

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINEES AS RESEARCHERS: ANALYSIS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS' DIPLOMA PROJECTS

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Abstract

To what extent can conducting a research project help graduate students to develop research skills? To answer this question, an analysis of selected M.A. theses produced by Polish graduate students was done. The preliminary findings of the analysis points to a variety of skills the students practiced, such as the abilities to: 1/ reflect on teaching, 2/ formulate research questions, 3/ theorise, define constructs and operationalize them in the study, 4/ look critically at one's research. Additionally, the analysis reveals various forms of creativity and originality. The results underline the importance of students conducting research in their own contexts, the activity that proves to facilitate both research and academic skills.

Key words: teacher education, graduate students, diploma theses, research skills

1. FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION – GOALS

1.1. Foreign language teacher education in Poland: goals and expected standards

In Poland foreign language (FL) teacher education at BA (undergraduate) and MA (graduate) levels is provided by a variety of institutions: universities, pedagogical universities, vocational schools as well as state and private post-secondary school colleges. The main information that serves as the foundation of curricula in FL teacher training education is provided in legal requirements issued by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education on 17th February 2012 (Rozporządzenie MENiSW 17 / 02 / 2012). The document specifies goals of teacher education, curriculum outline and exit standards, i.e. teaching competences that student teachers should acquire during their teacher education. Another important document to discuss here is National Qualifications Framework (in Polish *Krajowe Ramy Kwalifikacyjne*), which since 2012 has served as a qualifications framework for all study programmes in higher education institutions in Poland, including those that aim at training future teachers. The syllabus of the MA seminar conducted in the Institute of English Studies at the Jagiellonian University, the course which is the focus of this paper, draws on the two abovementioned documents. The main aim of the seminar is to help graduate students to design and conduct their own research project, which they finally describe in their MA theses. According to the syllabus, during the course the students should acquire specialised knowledge and develop a wide range of abilities. Below the goals of the seminar, which fall within the categories of knowledge, skills and social competences, are presented.

Students should develop the following knowledge:

- extensive and well-organised theoretical knowledge about the discourse used in the community of practitioners (i.e. linguists involved in research on learning and teaching foreign languages) which MA graduates are to enter;
- broad knowledge about the connection of applied linguistics with other science disciplines;
- knowledge about the research conducted in the discipline.

Students should develop the following academic skills:

- research skills such as the ability to find, analyze and evaluate information;
- critical thinking skills, which enable students to formulate critical assessment of the materials they use and their own research;

- self-study skills, which will enable students to conduct their own research projects;
- skills necessary to design a research project, i.e. to formulate research questions, apply appropriate methodology to answer these questions as well as the ability to present the findings of the investigation;
- skills typical of a reflective practitioner which involve an ability to evaluate one's work;
- ability to prepare a discussion supported by arguments drawn from other researchers' studies;
- communication and presentation skills, i.e. those necessary to prepare and give an oral presentation.

Students should develop the following social competences:

- an awareness of the need to develop oneself as a professional practitioner;
- an awareness that developing oneself as a person and a professional is a long life process.

I will refer to the abovementioned standards in the discussion presented below.

1.2. Developing research skills as a way of socializing students

The main aim of educating graduate students is to facilitate students' efforts to enter a community of practitioners, i.e. a group of professionals by some scientists called a discourse community. For the purpose of this discussion I suggest defining a concept of discourse community in the way Swales (2011) does it. According to Swales, a discourse community has several characteristics. Swales (2011 p. 25) claims that: "A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members." The scientist (Swales, 2011 p. 26) explains that: "A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback." It means developing community specific genres (types of texts) which will enable every member of the group to contact other members. In the group of applied linguists investigating the process of teaching and learning foreign languages the most common genres would be research papers, conference abstracts, research proposals as well as theses and dissertations. Participatory mechanisms cannot function without developing some specific lexis. "It is hard to conceive, at least in the contemporary English-speaking world, of a group of well-established members of a discourse community communicating among themselves on topics relevant to the goals of the community and not using lexical items puzzling to outsiders" (Swales, 2011 p. 26). There is one more feature worth discussing here. "A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursive expertise" (Swales, 2011 p. 27). It means that the group consists of both novices and experts; individuals enter the community and develop their knowledge by participating in the life of the community.

