
Empowering Teachers, Triggering Change: A Case Study of Teacher Training through Action Research

*Facilitar el cambio: un estudio de caso sobre la
utilidad del proyecto de investigación como parte
de un curso de formación de profesorado*

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Abstract: The present article sets out to validate small-scale research projects as a tool to foster the integration of theory and practice as well as the development of a reflective mindset in trainees in teacher training courses. This case study of the process followed by an experienced teacher carrying out research as part of a Master's degree in Teaching English traces the student's learning during her research process through an analysis of her interactions, both oral and written, with the thesis supervisor, as well as of the materials created for the pedagogical intervention planned and the data collection carried out as part of the action research process. This reconstruction of the trainee's developing understanding while working on her MA thesis reveals that learning does take place and is brought about by a mixture of different factors, such as the relation established between the theoretical concepts studied in the program and the actual teaching practice, the detachment brought about by the need to collect data and the interaction with the supervisor. Carrying out a research project also helps the trainee to reflect on her own practice, and thus establish a reflective mindset.

Resumen: El presente artículo se propone validar los pequeños trabajos de investigación como una herramienta para profesores en formación que promueve la integración de la teoría con la práctica docente así como un acercamiento reflexivo a esta práctica. En él se presenta un estudio de caso del proceso seguido por una docente experimentada en la elaboración de una investigación como parte de sus estudios de Máster en el ámbito de la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera. Para ello se analiza tanto su interacción oral y escrita con la directora de trabajo, como los materiales elaborados para la intervención pedagógica y la posterior recogida de datos. El análisis del proceso llevado a cabo por la estudiante nos permite concluir que la experiencia de investigación contribuye al aprendizaje del profesor en formación y le ayuda a reflexionar sobre su propia práctica docente.

Palabras clave: Formación de profesorado; enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera; enseñanza bilingüe; reflexión.

Keywords: teacher training; EFL; CLIL; reflection.

DOI: 10.15581/004.31.57-73

ESTUDIOS SOBRE EDUCACIÓN / VOL. 31 / 2016 / 57-73

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One of the challenges of any teacher training or teacher development program is to act as a catalyst of change, and thus to make sure trainees are able to incorporate what they learn in these programs into their teaching practice. As one way of meeting this challenge, and making the integration of theory into practice possible, many teacher training programs include small-scale (action) research projects as part of their training. In these small projects, teachers are encouraged to take one or several aspects of the techniques or approaches dealt with in the teacher training program, and try them out in a classroom situation, with the final aim of improving their own teaching practice (Luneberg, Ponte, & Van de Vev, 2007). Apart from providing an opportunity for linking theory with practice, an added expected learning outcome of engaging in inquiry is to foster the development of teacher reflection, and thus the creation of a reflective mindset in teachers.

However, while it is, quite logically, assumed that engaging in research will achieve these two major learning outcomes, this has not been analysed in any great detail, and, in fact, it is difficult to find any study where the actual learning potential of inquiry in teacher-training is analysed (but see Escobar Urmeneta, 2013). This is precisely what the present paper sets out to do. Analyzing the process followed by a single trainee in her final research project for a Master's Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, I will try to trace and identify instances of learning in an attempt to see to what extent engaging in research really allows trainees to integrate new ideas into their teaching practice, reflect on their own teaching, and thus make sustainable change possible. At the same time, I will try to identify instances of reflection, and identify what elements in the research process trigger this development. In this particular instance, the research project put to the test an approach to teaching English that had been presented in the Master's as an alternative to traditional, textbook-based EFL teaching, specifically addressing the needs of young learners in a bilingual or CLIL project.

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHER TRAINING

As Wright (2010, p. 264) in his state-of-the art article about second language teacher education points out, ever since the development of Applied Linguistics as the scientific discipline shaping teacher education programs, the gap between theory and practice in these programs has been a major challenge to their effectiveness. While as a result of social-constructivist theories becoming more influential in general education, the trainee teacher is no longer seen as a "passive recipient of received knowledge" (Crandall 2000, p. 35), and it is accepted that "[l]earning to

teach is a long-term, complex developmental process that operates through participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching” (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 402), this does not yet say anything about where exactly theoretical insights come into this process.

