To self-reflect or not to self-reflect: That is the question

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Abstract

Self-reflection should play a pivotal role in the professional development of all teaching professionals as it helps to enhance their effectiveness, personal and professional growth, and the quality of their student outcomes. However, the results of our qualitative research of five experienced English language teachers reveal that regular and formative teacher self-reflection is not quite frequently, if at all, used at selected primary or secondary schools in Slovakia. This paper uncovers the current status quo of the problem as well as the reasons causing the participating teachers not to self-reflect. It also provides an overview of some of their opinions on the researcher-led self-reflection they have recently experienced.

Keywords: Professional Development, Effectiveness of Teaching, Talk Self-reflection

1   Introduction

Teacher self-reflection has been widely researched and assessed by many renowned authors in Slovakia and abroad, both qualitatively and quantitatively. This paper summarizes the major preliminary findings of our qualitative research carried out during the global COVID-19 pandemic of years 2020 and 2021. It aims at contributing to the existing scientific knowledge in the field by examining self-reflection of classroom teacher talk in the context of online English language teaching. Specifically, it focusses on the ability of five qualified and experienced English language teachers to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of their own online classroom teacher talk as well as their preparedness to identify its more effective alternatives.

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2   Research Framework

2.1 Research Aims

The aim of our research is to contribute to the wider discussion on the importance of self-reflection in the work of foreign language teachers. Through teacher self-reflection we analysed and described the positive and negative aspects of classroom teacher talk in online English classes. We focussed on the views of five research participants, their ability to detect and describe the strengths and weaknesses of their online classroom teacher talk as well as their openness to modification and/or more effective solutions.

2.2 Research Questions

In our research we formulated five research questions. They were meant to help us uncover the nature of the research problem from the perspective of our research participants:

1. How did research participants perceive the role of self-reflection in the work of a foreign language teacher *before* their active participation in our research?
2. What examples of satisfactory and problematic classroom teacher talk can be identified in online classes of the observed teachers?
3. Which problematic areas of their online classroom teacher talk can the research participants identify themselves, i.e. without the help of the researcher?
4. What modifications of the problematic areas of their online classroom teacher talk can the observed teachers suggest?
5. How do research participants perceive the role of self-reflection in the work of a foreign language teacher *after* their active participation in our research?

2.3 Research Participants

Our research sample consisted of a group of five qualified Slovak non-native English language teachers with a minimum teaching experience of five years, teaching at primary and secondary schools in western and central Slovakia (Bratislava, Nitra, Zlaté Moravce, Žiar and Hronom). To guarantee confidentiality and anonymity in the research reporting, we use their pseudonyms:

1. Ms. Karolína, from a 5-year bilingual grammar school, teaching B2 English classes to 14–15-year-olds
2. Ms. Daniela, from a 4-year grammar school, teaching B2 English classes to 18-19-year-olds
3. Ms. Radka, from a secondary vocational school of trade and services, teaching B1 English classes to 18-19-year-olds
4. Ms. Zora, from an elementary school, teaching A2 English classes to 14–15-year-olds

5. Mr. Jakub, an elementary school, teaching B1 English classes to 14–15-year-olds

2.4 Research Methodology and Design

In terms of methodological approach, we chose qualitative, empirical, basic research. From a wide range of available research designs, we opted for a collective (multiple) case study, which is descriptive and evaluative in its focus and outputs (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2018).

2.5 Research Time Frame and Phases

Our research was carried out in seven phases between September 2020 and December 2021.

In Phase 1 (September – December 2020) we formed our research sample, described in chapter 3.3, and informed each research participant about the details of our research. In this phase the teachers were asked to audio record three of their online classes taught to the same group of students and submit the recordings to the researcher.

In Phase 2 (January 2021) we designed a Self-reflection Sheet No. 1 with general questions about online classroom management, interaction and student-centeredness. In this phase we also prepared selected readings covering the topic of classroom teacher talk, which the participants were provided with in a later stage of our research.

In Phase 3 (February - March 2021) the teachers were asked to listen to the three recordings of their online classes and self-reflect on each one of them by answering the questions in the Self-reflection Sheet No. 1. In this phase we listened to all fifteen audio-recordings and started taking researcher notes on each.

In Phase 4 (April – June 2021) we facilitated the first round of semi-structured in-depth self-reflective interviews with all participating teachers about each of their three recorded online classes. In this phase we also designed a Self-reflection Sheet No. 2 with specific questions targeting the area of classroom teacher talk.

In Phase 5 (July – August 2021) we provided the teachers with the selected readings as well as the Self-reflection Sheet No. 2. Their task was to self-study the reading materials, listen to the audio recordings again and self-reflect on all the three, while focussing on their classroom teacher talk. In this phase we listened to all fifteen recorded in-depth interviews and supplemented the researcher notes with our findings.