The process of socializing (helping students to enter the community of professionals) starts when students begin to realize that one of the main aims of their higher institution education is to become a foreign language teacher. Methodology lectures and classes along with teaching practice facilitate trainees' efforts to learn an appropriate language so that students can communicate with other members of the teaching community, i.e. other student teachers, teacher trainers and teaching practice mentors. During teaching practice student teachers develop general pedagogical competences, such as dealing with school documentation, organizing parent-teacher co-operation, identifying causes of conflict at school, developing effective strategies in classroom management, cooperation with other education institutions. This part of the teaching programme also equips trainees with the opportunity to develop observation skills; they observe lessons conducted by experienced teachers and analyse their effectiveness. They learn how to select materials, check and monitor their students' learning, give feedback as well as review and reteach. Trainees also learn how to monitor their teaching and evaluate it, how to analyse, talk about and reflect on their teaching experiences. Student teachers are required to keep record of their training and document their experiences and achievements. It is important to note

that teaching practice is often the main setting in which students assisted by their supervisors conduct their own research projects and present them in their MA theses.

Apart from entering the community of FL teachers, graduate students are trained to become members of one more community (entering which may be even more demanding) – a community of scholars, who have mastered academic reading and writing skills, can think critically as well as have developed research skills necessary to design and conduct their own empirical studies. Since MA theses, often prepared on the basis of teaching practice, are the final works that graduate students produce at the end of their education, it seems that they can be viewed as accurate reflections of competences student teachers have developed as novice members of both communities: the community of reflective practitioners and the one of academic researchers. And this is the main reason why they are valuable documents to analyse in terms of trainees' development of both academic and research skills.

1.3. A review of selected previous studies

Foreign language teacher trainees have been the subject of many educational studies, also in Poland, where since 2009 English has become an obligatory subject in both primary and school education. Many researchers have focussed on how FL teachers develop their professional skills. The importance of developing self-reflection and autonomy in FL student teachers has been underlined by Gabrys-Barker (2012), Michońska-Stadnik (2009), Osterman and Kottkamp (2004), Wilczyńska (2009) as well as Wysocka (2003). A number of researchers have investigated factors conducive to teacher trainees' development. Czajka (2014) exploited a variety of activities that help student teachers to evaluate their teaching during so called micro-lessons. Lankiewicz (2013) observed moments of reflection-in-action during methodology classes, facilitated by the use of languaging (i.e. thinking while speaking) – an approach to conducting classes recommended by the author of the study himself and other researchers (e.g. Moate 2011; Swain 2006). Marciniak (2014), in her questionnaire study, investigated the changes in teacher trainees' reflection skills. Szymankiewicz (2013) explored changes in student teachers' personal theories by analysing students' online comments on their teaching practice.

Although many studies have explored the development of student professional skills, particularly self-reflection, not much research in Poland has focused on diploma theses that student teachers produce at the end of their education and which are undoubtedly valuable evidence of trainees' practicing both teaching and research skills. The examples of such publications are the ones by Lankiewicz (2014) and Niżegorodcew (2010, 2012). Both authors draw on their own experiences as supervisors of MA theses. Niżegorodcew (2010) discussed how her MA students developed as fresh researchers, i.e. she described the process of their being born (*in statu nascendi*) as graduates. After Green (cited in Petersen 2007) Niżegorodcew (2010, p. 237) viewed postgraduate research supervision as “a place of intense negotiation of a written product of substantial length as well as an intense negotiation of identity.” She emphasised the role of writing diploma theses in students' developing new identities as members of an academic discourse community. Niżegorodcew (2010, p. 238) concluded that: “Successful supervision should then lead to the identification of MA and Licentiate graduates as entering into the applied linguistics discourse community with a sense of membership derived from having completed a MA thesis or Licentiate project in the field. Thus, MA theses and Licentiate projects remain indispensable final elements in achieving first and second degree in academic maturity.”

