A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE IMPACT OF RESEARCHING CHILDREN ON MY OWN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

When teachers engage in personal self-reflection, they can recall previous experiences of self-discovery which help them to become more aware of how they got to where they are at the present, and acknowledge what they have accomplished over their career (Farell 2007). In this paper, through self-reflection, I try to illustrate the impact of doing research with children on my developing understanding of teaching young learners.

Before coming to England for my MA degree, I used to teach English in Iran. English is a foreign language in Iran, often used for non-native interactions. This foreign language is not part of the school curriculum until the first year of middle school (age 11). However, the vast majority of students learn English as an extracurricular subject in private schools or English language institutes from pre-school levels (Rashidi & Najafi 2010). During the eight years of teaching English in both primary schools and English language institutes, I gained experience in teaching various age groups, particularly young learners. Since I only started my academic education in ELT after moving to England, I learnt how to teach mainly through class observation, and reflection on my own experiences.

Since in the world today, intercultural competence should be an indispensable part of any language learning (Bennett 2009), as a part of my MA research, I aimed to explore children's perception of intercultural competence and adaptation process. To this end, I decided to carry out research with children in year six of a primary school in England. I collected data via the distribution of questionnaires to the whole class and later through a follow-up group interview with four of the child participants. The experience of using participatory techniques to engage with children, led me to recognize some pedagogical implications of the participatory activities for English language classrooms. According to O'Kane (2008: 138), participatory activities are activities "which enable children and young people to talk about the sorts of issues that affect them". In this paper, I explore the process of the follow-up interview which was accompanied with some participatory activities in more detail, and illustrate the pedagogical implication of the use of participatory techniques.

Self-reflection

In searching for appropriate methods of doing research with children, I came across the concept of the 'social child'. This approach explains that "children are not pathological or incomplete, they form a group, a body of social actors, and as citizens they have needs and rights" (James et al. 1998: 32). In the 1970s a new theoretical model of childhood, 'sociological child' was introduced in the area of sociology. What is novel about this approach is the persistence of making childhood itself the centre of the attention, rather than seeing it as a subcategory of other topics. James et al. (1998) introduced four model of childhood: the developing child, the tribal child, the adult child and the social child. In the first two constructions, children are assumed to be incapable of having the same status as adult, whereas, the 'adult child' and 'social child' do have this capacity. The 'adult child' is seen as socially competent as adults; whereas in the 'social child' model, the differences between young and older human beings have been accepted. In this model, children are seen as individuals having different social competencies, but not inferior to adults (James et al. 1998).

In retrospect, I can say that learning to view child participants as 'social children' was the turning point in my professional life as a teacher-researcher. Having come across this new approach to children, I was encouraged to examine the values and beliefs that supported my perception about teaching young learners during the eight years of my experience. Although I always tried to create an interactive environment in my classes, when I examine episodes from my past, I can clearly see an existing gap between my optimal perceptions of teaching and my actual teaching situations. In this regard, the research conducted by Pennington et al. (1997) about the Asia-Pacific teachers also revealed the existence of the similar gap between teachers' perception and their real teaching situations (cited in Farell 2007).

The institutional expectation, educational curriculum and society are factors which strongly influence teachers' beliefs and values, and consequently their teaching practices. The educational system in Iran dictates to the teacher to just teach to the test, focus on appropriate material, maintain their authority through keeping their distance with the students, and not let them express themselves before giving them permission (Sadeghi & Ketabi 2009). This kind of approach to the classroom environment 'elicits traditionalism where the teacher knows all and the student does not know anything' (Freire 1985: 177). In retrospect, I cannot deny the fact that I was not an exception to this practice, and my perspective towards learners was also influenced by the dominant educational discourse.

For my research, an attempt to conceptualise children as social beings, I used participatory techniques within the context of focus group interview as one of the research methods in my study to create a suitable context for children to participate in a fun and meaningful way. With regard to the process of group interviews, Dörnyei (2007) suggests that the interviewer stays in the background and plays the role of 'moderator'. Bearing this in mind, I tried to be more of a facilitator during this phase of the research, which was a very different role from what I used to do as a teacher. Although being a teacher and a researcher carry different responsibilities, as a teacher-researcher, I believe that doing this research has positively affected my teaching style. On reflection, I strongly believe that the two main participatory activities which were used in the group interview with the four child participants can also be used in English language classrooms. These activities were the 'Diamond Ranking Activity' (O'Kane 2008), and 'Suggestions for a Newcomer'. In the following sections, these two activities will be described in more detail and the link between these activities and my suggestions for classroom practices will be suggested.

