

Self-reflection and Self-evaluation as Tools Increasing Effectiveness of Foreign Language Teaching: Classroom Teacher Talk.

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Abstract

There are some ways by which foreign language teachers sometimes prevent learning. Even the most qualified and experienced professionals sometimes produce unnecessary classroom teacher talk and thus limit the student opportunities to produce the language.

The paper describes our teacher Professional Development Project carried out at Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum Naval College in Abu Dhabi, the UAE. A group of English language teachers analyzed the ways in which they *do* or *do not* hinder learning. As part of their professional development, teachers reviewed their own audio-recorded lessons and reflected on their verbal classroom behavior, classroom discourse habits and areas of classroom management in order to identify those that supported learning and those that did not, and needed to be eliminated, modified or avoided.

The Project was not only aiming at raising awareness of the amount and quality of the classroom teacher talk but also at understanding the teachers' strengths and weaknesses in communication with their students and setting out relevant ways for the future of adapting their teacher talk in order to minimize it and enhance its effectiveness.

Keywords:

Professional Development
Self-reflection
Self-evaluation
Classroom Teacher Talk

Schlüsselwörter:

Fachliche Fortbildung
Selbstreflexion
Selbstevaluation
Sprechweise des Lehrers

1 Introduction

In the teacher Professional Development (PD) Project we designed and carried out in the summer term of the academic year 2013/2014 at Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum (RBSM) Naval College in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, a group of ten qualified in-service English language teachers analyzed the quality, quantity and meaningfulness of their classroom teacher talk by listening to their own audio-recorded lessons. To be able to fully recognize the problems in the areas mentioned and suggest effective alternative options, the teachers were provided with selected reading chapters published by renowned experts in the field. The readings served the purpose of gaining relevant theoretical background knowledge that was supposed to contribute to better understanding of their own strong and weak points in communicating with the students, realizing how much the communication supported effective learning, or whether it limited it or prevented it altogether, and then setting out appropriate alternatives of modifying their teacher talk in order to increase its effectiveness.

Our PD Project was imbedded in the compulsory RBSM Naval College teacher Professional Enhancement Programme (PEP) 2013/2014, a tool assisting the teachers in being able to critically review their professional performance and identify the areas they can develop and grow in. We designed and carried out the Project with two main aims: the first one was to support the individual professional growth of the RBSM Naval College

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English teaching staff utilizing the *'learning by doing'* approach, the hands-on, practical acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences (approach used at colleges throughout the UAE). Our second aim was to pilot the Project ideas, stages and documentation as we plan to improve them, elaborate on them and include the relevant ones into our future dissertation research project which focuses on the vital role of self-reflection and self-evaluation in the process of increasing the effectiveness of foreign language teaching at secondary schools in Slovakia.

2 English at Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum Naval College

RBSM Naval College in Abu Dhabi prepares its students for the career of naval officers and professional leaders qualified to serve in various naval sectors and naval forces units. English plays a pivotal role in the Bachelor of Naval Sciences study programme it offers and all the academic, specialized navy and military science subjects at the college are taught in English.

As part of their undergraduate study, in the academic year 2013/2014 (corresponding to years 1434/1435 of the Islamic calendar), both junior and senior level cadets studied in a semi-intensive course of English (between 15 to 20 45-minute lessons per week). In every class there were between 16 to 18 male cadets, mostly Emiratis and only a few from the neighboring Gulf countries like Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar or Oman. English classes varied in their language proficiency level. Junior cadet classes were homogeneous and divided into elementary through intermediate level and English for general purposes was taught. Senior cadet classes were all mixed levels, focusing on IELTS exam preparation.

Every classroom, the library and the learning center were equipped with the most modern information and communication technology and the teachers and cadets all used iPads as the main teaching and learning tool.