The second important requirement for teacher education programs is for them to contribute to developing a reflective mindset in practitioners, understood as the “acquisition of a critical stance or attitude towards one’s own practice and that of one’s peers” (Johnston & Badley 1996, p. 4). Leitch & Day (2000) point out that there are three reasons why this reflective mindset is so important in teacher education. On the one hand, having developed this kind of attitude allows teachers to question their assumptions, so as to make change –if and when necessary– possible. Secondly, engaging in reflection also leads to greater self-awareness and self-knowledge. And finally,

reflective practice is considered to be central to the growth of teachers as inquirers who engage in collaborative research with others from inside and outside the school in generating knowledge of practice rather than finding themselves as objects whose role is to implement existing theory in practice. (Leitch & Day, 2000, p. 183)

Many authors suggest that precisely engaging trainees in small-scale research projects is a powerful way of meeting these two requirements of teacher education, since “[t]he power of CAR [collaborative action research] rests with the ongoing nature of professional development that is situated within real classrooms with teachers confronting real problems.” It allows teachers “[to] draw upon what they knew theoretically from their studies and to apply that knowledge to the problem at hand” (Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2008, p. 346).

However, Zeichner (2009, p. 34) points out that although “many claims have been made about the benefits of teachers engaging in research about their own practices”, these claims are not unproblematic, as they are not supported by systematic research or accompanied by sufficiently detailed descriptions of the context in which the action research took place. The few studies there are analyse factors such as trainees’ perception of the usefulness of their projects (Maaranen & Krokfors, 2008), their self-reports (Escobar Urmeneta, 2013), or the external conditions in which the research project was carried out or its impact on the actors (teachers and students) (Zeichner, 2009, p. 34). It seems as if it was a given that engaging in research will help students learn to inform their practice with theoretical insights or engage in reflection on their teaching practice. And yet, “[j]ust as teachers are

expected to engage actively in their own teaching and to think critically about their practice, teacher educators should also be expected to take up a role not only as scholars of education, but also as inquirers into practice, including their own” (Hui & Grossman, 2008, p. 1).

THE STUDY

The trainee this study focusses on, called Esther for the purposes of this article, was a student in a Master’s in teaching English as a Foreign Language from the University of Alcalá (Madrid, Spain). This post-graduate program is mainly aimed at practising teachers who tend to do it as a part-time study over two years, combining it with their work as teachers. Esther was in her forties and had around 15 years of experience teaching English in primary school. For the past three years she had been teaching both English and Science (in English) to students in a bilingual school, also being in charge of the introduction of the bilingual project there. Hers was a middle-sized charter school in a village north of Madrid, where English was the language of teaching for around 40% of the school-day. In the Spanish context, where this research took place, CLIL programs at the primary school level are becoming fairly widespread, so that publishers have adapted their teaching materials, both for English and for the content subjects, to the characteristics of this kind of teaching. Esther had been using these materials with a great deal of success with her students, but was worried about their preparation for dealing with the more complex language-demands of content subjects at secondary level.

As part of the Master’s degree, trainees are required to do a small-scale research project focusing on a specific aspect of their teaching they’d like to improve. To support this first attempt at carrying out a formal research project, trainees are assigned a supervisor, with whom they can discuss any questions related to the research design, data collection, etc. At the same time, it is part of the supervisor’s task to guide trainees’ reflections, normally by reading and commenting on various drafts of the final report. Trainees can either choose a topic and then be assigned a supervisor who specializes in this area of teaching, or request to work with a specific supervisor, which was the case in this specific instance.

When Esther first approached me asking me to supervise her work, I suggested to her that she should put to the test an approach to teaching English that I was at the time developing to meet the specific requirements of students who are exposed to the foreign language for a significant part of their teaching hours (no less than 30%) and who have a real communicative need to use this language, since this is the language they learn other subjects in. This new approach was part of the

contents of an introductory module I taught in the Master's program, although, not having taken this part of the subject, Esther first heard about this approach during the process of trying to find a topic for her research project.

