

# Teaching practice as a motivational factor

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## Introduction

At the beginning of my contribution I would like to say that I have been supervising student-teachers (or trainees) at their teaching practice for about 10 years.

Over the years I have developed a feeling or rather a belief that teaching practice represents an important milestone in the trainees' lives. Having completed at least the first stage of their teaching practice in their fourth year, or even in the course of the first stage, they seem to change their attitudes to both their further learning and their further teaching. It means that especially their attitude towards their own learning changes. They start taking their learning much more seriously. They co-operate much better in both language and methodology seminars. Even those who used to be mostly silent become more willing to communicate in the target language, they do not mind sharing their ideas with their teacher and their peers, they contribute to discussions, ask questions. Most students become interested in language teaching methodology, which is definitely not a popular subject at the beginning of the course in the third year. They start attending lectures (which are not compulsory), borrow books on teaching and also new course-books. Even those who had believed they would never teach change their minds and start giving private lessons or teaching various courses. Does it mean that in their fourth year of studies they have simply matured, or does the teaching practice really mean a certain stimulus for further learning and teaching? It seems to me that teaching practice functions as a sort of motivational factor – for both learning and teaching.

The students after (or in the course) of their teaching practice find out they need to improve their English and at the same time their pedagogic knowledge and skills. During their teaching practice they realize what level of language proficiency is needed. In secondary schools they have to be really proficient speakers to be able to cope with the basic requirement – to conduct the whole lesson in English including grammar presentation. In basic schools the language level of the learners is rather low, which requires other language skills on the part of the teacher. He or she should, though, be able to use English as much as possible to provide the learners with comprehensible input and thus enhance language acquisition. The teacher has to be able to use simplified language for the learners to understand and he/she should also create in the classroom natural situations which would be exploited linguistically. All this requires an adequate language proficiency but also, or primarily, a very good level of pedagogic, or teaching, skills.

The trainees also realize that they somehow lack the knowledge of grammar which is needed at school level. Very often their knowledge of English grammar is too academic. It is often a surprise for the trainees that the learners are not able to cope with basic grammatical categories in theory, they do not understand the metalanguage the trainees use when talking

about grammar. The trainees realize they have to deal with grammar in very simple language, they have to rely more on examples than rules. Having realized this in practice (they should know it from theory, but it is not, naturally, enough) the trainees begin to view grammar also from a different angle – that of the learners at a much lower level than they had expected. The trainees usually start looking for activities which would help the learners in understanding particular grammar points and also in practising grammar.

The trainees become quite interested in teaching because they seem to have found out that teaching is an interesting, creative activity which represents a certain challenge for them.

At last but not least they have a much higher level of empathy with teachers than they had before their teaching practice. Before they were only learners of English, now they have become teachers. Even their social status has changed. They are very happy when they are accepted by the class as ‘real teachers’, which usually *is* the case. Their higher empathy is probably also the reason for their higher willingness to co-operate in their own learning sessions at the university.

The question is whether all the change in trainee motivation is reality or whether it is my private, personal feeling which comes from the fact that we spend much more time together during the teaching practice than just at lectures and methodology sessions before.

### **Questionnaire Survey**

Normally I supervise two groups of trainees a term. The group consists usually of four trainees. To find out more about the relationship between teaching practice and trainee motivation I asked the four groups of trainees I supervised over the academic year to fill in my questionnaire:

The questionnaire included 15 questions. I asked the trainees to think of various issues, not only those connected with their motivation. I wanted to use the results for the improvement of various aspects of the teaching practice.

Quotations from what the trainees have written down are presented in italics.

### **Lesson Planning**

To find out more about the main focus of their lesson planning the trainees were asked what they had to pay special attention to when working on their lesson plans. Was it grammar, vocabulary, preparation of effective activities, etc.?