Diamond Ranking Activity

This activity aimed to explore children's viewpoint about the most helpful factors in managing the transition to a new sociocultural environment. In order to explain such a complex concept to the children and learn more about their opinion in this regard, the participatory techniques were used in a form of 'Diamond Ranking Activity' (O'Kane 2008). In this activity 10 important factors regarding the adaptation process where selected, mainly from the findings of the questionnaires. These ten items where: *Knowing the*

language, knowing about the new place, knowing someone there, being with your family, being a good student, being friendly and having a big smile, being good at games, having friendly neighbours and classmates, having a pet, having an invisibility cloak. Each sentence was written on a separate post-it; one diamond shape cardboard was also given to each group. 9 boxes were allocated on each diamond to place the post-its, with 'the most helpful' at the top, the 'least helpful' at the bottom, and one extra post-it for the item which was assumed unnecessary (see Figure 1).

You are going to live in a country for a year, which one of these things can help you fit in easier? Please Rank these ideas.
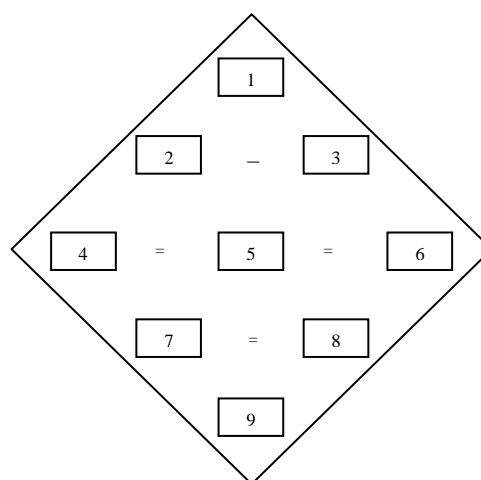

Figure 1: Diamond ranking: the overall format of the instrument

2 pairs of children were invited to work together and decide where to put the 10 statements based on how helpful they could be. Once they had reached consensus on placement of the post-its, the two groups were asked to compare their work and bring reasoning for their decisions. During this activity, children expressed themselves freely, generated plenty of ideas, and provided excellent reasoning for their decisions. Children's active participation surprised me; consequently, I started thinking about why this was the case and how this could be used for future teaching practice or research with children.

Regarding the pedagogical implication of this activity, collaboration is an essential part of any educational system, and regrettably, is a very unfamiliar concept in the Iranian educational system; that is why I strongly recommend this activity in English language learning classrooms in Iran and other similar contexts, to encourage collaboration and discussion amongst young learners. Moreover, the variety of answers that each group can provide persuades learners to

engage in discussion. For instance, in this activity, the two groups had different opinion about the level of the importance of 'having a pet' and 'being good at games'. Girls believed that having a pet could help them more than being good at games, whereas boys had different opinion. The extract below illustrates the discussion around this issue:

> Sally: we thought… we thought having a pet would help you if you don't know the language, and you didn't have any friends you can talk to it
>
> Ollie: I don't find that helpful
>
> Ben: yeah if you're trying to make friends not like really talk for ages about it to your pet
>
> Sally: Uuh
>
> Ben: but being good at games can gain you respect
>
> Sally: I think, I think… being good at games em. doesn't really matter, because people should like you …not for what you could have but for what you are and who you are and your personality.

Since participatory activities reduce the power imbalance between the teachers and young learners, teachers can also adopt this activity to encourage collaboration and discussion amongst the students. On the other hand, this study can have some methodological implication for teachers who aim to do research with children. The diamond ranking activity is a suitable method to explore other issues with children, either for research or in order to understand children's views and opinions about something. For instance, to explore children's opinions about tests, group works, materials, or different teaching styles.

In respect to group discussion, Lewis (1992) mentions that child participants feel more comfortable expressing their opinions and sharing their experiences in a group; for this reason group work in language classrooms may reduce the level of language learning anxiety amongst the learners. Furthermore, in this activity, there is no right and wrong answer which reduces the pressures on the learners. More importantly, in these types of activities, the role of the teacher can be reduced to a moderator who is mainly at the background; consequently learners can freely express themselves without having the feeling of being evaluated. It should be noted that in educational contexts like Iran, where students are not used to collaboration and group work in the classroom environment, some initial preparation is necessary to familiarize learners with the basic principles of doing group activities. In such cases, teachers are first advised to introduce the advantages of group work and help students to develop their skills in doing team work.