THE LITERACY APPROACH

In the context of bilingual education, students' approach to the foreign language changes. Not only are they exposed to much more input in the language, thus presumably learning it faster, but the process they go through presents a mixture of learning and acquisition, since in many subjects, and for a large part of the school day, the foreign language is used as a tool for communication. However, this change is not necessarily reflected in the way language teaching is organized, at least in Spanish primary schools. In a context in which language teaching is heavily focused on studying the language, with the corresponding primacy of grammar and vocabulary over communication (Cerezo García, 2007; Morata & Coyle, 2012; Roldán Tapia, 2009), adapting to the new communicative situation in bilingual schools is proving quite a challenge (Halbach, 2014).

As a response to this situation, an approach is being developed that puts literacy development of students in bilingual projects at the centre of foreign language teaching. The starting point for this is the recognition that the development of what Shanahan & Shanahan (2008) call *intermediate literacy*, and on which the development of the more specialized *disciplinary literacy* is based, needs to be the focus of all language subjects in the curriculum, regardless of whether we are talking about mother-tongue teaching or foreign language teaching. This has the added advantage of providing FL teaching with actual content, rather than having to rely on topic-based textbooks that often are perceived as lacking both relevance and interest.

With this heavy focus on literacy, the proposed approach starts the planning sequence by defining the type of text (oral or written) that students will produce at the end of the unit, thus applying the principle of backward planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). Once this final goal has been established, the rest of the unit is designed to enable learners to meet it by working on existing texts, developing the necessary awareness of important text features and writer's strategies, and by providing them with the language necessary for their production. Important features of this teaching are, among others, the focus on text, the space granted to creativity and collaboration, and the fact that language is worked on in context. Creating a unit of work based on this approach, and putting it into practice with a 3rd year primary group was, then, the object of Esther's research project, and her

way of looking for means to improve her already very successful teaching. Esther was able to evaluate the impact of this new approach to teaching English by using a quasi-experimental design, with an experimental group being taught through the new approach and a control group that learnt the same contents through the usual textbook-based unit of work. The students' learning, motivation and involvement in both groups were compared, and the teachers' perceptions of the process analysed.

THE DESIGN OF THIS STUDY

The present study traces Esther's development during her research project with the aim of finding out whether exercises of this kind, which are often found in teacher training courses, actually lead to development in the trainee. More specifically, through this study I intend to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there any evidence of trainee learning during the process of planning, executing and writing a report about their action research projects?
2. What triggers this learning?
3. Is this learning in any way related to the contents of the teacher training course
4. Is this learning likely to have an impact on the trainee's future teaching practice?

DATA COLLECTION

In order to answer these questions, I collected all the information available about the research process and Esther's reaction to it. More precisely, I collected and analysed the following:

- Notes after the initial face-to-face meeting.
- Around 40 e-mail exchanges, which range from simple acknowledgements of receipt of corrections to reports on difficulties or discussions of methodological questions.
- Corrections and comments to the various drafts of the report (four in total, with an average of 30 comments each, apart from two versions of the unit plan and two versions of a preliminary report on the outcome of the pedagogic intervention, each with a considerable number of comments).
- An audio-recording of the presentation of the project. This recording was

listened to several times, and relevant parts were transcribed to allow for analysis.

These data were analysed by using a colour-coding and key-word method. The different written texts were read several times looking for instances where learning became visible either because the student herself points it out, because a change in the understanding of the concept becomes visible, or because a certain concept is mentioned that is likely to come from one of the subjects in the Master's the student had been studying. By double-checking with the teachers in the program it was possible to ascertain that the concepts were actually part of the contents of the courses. Different instances of learning from the various data sets were first colour-coded, and then set side by side in chronological order so as to trace the development of the student's understanding of a given concept or idea over time. Finally, a first version of the description of the trainees' learning was sent to the student herself to allow her to comment upon and correct it, which she did by adding information and pointing out instances where a given concept appears, which I had overseen.