In Phase 6 (September – November 2021) we facilitated the second round of semi-structured in-depth self-reflective interviews with all teachers, each about the three recorded online classes. We wanted to find out whether, and to what extent, the teachers can identify and

describe positive and negative examples of their online classroom teacher talk. At the same time, we were interested in learning about what more effective alternatives to the problematic areas they can suggest.

In Phase 7 (December 2021) we listened to the five recorded in-depth interviews and added our findings to the researcher notes.

2.6 Research Data

The main sources of information in our research, which Skalková et al. (1985) refer to as primary documents, were data collected from audio-recordings of online classes, Self-evaluation sheets and individual in-depth interviews. They are all listed in Table 1:

Recordings and Documents	Length of one (in minutes)	Length of one (A4 pages)
15 audio-recordings of on-line English classes	35 to 45	-
15 full transcripts of on-line English classes	-	16 to 22
15 Self-evaluation sheets No. 1	-	2 to 3
15 audio-recordings of in-depth interviews from Round 1	90 to 120	-
15 full transcripts of in-depth interviews from Round 1	-	10 to 43
5 Self-evaluation sheets No. 2	-	3 to 5
5 audio-recordings of in-depth interviews from Round 2	90 to 120	-
5 full transcripts of in-depth interviews from Round 2	-	15 to 40

Table 1: Research data overview: Recordings and Documents.

2.7 Data Analysis

Our qualitative research neither confirms nor disproves any existing theories. After collecting enough research data, we analysed it for regularities, formulated preliminary conclusions and then looked back again for more support in the available data. Although the findings of this type of research are not representative and cannot be generalised, they uncover interesting and statistically invisible details and nuances, which, we believe, can impact educational processes.

3 Research Results

As each teacher participating in our research was unique and his or her case was specific, we present the preliminary results in this chapter case by case. They were collected from the

transcribed audio-recorded online classes and the teacher self-reflection sheets No. 1 and No. 2. The data from the in-depth self-reflective interviews are still being processed.

3.1 Research Question 1

How did research participants perceive the role of self-reflection in the work of a foreign language teacher *before* their active participation in our research?

Ms. Karolína:
- did not experience systematic self-reflection before our research
- she sees no reasons why to self-reflect
- sometimes informally thinks about her classes, especially whether they are interesting for her students

Ms. Daniela:
- did not experience systematic self-reflection before our research
- occasionally informally self-reflects on the classes that do not go smooth or according to the plan

Ms. Radka:
- did not experience systematic self-reflection before our research
- does not use self-reflection in her work at all mainly because of heavy workload

Ms. Zora:
- did not experience systematic self-reflection before our research
- in the past she recorded some of her classed, listened and analysed them with the aim of improving her teaching

Mr. Jakub:
- did not experience systematic self-reflection before our research
- there is no self-reflection culture in the school where he works
- occasionally briefly and spontaneously self-reflects about his classes, especially if covering difficult topics

3.2 Research Question 2

What examples of satisfactory (+) and problematic (-) classroom teacher talk can be identified in online classes of the observed teachers?

Ms. Karolína:
- \+ asking a lot of questions of all types (mainly open) during the whole class
- \+ using a wide variety of oral elicitation techniques
- \+ occasionally supporting student self-correction
- \+ sometimes allowing students to finish their answers – not interrupting them
- \- overuse of fillers (ah, uhm, err, ehm, ok, yes, etc.)
- \- extensive input – frequent lengthy teacher monologues

- complex and complicated instructions
- echoing, i.e. repeating own questions right after asking them
- immediate explaining of new vocabulary without involving students
- absence of think time and/or wait time for students to prepare their contribution

Ms. Daniela:

- + clarity of some instructions
- + supporting students and motivating all of them to active participation
- + regular praising and encouragement
- + involving all students equally into tasks and activities
- + asking a variety of questions during the class
- overuse of fillers ("So, this is it.", "So, tell me.", etc.)
- overhelping: starting or finishing answers for students, repeating or paraphrasing own questions, etc.
- immediate explaining or translating of new vocabulary without involving students
- complexity of some instructions leading to long teacher monologues
- absence of think time and/or wait time for students to prepare their contribution

Ms. Radka:

- + asking a lot of questions of all types (mainly open) during the whole class
- + using a wide variety of oral elicitation techniques
- + distinguishing between fluency and accuracy tasks, i.e. not interrupting during fluency tasks
- + occasionally allowing student peer-correction
- + sometimes providing think time and/or wait time for students to prepare their answers
- overhelping: starting or finishing answers for students, repeating or paraphrasing own questions, etc.
- using mainly teacher correction
- immediate explaining or translating of new vocabulary without involving students
- interaction limited to teacher asking questions and individual students answering these questions

Ms. Zora:

- + asking a lot of questions of all types (mainly open) during the whole class
- + using a wide variety of oral elicitation techniques
- + supporting students and motivating them to active participation
- + involving all students equally into tasks and activities
- + listening without interrupting students who talk
- immediate explaining or translating of new vocabulary without involving students
- using too much Slovak even when unnecessary
- interaction limited to teacher asking questions and individual students answering these questions
- expecting impromptu answers – not providing think time/wait time

- overhelping: starting or finishing answers for students, repeating or paraphrasing own questions, etc.

