viewing video recordings of one's own simulated teaching is consistent with previous studies of the sources of preservice EFL teachers' anxiety (Merç, 2011), and may have resulted from the fear of getting negative evaluation by the supervisor and/or the peers, or from the possibility of being personally dissatisfied with their own recorded performance. Obviously, not all the participants were fully aware that the microteaching activity was going to be used as a learning tool, rather than as a final evidence of their teaching ability. It must also be noted that the participants expressed a high level of self-confidence in their ability to manage a microteaching activity with success and to reflect effectively on the experience. The former can be explained with the participants' unfamiliarity and complete lack of experience in teaching in English, while the latter may have been the outcome of a great number of practice teaching lessons in other school subjects that they had performed and reflected on previously in group discussions regularly applied in methodology and practicum courses at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina.

The analysis of the participants' narratives in response to open questions after the microteaching experience reveals a change in beliefs and attitudes. Three Microteaching Self-evaluation Questionnaires (Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3) and two Microteaching Evaluation Questionnaires (Participant 4, Participant 5) yielded a number of narratives in response to 15 open questions. Some of the issues appearing in the narratives, relevant to the first research question, will be summarised in the form of recurring themes.

The data collected with Microteaching Self-evaluation Questionnaire (N=3) showed that, upon reflecting on their microteaching experience, all the participants expressed much less confidence in their readiness to teach a microlesson than before the microteaching activity, revealing that they had concerns related to using appropriate language for giving instructions in English, to sequencing their instructions, to giving feedback to the 'learners', and to pronouncing key vocabulary clearly in English. Also, they stated that they had realised they had not been prepared enough to teach a microlesson because they had had no experience in teaching English and teaching in English to refer to as a form of support. Their surprise was the fact that their experience in practice teaching of other primary

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school subjects had not been very useful when teaching English in English because "teaching English differs a lot from teaching other school subjects" (Participant 3). They also expressed surprise and frustration in relation to some aspects of their teaching behaviour observable in the video recordings: "Some of my instructions were too long for the children of such a young age." (Participant 1); "My instructions were clear, but too long." (Participant 2); "My instructions kept becoming more complex, less clear, and more inappropriate in the choice of verbs. This made me nervous, too occupied with choosing the right instructions, and with my pronunciation." (Participant 3). The participants' narratives show that they became aware of some of their mistakes only after having viewed the recordings, which made them feel embarrassed in front of the peers and the supervisor.

Peer evaluation of simulated teaching performances was collected with Microlesson Evaluation Questionnaire (N=2). The data pointed to the above problems, adding some new ones: inappropriate language in the task of giving instructions, very complex phrases, omission of important instructions, and the lack of enthusiasm and support to the 'learners' (Participant 4), incomplete instructions, excessively long instructions, inappropriate language, and not motivating the 'learners' appropriately (Participant 5).

The transcripts of the post-microlessons discussions displayed two sets of opposing results. On the one hand, there was too severe self-criticism of the participants who had played the roles of teachers and who expressed disappointment with their own performance; on the other hand, there was evaluation and feedback provided by the supervisor and the peers, who focused on the overall performance, pointing to the success of the microteaching activity in spite of occasional mistakes made. The supervisor praised the pace of the microteaching activity and its successful completion, suggesting minor changes and explaining that further practice should contribute to the improvement of performance as a result of reflection and self-evaluation.

It can be concluded that the participants' microteaching experience was beneficial in making them fully aware of their own anxieties and personal needs for developing teaching skills. What is more, it resulted in more realistic attitudes of the participants to the requirements of a teaching situation, constructively changed their beliefs. Unlike their beliefs before microteaching, the participants now expressed much less self-confidence, but more realistic views of their competences to teach English. The peer and supervisor feedback was encouraging, provided a positive atmosphere and greatly contributed to the process of understanding microteaching as a learning tool (Allen & Ryan, 1969; Wallace, 2001), so that the participants came to understand the true requirements of the teaching context and viewed their own teaching skills and feelings in relation to it in a more realistic manner.

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Contribution of microteaching to the development of effective reflection

The second research question was answered on the basis of data collected with Microlesson Self-Evaluation Questionnaire (N=3) and transcripts (N=3) of video recordings of the participants' reflections on their own teaching performance. The participants had multiple opportunities to reflect on their performance (Johnson, 2013): in the process of teaching a microlesson, upon viewing the video recording of their own microlesson performance, and when writing their reflections in response to questions in Microlesson Self-Evaluation Questionnaire.