3 Project aims

The Naval College PD Project 2013/2014:

- highlighted the importance of self-reflection and self-evaluation and their key role in the process of increasing the effectiveness of foreign language teaching
- contributed to individual professional growth of the Naval College English language teachers
- provided the teachers participating in the Project with an opportunity to utilize the *'learning by doing'* approach in their own professional development
- helped to identify a set of most commonly used verbal procedures and verbal behaviors that prevent language learning

4 Project participants

4.1 Project Facilitators

Ms. Theresa H. (*Canadian*) – Naval College English Supervisor

Ms. Andrea D. (*Slovak*) – Naval College English Language Teacher and the PD Project Author

4.2 Participating English language teachers

4.2.1 Teachers of senior level cadets

1. Mr. Mark M. (*Irish*)
2. Ms. Susan R. (*British*)
3. Ms. Elizabeth N. (*British*)
4. Mr. Eric R. (*American*)

5. Mr. Trace M. (*American*)

4.2.2 Teachers of junior level cadets

6. Ms. Michele C. (*American*)
7. Mr. Kevin K. (*American*)
8. Mr. Adam H. (*American*)
9. Ms. Shauna L. (*American*)
10. Mr. Alex F. (*British*)

N.B.: The author of the Project was actively involved in all the stages of the Project and so was able to gain the same, first-hand experience of other participating teachers.

5 Project tools

- Lesson Audio Recordings and Analyses
- Selected Reading Chapters
- Supervisor Feedback (*10 written forms*)
- Project Author Feedback (*10 written forms*)
- Teacher Self-evaluation (*10 written forms*)
- Final Supervisor Evaluation and Feedback (*10 written forms + 10 feedback sessions*)

6 Project framework and stages

6.1 Stage one: Project introduction

The participating teachers were requested to make an audio recording of one of their 45-minute lessons and by the agreed deadline submit it electronically to the English Supervisor to listen to and provide written and oral feedback. The lesson was to be of interactive nature, with both the teacher and students actively involved in communicating. The recommended were for example the lessons of teaching reading, listening or vocabulary, not covering writing or testing. Together with the formal requirements for the lesson recording and the deadline for its submission, the main aim of the Project was introduced, underlining the need for everyone's continuous professional development. At this stage the participating teachers *were not* informed about the main focus of the future recording analyses (classroom teacher talk), so they did not pay special attention to it when preparing the lessons and teaching them but recorded as authentic and natural performance of their own as possible. For the same reason, the teachers were advised not to draw their students' attention to the fact the lessons would be recorded.

6.1.1 Project facilitator tasks

- designing a teacher self-evaluation form
- designing a feedback form
- selecting and photocopying relevant reading chapters for each teacher to read

6.1.2 Stage one challenges

There were no special challenges at this stage apart from having to answer a variety of teacher questions about the reasons why the Project was being done, the possible aim of the recording analyses, etc.

6.1.3 Stage one benefits

This was the awareness raising and curiosity building stage with the teachers becoming motivated (some intrinsically, some extrinsically), discussing the type of the lesson they wished to record and sharing their opinions on what they thought the Supervisor would be listening to.

6.2 Stage two: Lesson audio recordings and submission

All teachers were provided with sufficient time (4 teaching weeks) to record their lessons. They were free to record more than one lesson but asked to only submit the one they themselves considered 'the best'. The iPad **SoundNote App** (Naval College paid app) was recommended for the lesson recording and **Dropbox** was to be used to send the link to the audio via email.

6.2.1 Project facilitator tasks

- sending email reminders about the submission deadline (2 weeks/1 week/2 days prior)
- creating a database of submitted lesson audio recordings

6.2.2 Stage two challenges

Some teachers, especially those that decided not to use the recommended iPad SoundNote App and used their smart phone voice recorder, faced technical problems. Their recordings were too large in size (some about 2 GB) and difficult to send as an email attachment. Some teachers were hesitant about whether to tell their students about the audio recording of the lesson or not. There were also teachers who needed to be reminded repeatedly about the submission deadline and there were two who submitted their recording after the deadline.

6.2.3 Stage two benefits

Almost all teachers recorded more than one of their lessons (one teacher recorded 6!) and listened to the recordings in order to select 'the good one' to submit. That meant the teachers tried hard to prepare well, self-monitored their performance in the classroom and afterwards, with the help of the audio recording, spontaneously reflected on their teaching. In the offices they also talked with each other about how the lessons went and shared opinions on certain ELT approaches and methods.

6.3 Stage three: Audio recording analyses and evaluation

Teachers received copies of selected reading material (chapters written by J. Harmer and J. Scrivener) together with the self-evaluation forms. In their free time they each listened to their own recorded lesson and reflected on its contents, guided by the information in the readings as well as the questions listed in the self-evaluation form. Teachers filled out and submitted a copy of their self-evaluation form to the Supervisor.