DATA ANALYSIS

While many of the comments made in the process of reviewing the various versions of the Master's thesis as well as much of what went into the e-mails is related to the process of drafting the actual thesis, i.e. to the process of finding her voice as a researcher, the analysis of the data also revealed several pedagogic issues that reflect Esther's learning. These insights will be described in the next paragraphs, trying to trace their development during the process of carrying out and describing the pedagogic intervention¹.

The one topic that appears throughout the process followed by Esther once and again, is related to the usefulness of the textbook. Once the student had decided that she would try to implement what we called a "literacy approach to teaching English" as an alternative to using an EFL textbook, she expressed her doubts about her choice by pointing out to me during our first meeting that she had found the perfect textbook, and was not sure there was anything to improve. In fact, she mentioned that the textbook already included work on literacy development, since

1 Excerpts from Esther's comments, questions and writing are quoted in the data analysis section. The sources of the quotes appear in brackets at the end each of the excerpts. The quotes are not edited in any way.

each unit contained a page labelled “Literacy”. Yet, already after the first week working with the literacy unit, in the update she sent me over the e-mail, Esther had completely changed her opinion: “I don’t want to use textbooks anymore!” (UOP).

This rather sudden change of opinion is classified by the student herself as the most important lesson this experience taught her:

I thought that the book was great [...] After working with all this, I think that the books are not as great as I thought. [...] But you have to be in a different part and have a different view, so I will probably have to use these books again and again, but now I know they are not perfect as I thought. Very useful for teachers, you are in your comfort zone, but they are not as perfect as I thought and I’ll do my best next year to use them in a different way. (TD)²

There are several reasons for this change of opinion. On the one hand, Esther expresses her frustration with the stories used in EFL textbooks, as opposed to those that appear in textbooks used in mother-tongue teaching in Spain or the UK, since the latter are real stories with real characters. Furthermore, she complains that publishers claim that the stories are the unifying factors of the units of the textbook and that all the contents are related to these stories, but this is not true:

And I’ll give you just one example. For example, in every unit you have the phonics³. [...] But in this book, the phonics are never ever related with the story. They don’t use the story to say well now we are going to learn the difference between the x sound and the y sound, for example. So the blocks are NOT related to the story. It’s not true. (TD)

However, more importantly than this, the student becomes aware of the difference between a textbook unit and her own literacy unit when it comes to producing language, as she observes that

they [textbooks] don’t allow the mistakes, they cover the mistakes, because they don’t have space for writing [...] All the exercises are so guided and they don’t have room for expanding the way they [students] want to express. If you

2 Here the student is responding to my question during her presentation of the thesis asking her to state what the most important learning had been.

3 The student is referring to the pronunciation practice here, more than an actual phonics section.

give them freedom they use it and then you as the teacher can see oh, that's their real level, that's the real problem. (TD)

Students' final production in the form of a writing is, as becomes clear in the quote above, another aspect where learning occurs. First of all, Esther notes that the students' performance is much weaker than she had foreseen, which initially leads to a certain degree of frustration: "The only negative thing was the writing" (TD).

However, if we analyse her comments further, we also find that she values this difficulty, which initially resulted in a certain degree of disappointment, as helping her to appraise her students' level more clearly (OR and TD), a diagnosis she thought it wasn't necessary to do. She even comments, with a certain degree of irony, that her students' rather negative perception of writing in English is more insightful than her own perception of students' difficulties in this skill: "It is revealing how the students are aware of their learning weaknesses even before the teachers" (RR4).

As was mentioned above, her students' mistakes in writing lead Esther to question the quality and usefulness of the production exercises in her textbook, as she finds that they don't leave room for students' creativity, and thus cover up their problems with the language. This is especially relevant in the context of bilingual education, where students learn content subjects in a foreign language, and will increasingly be required to produce longer texts in their content subjects. This is pointed out by Esther in the defence of her thesis: "students need a good language level in order to write the description of a process in natural sciences [...] Now is the moment to really set a good base" (TD).