In his discussion concerning developing research skills in graduate students, Lankiewicz (2013) evaluated “academicity” of Licentiate projects produced by 23 students in five higher education institutions in Poland. When analysing projects, he looked at the topics of the projects and the way they are developed in the thesis. He treated diploma projects as reflections of students' knowledge of the subject under investigation and the ability to discuss it in a critical way in the context of their project. The conclusions of his analysis are that many students lack basic academic and research skills indispensable for designing projects and presenting them in diploma papers.

All the studies discussed in this section are interesting contributions to the research investigating pre-service teacher development within the university context. The last two studies explored the role of writing MA theses in students' growth as fresh researchers. This interplay between developing teaching skills and research skills by graduate students will be the focus of the study described in the next section below.

2. THE ANALYSIS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS' RESEARCH PROJECTS

2.1 The aims of the analysis

In this section of the paper I present preliminary results of the analysis of the MA theses produced by 17 students of the Institute of English Studies at the Jagiellonian University in the academic years 2014/2015 and 2015/2016. The main aim of the analysis was to prepare a set of criteria needed for the evaluation. Drawing on the goals specified in the syllabus of the seminar (presented at the beginning of this paper), I decided to read all the theses and search for the indications of skills that could be considered research skills. I expected to look at: reflection skills, i.e. an ability to evaluate and reflect on teaching (be it one's own or other teachers'), an ability to look critically at the research, and an ability to formulate research questions and select methods appropriate for the study.

At the first stage of this investigation I looked at the topics of the projects and the research methods applied by their authors. At the further stages I was interested in how the students explained the rationale behind their projects, how they discussed the link between the theoretical principles of their project and their empirical study, whether they were aware of the limitations of their research and what conclusions they drew from the results of their study.

2.2. General information about the theses

Seventeen theses, which I supervised, were analyzed. All of them explored issues connected with teaching in the following types of school: primary school (1 thesis), junior secondary school (7 theses), senior secondary school (8 theses) and private language school (1 thesis). All the projects described in the theses were set in the context of the students' teaching practice. It is important to explain that at the Jagiellonian University, as in most higher education institutions in Poland, the teaching practice is based on a mentor system. Mentor is an experienced teacher of a primary or secondary school who acts as a teaching practice supervisor. It comes as no surprise that many of the projects analysed in this study involved cooperating with other teachers, usually those more experienced, often their teaching practice mentors. Some of the theses took the form of action research projects, which meant that the students researched their own teaching.

What did the students write about? The students were free to choose their own topics, which helped them to develop their own interests. The students focused on a wide range of issues. The most popular topics concerned teaching techniques applied in FL teaching; the students investigated the use of the following: storytelling, dictogloss, authentic materials, phonemic transcription, project work. Four graduates decided to analyse coursebooks used in schools; they evaluated their usefulness in developing Intercultural Communicative Competence, teaching pronunciation and preparing learners for external exams. Also computer technologies were popular topics; some students wrote theses about the use of CALL and MALL technologies in FL teaching. The other graduates focused on various aspects of FL teaching and learning: oral error correction, washback effect of external exams, FL speaking anxiety and the use of learning strategies. It is crucial to note that all the theses discussed the issues that reflected the reality of contemporary Polish schools. The authors drew on the experiences they had acquired during their teaching practice, the subjects of their studies were their mentors and the learners they had taught as teacher trainees.

2.3. Analysis of the thesis

To describe the process of the analysis in more detail, this paper will focus on one MA thesis, in this section named thesis A.

The focus of the thesis is homework in learning and teaching English as a FL. The author investigated the differences between students' and teachers' perceptions of homework. In the theoretical section of the thesis she discusses the following issues connected the topic of her thesis: the definition of 'homework', the history of homework as a component of school education, the purpose and the function of homework, the process of setting and checking homework and types of homework assignments. This part of the thesis ends with "the debate over homework", which presents arguments for and against homework. At the first sight it seems that the discussion is thorough and can be viewed as good theoretical background to the study described in the next section. However, the whole discussion is placed within theories concerning general pedagogy and teaching in school, with no reference to studies into teaching foreign languages. As a result, the author did not make any link between the theoretical section and her empirical study, as if the two were independent separate texts.