Obviously the trainees had to prepare the content – grammar to be explained in the particular lesson and also vocabulary necessary for the particular topics to be covered: e.g. *I had to make sure that I know all the vocabulary needed for the lesson, especially the problematic words.*

The trainees paid a lot of attention to the choice of activities and games which would be interesting for the learners, which would not be boring and which would thus be motivating for the learners. *I primarily thought of activities and games which would be interesting for the pupils.* or: *I especially thought of how to motivate the learners.*

They had to think about teacher language:

*I had to prepare questions which are normally asked in the classroom.* or: *I had to prepare classroom language to be able to conduct the whole lesson in English.*

and also the structure of the lesson, ways of presentation, but also more deeper issues of results, effectiveness and meaningfulness. E.g.:

- *I had to think about the organization of the lesson to present the new information clearly, to make the lesson beneficial to the learners, to give the learners room to express themselves and last but not least to make the lesson interesting to the learners.*
- *The big problem for me was to integrate all activities into a meaningful whole.*
- *I had to think of timing, I was afraid I wouldn't have enough material for the whole lesson.*
- *My main concern was the organization of the whole lesson, its general weighting, to make the activities, to think of the aim of each activity and whether it will be effective enough.*
- *To prepare the lesson was very difficult for us as we didn't know what the learners already know, what they are like, what their needs are.*

### **After the Lesson**

I also enquired whether the trainees spotted any mistakes they had made, whether their mistakes motivated them to consult the dictionary or a grammar book, whether they had to clarify for themselves some points covered in the lesson which might have caused problems to the trainee.

Surprisingly most of the trainees said they did not check anything after the lesson. Some of them said they asked their peers immediately after the lesson, others asked the supervisor and in case they did not, the mistakes they made during the lesson were explained to them later at the feedback session. Some trainees said they did not have to check anything because they had prepared for every possibility before the lesson.

Only a few trainees admitted they checked the right form or usage:

- *I checked the right pronunciation. I realized that I pronounce a word in a different way than the learners. I realized it was my mistake and I admitted it.*
- *I had to look up some classroom English expressions I was not sure about in the lesson.*
- *I was looking for more examples of words the learners mix up (e.g. lend and borrow, say and tell).*
- *I was not sure of spelling of some words and the use of articles. I did look this up.*

To conclude this issue I would like to quote one of the trainees who shows her process of reflection:

- *I try to make everything clear before the lesson. After the lesson I try to improve the plan for the next lesson, I try to avoid the mistakes I had made and try to include anything that I think was missing in the previous lesson.*

The trainees were asked whether the first teaching experience motivated them to improve any aspect of the knowledge needed by language teachers. They were offered some options. The results can be seen from the following table:

| <i>The teaching practice motivated me to:</i>   | <i>Number of students:</i> |
|---|----------------------------|
| Improve my grammar  | 6                          |
| Widen my vocabulary linked to a particular topic  | 7                          |
| Improve my pronunciation  | 4                          |
| Improve my spelling   | 2                          |
| Become a more fluent speaker of English   | 6                          |
| Look for interesting activities   | 12                         |
| Look for new, interesting coursebooks and materials                                     | 9                          |
| Learn more about language learning principles   | 3                          |
| Improve my pedagogic skills   | 4                          |
| Learn how to attract attention of the learners and how to maintain classroom discipline | 8                          |
| Gain more teaching experience   | 7                          |

Again, I would like to sum up this issue by a quotation of one of the trainee's thoughts:

- *My first, not very successful lesson motivated me to manage the following lesson much, much better.*

The serial teaching practice provides the trainees with the first exposure to real learners and real classroom situation. What have the trainees learned about knowledge and skills needed by the language teachers? I asked them what sort of knowledge or skill they should gain to become good teachers. What did the teaching practice reveal?

The knowledge and skills mentioned by the trainees can be divided into three main categories:

- a) language
- b) teaching skills
- c) establishing good relationship with the learners.

As far as the language is concerned the wish of many trainees is to: *improve the knowledge of the English language itself and also be confident in grammar and be able to explain it clearly and in a simple way to the learners.*

Although the trainees in the previous section of the questionnaire did not think of teaching skills as being crucial for them, in this part they seem to link their future success as teachers with a good level of teaching skills.

The trainees wish especially *to manage timing of the lesson* and also

- *to be able to plan the lesson well, on the other hand not to spend too much time on lesson planning.*
- *Not to hurry, be consistent, be able to adapt the plans to the circumstances, react spontaneously.*
- *To make the lessons interesting and effective*
- *Not to panic if something goes wrong*

To establish a good, fair relationship with the learners seems to be extremely important for the future teachers.