Even though initially Esther expresses her frustration at seeing the problems students have in writing, she also learns from these student difficulties that her own planning could have been more successful had she scaffolded students' production more effectively: "Open answers generate more mistakes. Besides, I believe that I did not provide enough scaffolding: more examples, modelled answers..." (OR).

The notion of scaffolding is one that the Master's students struggle with during the course, but at this stage Esther seems to have developed a good notion of its meaning, along with a clear idea of its importance and how to actually make it happen. We can therefore quite safely assume that this is an instance of learning triggered by courses in the Master's, but then materialized through the process of reflection carried out by the student in her research project. Incidentally, right at the beginning of the research process I had pointed out the need to scaffold students' production, but Esther did not pick up on this until after teaching her unit and analysing her students' writings.

The very introduction of a writing task at the end of the unit of work constitutes another instance where learning becomes visible, in this case probably triggered by my feedback on the first draft of the unit of work. Although the proposed planning model for a literacy approach includes an extended production exercise as the last step in the unit of work that brings all the learning together, and in our first e-mail exchange about the literacy approach I had explicitly mentioned this as an essential part in the learning cycle, the first unit draft did not include a production exercise. When this was pointed out to her, Esther reacted very positively and agreed to include a production exercise at the end. Interestingly, when she presented her thesis, the trainee mentioned “backward planning”, i.e. starting the planning with a decision about the kind of production students will be asked for, as an essential step in the creation of a unit of work, thus giving the impression that this has now become part of her understanding of the way literacy teaching should be organized and planned.

Apart from textbooks, the mistakes resulting from setting a more open-ended task, the need to scaffold production and to include a production exercise at the end of the unit, the area of general planning is another one that needs to be looked at to find instances of learning. In this case, although the model proposed to the student was based on the idea that the teacher takes the students’ final production as a starting point for the process of planning, and that the input as well as the tasks are geared towards preparing the students for this final production, this is not something that translated easily into Esther’s unit planning. In fact, the starting point of her unit plan is grammatical, with the objectives being related to the practice of adjectives and their gradation as well as the introduction of the use of adverbs. True enough, this is what the syllabus required, and since part of the research project was based on the comparison of the learning outcomes in two groups, one taught using the literacy approach and one following the textbook unit, Esther didn’t have much room for innovation here. However, the very fact that she did not include a final production exercise in the first draft of her unit also indicates how strong the notion is that language learning needs to be organized around grammar points. This does not seem to change during the course of the research project, as in the presentation of her thesis Esther’s description of the unit of work starts precisely by outlining the grammatical objectives of the lesson.

There is a further insight related to grammar teaching, when Esther notices that one of the objectives she had set for the unit was irrelevant:

The last linguistic objective is related to the use of the past tense in the story. I must say that the students did not struggle at any moment with the verbs

tenses or other forms such as futures or modals. They infer the meaning and they were not blocked in terms of understanding. (OR)

However, although she clearly recognizes that students had already mastered this grammatical component, probably because of the home-reading program they were participating in, this does not lead her to question the role of grammar as the starting point of unit planning nor the need for explicit grammar teaching. Assumptions about the importance of grammar teaching run deep in the Spanish tradition, and it seems that this is something that cannot be modified easily.

The results of this grammar instruction offer a further opportunity for learning as Esther is able to compare the outcomes of different types of grammar instruction and is surprised by their results:

Considering the linguistic objectives, there is something unexpected in the results. The gradation in adjectives had been studied in the previous unit following the usual resources (textbooks, exercises, etcetera). In the literacy unit, the students had to apply their previous knowledge and they had a considerable number of mistakes both in oral or written exercises. On the contrary, the adverbs as a concept were introduced in the present unit for the very first time and the students used them in context correctly in most of the cases. They integrated some of the target words into their oral language and the written exercises were correct in a very high percentage. Maybe the fact that adverbs were presented in context made them easier to learn and incorporate into the students' active repertoire. They connected, and they still do three months later, the adverbs to the story, for instance, "suddenly" is associated with the sentence "Suddenly, he was gone" when one of the children in the book disappeared in the chocolate river. [...] The learning was meaningful, thus it lasts. (RR4)