Mr. Jakub:

- \+ enthusiasm and very supportive way of communicating with students
- \+ using humour regularly during the class
- \+ asking a lot of questions of all types (mainly open) during the whole class
- \+ using a wide variety of oral elicitation techniques
- \+ ability to discuss the depth and width of the topic
- \+ distinguishing between fluency and accuracy tasks, i.e. not interrupting during fluency tasks
- \+ supporting students in asking questions, not just answering
- \+ regular praising and encouragement
- overhelping: starting or finishing answers for students, repeating or paraphrasing own questions, etc.
- tendency to "running commentary"
- echoing, i.e. repeating own questions immediately after asking them
- expecting impromptu answers – not providing think time/wait time

3.3 Research Question 3

Which problematic areas of their online classroom teacher talk can the research participants identify themselves, i.e. without the help of the researcher?

Ms. Karolína:

- overhelping students
- not providing enough think time/wait time to students
- not allowing students to correct themselves
- interrupting student answers
- too much teacher talking time
- reading instructions and examples from the book instead of asking students to do so
- answering questions instead of students

Ms. Daniela:

- asking too many questions
- echoing, i.e. repeating own questions immediately after asking them
- finishing student answers
- paraphrasing own questions
- overhelping
- too much teacher talking time
- quick pacing

Ms. Radka:

- repeating student answers
- repeating own questions
- using only Teacher – Student interaction

Ms. Zora:
- not allowing students to ask questions
- not providing enough think time/wait time to students to prepare their answers
- echoing, i.e. repeating own questions immediately after asking them

Mr. Jakub:
- not providing enough class time to students
- too much teacher talking time
- absence of peer teaching and peer correction

3.4 Research Question 4

What modifications of the problematic areas of their online classroom teacher talk can the observed teachers suggest?

Ms. Karolína:
- students need to be given more time to think as well as speak
- students should be involved into reading instructions and examples
- I should slow down and step back during classes
- more peer correction and self-correction is necessary
- students can explain vocabulary before the teacher does

Ms. Daniela:
- my role of a teacher – leader or teacher – speaker should be modified to a teacher – facilitator
- I must reduce the number of questions
- it´s important to allow students to prepare their answers without my interruptions
- slower pace is necessary

Ms. Radka:
- I need to be more patient and wait for the students to prepare their answers
- I should include other forms of interaction not only Teacher – (one) Student
- student should be involved in repeating answers or questions instead of myself

Ms. Zora:
- provide enough think time instead of repeating or paraphrasing questions
- use pair work or group work so the students experience talking to each other not just answering the teacher´s questions
- reduce the use of Slovak
- slow down when talking about more complex topics

Mr. Jakub:
- students need more think time which I need to plan in

- students need to cooperate with each other and learn from each other which I need to plan in
- I will try to shift roles from a teacher – leader to a teacher – facilitator

3.5 Research Question 5

How do research participants perceive the role of self-reflection in the work of a foreign language teacher *after* their active participation in our research?

Ms. Karolína:
- self-reflecting on my own work was an eye-opening experience
- self-reflecting can be very useful for teachers

Ms. Daniela:
- I realised a few problems of my teacher talk only thank to listening to the recording and analysing the class; I was not aware of those before

Ms. Radka:
- if there is time to self-reflect, it is useful and can help teacher to improve but it is difficult to find time for self-reflection in the busy teaching schedule

Ms. Zora:
- self-reflecting was very useful as this was the only time, I had a chance to self-reflect on the quality of my online class teaching
- I appreciate being guided though the self-reflection from general to very specific points of English methodology

Mr. Jakub:
- interesting experience which made me re-consider certain practical details of my everyday work on the one hand and on the other hand made me think about my mindset and some different techniques worth trying with my students

4 Conclusion

The conclusive results of our qualitative research will be available after we have finalised processing the data from all the in-depth interviews. We strongly believe our scientific endeavour will confirm what the preliminary results mentioned above already indicate. Self-reflection is an essential tool for all teaching professionals. It fosters continuous improvement, promotes a growth mindset, and can significantly enhance both teacher and student performance. Teachers who engage in regular self-reflection are better equipped to tackle the problems and master the challenges of everyday classroom and ensure high-quality education to their students and the institutions they work for. Systematic self-reflection supports both personal and professional growth and is essential for improving the effectiveness of foreign

language teaching. Therefore, whether to self-reflect or not to self-reflect should not be a question but should rather be a fundamental part of a teacher's daily practice.

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