Suggestions for a Newcomer

Since children may participate in one type of activity better than the other, I decided to engage the participants of my study in the "Suggestions for a Newcomer" activity in addition to the 'Diamond Ranking'. Moreover, when obtaining data from more than one type of activity, the information maybe triangulated and may result in more reliable findings. Hence, this activity was also designed to explore children' opinions about the adaptation process, this time from the viewpoint of the host students. In other words, I aimed to discover the suggestions that participants would have for a newcomer to their educational environment. To this end, I tried to encourage them to express their opinion by participating in this group activity. Children were asked to provide 10 statements, suggesting to a newcomer how to behave to fit in better. The statements were written on post-its under the two categories of SHOULD and SHOULD NOT, and 5 recommendations in each category. After two groups finished this task, they were asked to comment on each others' recommendation, and also justify their own decisions. Children's active participation and engagement in discussion regarding the answers they provided for this activity convinced me that this activity could also be adopted as a classroom activity to encourage discussion. In this activity children needed to produce 10 sentences, whereas in the previous activity, they already had 10 prepared statements to work with; therefore, children's level of language proficiency should be considered when conducting this activity. Furthermore, the findings of this activity revealed that participants tried to convey the same message under the both categories of SHOULD and SHOULD NOT (see Figure 2).

SHOULD...	SHOULD NOT...
[should] always smile and look friendly.	[should not] be bossy or angry all the time.
[should] be yourself.	[should not] try and change your likes and dislikes just so you fit in.
[should] be open to new ideas and other people.	[should not] be defendant.

Figure 2: Sample sentences produced in 'Suggestion for a Newcomer Activity'

These findings suggest that this activity can be also adopted as a grammar exercise introducing production of negative sentences. Although participants in this activity were native speakers of

English, I believe with some modification this activity can help learners to practice the use of the negative form of the sentences. The figure below shows some example activities.

SHOULD	SHOULD NOT
He should speak English.	He should not speak French.
She should smile.	She should not frown.

Figure 3: Example Activities

First, students produce their answers individually, and then check them in pairs. Then groups compare their answers with each other, and justify their choices. Some of the sentences may have more than one correct answer which can stimulate discussion. Similar to the previous activity the teacher can act as a moderator, and provide more space for the learners to justify their answers.

Conclusion

Referring to Farrell's (2007) statement at the beginning of this paper about the positive effect of self-reflection on teachers' professional life, there are a number of issues that have emerged from my personal reflection. First, adapting a new perspective on children as social beings changed my viewpoint and consequently my practice as a researcher-teacher who works with young learners. Now, I believe young learners are capable of expressing their feeling and opinion if appropriate methods are used in teaching them or conducting research with them. Second, by reflecting on the methodology I used in conducting my MA research, the idea of using participatory techniques in language learning classroom arose. Finally, the findings of my MA research highlighted the advantages of developing intercultural competence amongst young learners (Zandian 2011), which can become one of the objectives of English language classrooms, particularly in educational contexts like Iran where there has been less emphasis on issues such as intercultural awareness.

In conclusion, my experience as a teacher-researcher suggests that English language teachers can also employ some of the participatory techniques in their classrooms. In general, participatory techniques as well as group discussion are methodologies which redress the imbalance of power relation between the adult researcher and young participants. The use of the participatory techniques also helps to explain the purpose of the research (O'Kane 2008). Due to the fact that participatory techniques lay much emphasis on the power of visual impression and active representation of ideas, they are suitable for children with limited linguistic competence. These techniques are also highly structured in time and space, and can be modified to work with different age groups (O'Kane 2008). 'Diamond Ranking' and 'Suggestions for a Newcomer' activities which were introduced in this paper can both be used in English language classrooms, mainly to encourage discussion amongst young learners. Minimizing the power imbalance between the teacher and young learners reduces the pressure on children, and also encourages them to express themselves. The structured nature of these types of activities is also suitable for the limited space and time of the language classrooms. These types of activities also encourage collaboration and group work which is an indispensable part of any educational system.

In addition, regarding the issue of intercultural competence which was the original purpose of my research, the participants of my research were familiar with the concept of intercultural interactions since they have been educated in England and in a school which welcomed newcomers on a regular basis. In educational systems like Iran, where there has been less attention to intercultural awareness amongst students, language teachers can create a meaningful link between language learning and intercultural development. Activities which provide intercultural awareness (e.g. Diamond Ranking and Suggestion for a Newcomer) can provide the opportunity for learners to develop their intercultural competence. Therefore, young learners can also benefit from practising similar activities which aim to promote intercultural awareness in a child-friendly format.

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