Granted, it could be argued that in one instance we are dealing with grammar learning, while adverbs could be classified as lexis, but nevertheless there is something Esther learns that is applicable to both grammar and lexis: learning that is contextualized in a story that children like is meaningful, and therefore memorable. This fact was quite probably mentioned more than once during her studies, but it only seems to come alive once Esther has been able to observe its impact in her teaching. If not, why else would she classify the results of the unit as "unexpected" in this respect?

Another aspect where learning becomes visible, and in this instance can be traced back to a specific course in the Master's, is Esther's attempt to vary the types

of groupings she uses in class. From the very first draft, she tries to include “different grouping activities, different ways of interacting with the text, with me, in groups, with the language assistant” (TD), and describes this as being hard. The explicit mention of this aspect and Esther’s evaluation of the difficulty seems to point towards an aspect of teaching that she paid deliberate attention to, but that didn’t come naturally, probably because it is not part of her regular teaching, or at least not something she usually pays attention to, since it is a given in the textbook. However, this deliberate attention to different types of working arrangements had an unexpected effect on students on both ends of the performance continuum, the weaker students as well as the more advanced, since Esther mentions in her oral presentation of the project that “the way I designed the activities there were a lot of pair working and small grouping working, and I think that for them it’s perfect. [...] so the children with special needs would benefit from the approach” (TD).

She also mentions this positive effect of working in groups, as in her final report, Esther writes

they [the students] worked better in small groups or pairs. This is beneficial also for the Special Needs (SNs) students who were helped mainly by their partners and in some cases, by the LA. In the literacy unit, the Think-Pair-Share technique was used (see Alzina, 2010) and it improved the oral production outcome especially for the students with difficulties. (FR)

While group- and pairwork has the potential to foster collaborative learning, and thus to allow weaker students to get more support, the very fact that the literacy unit is geared towards relatively free production could also be beneficial for the other students in that each of them would have the possibility of performing at his/her level. However, this is never mentioned by Esther, so probably not perceived as an added advantage of this approach.

Another area of change that took Esther by surprise was the effect the literacy unit had on the language assistant:

The LA is very happy working with this approach. She feels comfortable with it as she said that’s the way they learn in England. She loves the story. She knows Dahl’s books much better than anyone else in the school. Just a little detail, last week she was unexpectedly free from a couple of classes and she popped up asking if she can stay with us during the lesson as she really enjoys it. Incredible, isn’t it? (UOP)

Language assistants play an important part in bilingual schools, but their role is not always well-defined and expectations about their implication vary between teachers and language assistants themselves (Buckingham, 2015). In the practice this often amounts to a certain feeling of frustration on both sides, so that language assistants frequently find it difficult to relate to, or get involved in, teaching. This instance of higher involvement, and even voluntary work, therefore constitutes a welcome change. This greater engagement also allows the language assistant to provide more support to students who most need it:

The way that the language assistant was involved was key for them. Because she is very nice, and she does a proper job, but with this she was absolutely engaged, so she was there helping me, sitting down with them and adding things all the time, so I think it's good. (TD)

The fact that this unit of work included a great degree of group- and pair-work made this greater implication of the language assistant possible. Thus, the dynamics created with the students in this unit of work allowed the trainee to discover other ways in which the language assistant can get involved in teaching and is able to make use of her own cultural background.

Finally, Esther herself states that “I have learnt very valuable things by doing this [research project] and I have enjoyed it too” (LE), and makes it clear that she considers this learning relevant for her future teaching practice as “I hope that I can keep on working on the approach” (LE).