The participants' reflections during the process of teaching a microlesson were revealed in the written narratives provided in the Microlesson Self-evaluation Questionnaire, like: "In my microlesson I worried that I would not be able to simplify my language, that my instructions and my demonstration of the task for the learners would be inappropriate." (Participant 2); "Since this was the first time I had taught an activity in English, I was very nervous and in the course of the activity I kept thinking about the instructions I was giving and about my pronunciation. Before the microteaching video activity I had structured the task in my mind and believed it would go as I had planned it, but when I started my microlesson, there was a mess in my head." (Participant 3).

Moreover, the participants' narratives showed their ability to reflect deeply, detect problems and their sources, and suggest solutions for self-improvement. The reasons for failure that were reported involved the unexpected feelings of anxiety and frustration (Participant 2), inexperience in teaching in English (Participant 1, Participant 3), and inability to apply the teaching experience already acquired in practice teaching of other primary school subjects (Participant 3). The solutions offered in the process of self-evaluation were given in the form of newly created general rules for giving effective instructions to young learners in English: "Some of my instructions were too long for the children of such young age. It is more appropriate to have only two simple commands in one sentence. Each command should be supported by body language. [...] The most important strategy for effective teaching is to adapt the language of instructions to the learners' language level." (Participant 1); "My instructions were clear, but too long. I used the vocabulary that young learners would not be able to understand, but I think that I made up for it by demonstrating and miming what I was saying, so that the 'learners' could understand. [...] I think I should improve my instructions by making them clearer, shorter, and the language more appropriate." (Participant 2) "Due to anxiety that appears when we play the role of a teacher, we often make mistakes that we are unaware of during and after the lesson. The microteaching video activity helped me to see my mistakes and to plan how to correct them and improve my performance, not only in teaching English, but also in teaching other primary

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school subjects." (Participant 2). Significantly, the solutions proposed in narratives given by the peers playing the roles of learners were similar: simplifying the language of instructions, adapting the length of instructions to the young learners' level, creating a competitive atmosphere and motivating the 'learners' by promising a reward, making instructions clearer, more concrete and precise, and demonstrating the activity (Participant 4, Participant 5).

The transcripts of video recordings of the post-microlesson discussion showed that the first reactions of the 'teachers' were reflections on the teaching behaviours that displayed their own weaknesses. As the supervisor guided the discussion and reflection, she managed to provide a positive atmosphere (Wallace, 2001) by focusing on the successes of microlessons taught. Obviously, reflection provided by the participants immediately after viewing the video recordings of their own microlessons was biased and too critical, while the written narratives provided more balanced reflection, constructive ideas and plans for personal professional improvement. The supervisor played a crucial role in training the participants in effective reflection by guiding them towards problem detection, reflection and proposition of solutions.

CONCLUSION

The paper studied the application of an innovative model of microteaching video activity in preservice English language teacher education and its impact on student teachers' ability to restructure experience through reflection (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Critical reflection as part of microteaching video activity stood out as an essential element of student teachers' learning how to connect theory to practice, and as a result, microteaching sessions became "opportunities for experiential learning" (Wallace, 2001, 103), both for the 'teacher' and the peer group. Apart from our findings being consistent with the results of previous studies of the effectiveness of microteaching (Savas, 2012; Sole, 2002; Wallace, 2001), they contributed something unique to our understanding of this technique as a form of pedagogy in preservice English language teacher education. The participants' written narratives offer evidence of the learning not only through one's own simulated performance, through self-evaluation and reflection on the video recording of one's own teaching behaviour, and through constructive feedback obtained by the peers and the supervisor, but also from participating in the microteaching video activity as a 'learner', through the process of evaluating the microlessons and giving feedback to the 'teachers', and through group discussions of microteaching as a new technique in the practicum.

Pedagogical implications of applying microteaching in training preservice and inservice language teachers may involve practising teaching skills, building

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up self-confidence, conducting performance assessment, and practising innovations in teaching (Crandall, 2000). Video recordings of microlessons may be part of student teachers' electronic L2 practicum portfolio, accompanied with evaluation, self-evaluation, reflection and comments by peers, and thus assist in the improvement of teaching skills of student teachers. Microteaching may help experience and develop new teaching and learning strategies, create one's own method of teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), view teaching from a learner's perspective, and gain experience and autonomy in teaching.

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