6.3.1 Project facilitator tasks

- listening to all lesson audio recordings
- analyzing every lesson and writing feedback using the feedback form
- creating a database of submitted teacher self-evaluation forms
- familiarizing themselves with the contents of all self-evaluation forms
- comparing/contrasting the information in the self-evaluation forms and feedback forms

N.B.: *In this stage the two Project facilitators worked separately, i.e. each of them listened to every audio recording, analyzed it and wrote her own feedback on the lesson.*

6.3.2 Stage three challenges

This stage was extremely time-consuming and required thorough planning as all Project participants were involved in it while having to perform their regular everyday teaching and supervising duties.

6.3.3 Stage three benefits

In the same time, this was the most productive and most beneficial stage of the Project. On one hand the teachers revised and/or learned useful information about communicative language learning, roles of the interactive teacher, classroom management, teacher talk, student talk, self-reflection and self-evaluation. On the other hand the Project facilitators learned about what had happened in the lessons, how different teachers taught and how their students studied and behaved. All audio recordings were very authentic. Even if a teacher had told the class the lesson was going to be recorded, the students, after a few minutes of being engaged in the activities, forgot about the recording and performed as they would normally have.

6.4 Stage four: Final evaluation

The Project facilitators compared and discussed each other's feedback notes on every lesson. Based on the findings in the two sets of feedback forms, the Supervisor completed the final evaluation forms and scheduled a feedback session with every teacher.

6.4.1 Project facilitator tasks

- comparing/contrasting the information in both sets of feedback forms
- writing final evaluation
- planning feedback sessions

6.4.2 Stage four challenges

This stage was time-consuming especially for the two Project facilitators.

6.4.3 Stage four benefits

Sharing similar beliefs about ELT methodology resulted in a large number of areas that were overlapping in the evaluation forms the two Project facilitators filled out. Their discussions were long and very meticulous, trying to identify specific aspects of every teacher's style and producing the final teacher evaluation which would be objective, constructive, balanced and improvement oriented.

6.5 Stage five: Feedback

The Supervisor met every teacher individually to discuss the lesson, referring to the points mentioned in the self-evaluation and final evaluation form. Opinions on how to best tackle the problematic areas of teacher talk in order to minimize its quantity and maximize its quality were brainstormed and recorded onto the final feedback form.

6.5.1 Project facilitator tasks

- facilitating a feedback session for every teacher
- creating a database of final evaluation forms
- identifying the most common verbal procedures the teachers used that prevented language learning

6.5.2 Stage five challenges

Apart from being time consuming for all the parties involved, this stage put extra pressure on the teachers who were not familiar with the development oriented type of feedback. Some of them were anxious about the possible negative feedback comments.

6.5.3 Stage five benefits

Most of the teachers experienced the new type of feedback for the first time, understood its purpose and acknowledged its value.

6.6 Stage six: Follow-up

Based on the points discussed in the feedback session and as part of their future professional development, every participating teacher was requested to select two specific areas of their classroom teacher talk to improve in. Referring to the Scrivener's (2005) list of 'popular' techniques that help to prevent learning, the teachers identified the following examples of unnecessary teacher talk they had produced and needed to work on:

- Amount of teacher talking time (6 teachers)
- Giving instructions: unclear/repeated/unchecked (4 teachers)
- Echoing student replies (3 teachers)
- Verbal over-helping/over-organizing (2 teachers)
- Completing student sentences (2 teachers)
- Asking: 'Do you understand?' (2 teachers)
- Insufficient eliciting (1 teacher)

The Project facilitators initiated organizing the Naval College professional development workshops focusing on sharing practical suggestions and procedures that might contribute to the enhancement of the teacher talking quality.

7 Conclusion

Although the Professional Development Project described in this paper was designed for a group of native English language teachers teaching tertiary level students in the UAE, we strongly believe in its applicability in any foreign language teaching context, in any country and at any level of education. Foreign language teachers, both native and non-native, regarding of the length of their service and the language they teach, should regularly reflect on the effectiveness and appropriateness of their classroom teacher talk. The analyses of their own verbal behavior in the classroom together with the ability to identify the weak areas and implement changes to their own verbal performance might significantly contribute to the increase of the classroom communicativeness and help to improve the learning outcomes of foreign language teaching in a formal environment.

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