In the presentation of the project she reiterates this by summarizing her learning, and future application of it, as follows:

Using a literacy approach is time-consuming; for creative teachers is perfect. In the future we can introduce it gradually, maybe a unit a term, that would be perfect. Reducing the number of units, instead of having 9 units, having 6, but one of them a literacy unit. (TD)

This learning, as can be seen, is referred to in terms of the new approach to teaching she had learnt in the Master's, but no mention was made of specific aspects of teaching that Esther has revised and is now going to change in her current teaching approach. Nevertheless, even though it seems that the possibility for change is limited to embracing a literacy approach to teaching English, Esther mentions in her defence that since her faith in textbooks had been challenged, in the future she would use them in a different way.

DISCUSSION

What exactly brought about the learning described in the preceding paragraphs is rather difficult to pin down, since it needs to be seen as a “multi-layered phenomenon” (Maaranen & Krokfors, 2008, p. 221). On the one hand, the contents of the Master’s become visible in the attention paid by Esther to certain aspects in her planning, most prominently the need to vary student interaction patterns during classes. This aspect of teaching constitutes one of Esther’s main concerns from the very beginning of the planning process. Other issues mentioned in the course, however, translate into Esther’s practice with greater difficulty. This is the case of the notion of scaffolding, the idea of backward planning and the need to include a production exercise as the final outcome of the unit, as well as the need to make learning meaningful. In these cases it was the reflection on the outcomes of the unit of work, sometimes in combination with comments from me as the supervisor, that triggered the learning. Some of the insights (role of the language assistant, suitability of the approach for mixed ability classes) are a direct result of the classroom observation and reflection brought about by the research process itself, thus showing that engaging in a process of this kind through a small-scale research project has its effect on creating the reflective mindset teacher-training strives to foster. Other theoretical concepts, such as the fact that language learning does not necessarily revolve around grammatical topics, do not translate into the trainee’s practice at all.

On the other hand, the very process of having to collect data, analyse them and write a research report implies that students have to reflect on their teaching practice. The fact that the trainee needs to voice these observations and is able to use the supervisor as a sounding board, is quite likely to make the reflection even more relevant and useful (Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2008, p. 345). Otherwise, trainees may run the risk of being caught up in their observations, and possibly not seeing the wood for the trees. The degree to which the supervisor needs to direct the trainee’s attention towards certain characteristics of what he/she has observed, or provide straightforward answers, is something that cannot be answered here (Zeichner, 2009, p. 35).

While interaction with a trainer is typical of other aspects of teacher training courses too, the fact that in research projects the focus lies on the trainee’s actual teaching practice and is accompanied by critical observation and reflection on the trainee’s side, quite probably contributes to making it more meaningful. Furthermore, unlike other trainer-trainee exchanges about the trainee’s teaching practice, in the case of a research project the focus is not on the quality of teaching so much,

but rather on the structure of the research project, its different phases, and what the project is revealing to both, the trainee and the trainer, about the trainee's practice. This may be beneficial since it takes away some of the pressure the trainee may feel in situations of lesson observation by the trainer.

Finally, just how sustainable both the change in her teaching practice and the development of a habit to reflect on it are, cannot be answered here. This would need a more longitudinal study, even though the fact that the trainee herself thinks about the impact the research project will have on her teaching practice is encouraging.

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, then, after analyzing Esther's process in carrying out her research project, it can be said that small-scale research projects of the kind that often are part of teacher-training courses, especially at postgraduate level, do have the potential to contribute to trainees' learning. The extent to which they do so will depend, of course, on many factors that have not been taken into account here, such as the relevance of the contents of the teacher training program to the actual teaching situation in which the research project takes place, the quality of the teacher training, the personality of both trainee and trainer, the communication between them, etc. Nevertheless, the fact that the trainee has time and opportunity to look at his or her teaching practice through the eyes of a researcher, and with the help of a supervisor, is likely to also lead to the development of the skills of observation and reflection. More studies are needed to provide guidelines for effective learning through small-scale research projects, but it is hoped that this study may constitute a first step towards moving beyond intuition in ascertaining the learning value of this kind of activity in teacher training.

Date of receipt: 29 September 2015

Date of acceptance: 31 July 2016

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