In the empirical study, the author applied two research methods: the questionnaire to investigate students' perceptions of homework and the interview with the teacher to explore his/her opinions. The student aimed to gather such information as: the amount of time students devote to carrying out homework, students' opinions about the value of homework, their attitudes towards the homework policy in their EFL classroom as well as students' evaluation of how their teachers set and check homework. The interview questions asked the teacher about her practices concerning preparing, setting and checking homework assignments. However, there were no questions to investigate the teacher's perceptions concerning homework, e.g. its role in FL teaching, which Student A wished to make the focus of her investigation. The choice of methods applied by the young researcher appears appropriate; they enabled the author to look at both participants of the teaching context – students and the teacher. Employing this kind of triangulation helped the student to ensure a more complete picture of the phenomenon investigated.

It is worth looking at how the author presents the analysis of the data collected in the study. Having calculated the answers obtained in the questionnaire study and the interview, the student decided to present the results by referring to all the questions from both research tools in a question after question manner. Although this kind of presentation gives the impression of being detailed and thorough, it lacks synthesis (e.g. analysing the data according to the themes corresponding to the questions) and a critical perspective, both skills expected from an academic research paper. In the section called "Conclusions" the author failed to compare and contrast the opinions of students and those of the teacher, which would be an interesting thing to do and which I think was also the aim of the study, although not stated by the author in an explicit way. This may seem a little surprising since as teaching implications the author advocates a closer cooperation between students and teachers, e.g. at the stage of planning and setting homework tasks.

To sum up, Student A embarked on an issue that was close to her own teaching experiences. It seems that she found the topic interesting and useful to investigate. The strong points of her thesis are an extensive theoretical introduction, clear research questions (making her study a manageable project), appropriate research methods and a detailed presentation of the results.

Unfortunately, the thesis has also some weak points. The discussion in the theoretical section does not include any reference to the role of homework in teaching foreign languages. This undoubtedly had an impact on the author's study and the conclusions she drew from the data. The author looked at the value of homework in teaching in general, not at its role in a FL classroom, which was the main aim of her thesis. Another aspect of the thesis which would need modification is a confusing way to operationalise the concept of perceptions. The author defines them as opinions and feelings about homework; however, in the research project she investigated teachers' practices related to homework. This weakness may be the main reason why the author was not able to present a comparative discussion of teachers' and students' "perceptions" of homework. As regards the author's ability to reflect on her study, it is clear that the student expresses a genuine understanding of the situation that

she has experienced as a learner and probably also as a teacher. However, the young researcher is not really aware of limitations of her study; the only thing that she points to is a small number of subjects, which in her opinion makes the results of her study difficult to generalise to a bigger population. In conclusion, in the MA thesis the author presents herself as a teacher of some experience with a certain degree of reflection. It is visible that the student is more interested in the subject of her thesis as a teaching problem than a research question. The analysis points to rather poor academic and research skills of the author, which makes the thesis incomplete and at certain points confusing.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented above aimed to identify skills that graduate students develop during their studies and which they demonstrate in their MA theses. The preliminary findings point to a number of skills. The most important are the abilities:

- to find materials relevant to the topic investigated, both in terms of theoretical background and empirical studies;
- to define the constructs under investigation and operationalise them in the context of the study;
- to formulate research questions which are manageable for the student in his/her teaching context;
- to select appropriate methodology;
- to present the findings of the study in a manner which would help the student to answer the research questions;
- to look critically at the study conducted and be aware of its limitations.

The analysis is not complete. More MA theses will be analysed to enrich the suggestions presented above and to prepare a set of criteria that can be applied in the evaluation of MA theses. I hope my study will provide me and other academic teachers involved in MA thesis supervision with information necessary for both teaching and evaluation practices.

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