They wish to learn how to: *involve all the pupils, be fair to everybody, know what the children can know and what they cannot, not ask them questions they cannot answer, understand what their thinking process is like, speak to them in a simple language.* They also want to be able to:

- *keep attention and maintain discipline*
- *be friendly and fair*
- *set clear rules from the very beginning*
- *be strict from the beginning, keep distance from the learners.*

A trainee says that *it is necessary to have enough teaching practice, to gain enough experience to be able to take decisions in the classroom.*

Another student teacher believes that what she will have to do to become a good teacher is to *adjust herself to the role of the teacher.*

The last question of the questionnaire enquired whether the trainees changed somehow their intention to teach or not to teach in the future. Whether the teaching practice motivated them to choose the teaching profession or the other way round.

Three people said that their decision whether to teach or not had not been influenced by the teaching practice, e.g.: *teaching practice with an unknown class cannot influence the decision whether to teach or not. It is influenced by many other factors.*

Another trainee, in spite of a positive experience, does not want to teach: *I haven't changed my decision not to teach in the future. I am afraid of the learners. Even though the teaching practice was a positive experience, I think it was only by chance.*

Another student said: *the teaching practice did not discourage me from teaching but I am not that keen on it any more.*

Quite a few students are scared of the idea to become basic school teachers:

- *I have always wanted to teach but I have made sure that I do not want to teach at the basic school. I do not want to solve discipline problems.*
- *I would like to teach but not at the basic school and not for the rest of my life, only for some time.*
- *I will never ever teach at the basic school, as I have always known.*
- *I decided to teach but not at the basic school, preferably at some sort of alternative school.*

Why is teaching at basic school so unpopular among the trainees? Teaching at basic school means teaching children of lower level of language proficiency, sometimes of lower motivation or teaching children with various learning problems. Definitely teaching at basic school requires a very good level of pedagogic knowledge and skills, experience and confidence.

I am very happy to say that the teaching practice influenced others in a positive way.

E.g:

- *I didn't want to teach but after the teaching practice I changed my mind.*
- *The teaching practice strengthened my intention to teach.*
- *I have always wanted to be a teacher.*
- *I have learned that not all children are naughty.*
- *I feel a challenge. I want to be able to attract the learners. I would like to develop in the learners a good relationship to the English language and to learning languages in general.*

I will conclude the questionnaire survey by another quotation. A future teacher says: *I have always had the opinion that teaching at the basic school is a very difficult and challenging job, which brings a lot of problems. The teaching practice showed that there is also a pleasant side of it and motivated me very strongly to become a teacher in the future.*

## Conclusion

What can we see from the results of the questionnaire survey? Naturally we cannot say that teaching practice is the only stimulus for further learning and teaching of the trainees. There are many more aspects to it. On the other hand we can say that teaching practice is extremely important and I am very happy to say that it fulfils its aims. At the teaching practice the trainees realize what it means to be a teacher, what kinds of knowledge and skills are needed on the part of the teacher. Even though they knew it before in theory, they had to experience it in practice. This 'experiential knowledge' (Wallace 1991) brings more responsibility to the trainees. They feel much more responsible for their own learning but they also accept the responsibility for the learning of their own learners, which is extremely important. Learners, with all their feelings and needs, their motivation, seem to be in the centre of the trainees' attention.

As we can see from the answers, teaching practice (or in other words experiential knowledge or knowledge-in-action) promotes reflection. The trainees think very seriously of what to avoid, what to repeat, what to improve in their classes.

I think I can say that teaching practice represents a certain stimulus for further learning and teaching of the trainees because it represents a stimulus for reflection. The trainees' ability to reflect can be perceived by the university tutors as certain maturation and also as higher motivation to become a teacher, a professional.

From the survey we can also see that the trainees oscillate somewhere between being a teacher and being a learner. It is a difficult position. They are aware of the fact that establishing a good relationship with the learners from the very beginning is extremely important. But they should also be aware of the fact that teaching is a never-ending process of learning. The more teaching experience the trainees gain, the more secure and confident they will feel in the teacher's role. If we want to motivate the trainees to become teachers, we have to provide them with enough teaching experience, with enough challenge, but on the other hand we have to provide them with enough support of all the people involved.

We cannot think that all the trainees will become teachers. The positive thing is that those who want to teach know what the job is about, they are able to reflect on their practices and improve them. It gives us a chance that our graduates will become good teachers.

## References:

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