

## An inquiring light: reflection and reconstruction in English language teacher education

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### Abstract

This paper describes the evaluation of the Practicum on a post-graduate English Language Teacher education program in Lebanon. The current trend in such courses favors metacognitive awareness of classroom decision making over skills based models (Slaouti and Motteram, 2006; Farrell, 2007; Edge, 2010), exemplified in the promotion of reflective teaching. In the Practicum, student-teachers engage in a process of (re)constructing practice through reflecting on actual experience and their teaching knowledge base (Graves, 2009). Reflection is carried through as if shining an inquiring light on classroom practice. The student-teachers are encouraged to describe events, uncover their reasoning and articulate the theoretical bases for decisions. Portfolios of lesson narratives, diaries, critical incident reports, and the like, are analyzed for evidence of reflective writing (Kocoglu et al, 2008), awareness of the knowledge base and teacher education outcomes (Harland and Kinder, 1997). This framework is used to interpret the evidence and evaluate the Practicum.

**Keywords:** reflection; teacher-education; evaluation; practicum; knowledge base

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### 1. Introduction

This paper reports on my efforts to evaluate the Practicum course I taught as part of a Masters of Arts (MA) program for English language teachers in Lebanon. The approach is influenced by the idea that, “the quality of teacher development practices should be evaluated with reference to the criterial attributes that make it reflective” (Viera & Marques, 2002, p. 2). Evaluation, in this view, is based on the belief that reflection is a core skill and that by defining reflection, we can identify the criteria against which teacher development practices are compared. Contextual information is followed by details of the Practicum and the participants on the course. Literature on developing reflective practice skills in teaching is reviewed and set in the larger context of evaluation. The rest of the paper reports on evaluating the impact of the Practicum course through studying participants’ reflective writings contained in their course portfolios.

#### 1.1. Context

The MA in English Language Teaching (ELT) is taught over two years at a medium-sized university in Lebanon. It aims to provide student-teachers with the knowledge and skills to cope with a complex variety of teaching situations. Lebanon is a country where the national curriculum is increasingly delivered in English and private education caters to 65% of the country’s children, (Zacharia, 2010). Teachers work under different sorts of pressure,

including expectations concerning content from education authorities and exam results from parents and pupils. There is also pressure to conform to models of teaching espoused by influential western cultural organisations such as the British Council and Amideast. These organisations cooperate with the Ministry of Education and the national teacher association to direct much of the available professional development. They promote a standard mix of communicative language teaching ideas which they acknowledge may be difficult to implement, but which are seen as the ideal to which teachers should aspire. Despite a growing awareness of problems caused by automatic validating of ELT ideas and products from the “centre” (Western universities and publishers) at the expense of local expertise (McMorrow, 2007; Author, 2011), nativespeakerism remains a pervasive influence in how teachers in Lebanon view their professionalism (Annous, 2011).

## 1.2. The Practicum

The MA in ELT includes practical application in every course, but there is also the Practicum in the third semester. The aim of the Practicum is primarily the development of reflective practice skills, and only secondarily the implementation of ideas and methods learnt on the Methodology course. There are three reasons for this. First, teacher education research has brought us to the stage where “the conceptualisation of teaching as reflective practice has cast the mould for our vision of what it means to be a teacher.” (Edge, 2010, p. 14). Second, the presence or absence of reflection is key in determining whether or not student-teachers learn from the experiences provided from the courses, and after, once they are at work (Oxford, 1997; Edge, 2010). Third, there is a desire to empower student-teachers to judge for themselves the value of inspectors’ and trainers’ reports on their teaching as well as the ideas promoted as progressive by teacher educators and textbook publishers. Teaching reflection, clearly influenced by critical language teacher education (Hawkins & Norton, 2009), helps teachers to manage the demands placed on them by their institutions and wider society, and to avoid the confusion, anxiety and uncertainty referred to as “Battered Language Teacher” syndrome by Jacobovits (1972, p. 2).

The Practicum runs for one semester and is carried out in classes in the student-teachers’ schools and with pre-sessional students in the university pre-sessional programme. This allows for a range of ages, class sizes and levels of proficiency. Following Farrell’s guidelines (2007, p. 178), the Practicum provides different opportunities for reflection, establishes ground rules, allocates time and provides input on reflection as well as theory and practice in ELT itself. Much of the latter involves re-engaging our student-teachers with other courses they have taken. The student-teachers meet for 5 input sessions of 3 hours. These are interspersed throughout the semester and present the key concepts of reflective practice, knowledge base, critical incident, critical friend and classroom observation. During these sessions, describing classroom events is differentiated from questioning, speculating and reasoning about what, how and why things happen in class. The student-teachers observe 10 lessons and are observed teaching 8 lessons. They keep diaries, observation checklists and narratives which they bring to the input sessions and use to discuss the different concepts. They write 2 papers during the semester: one describing their approach to teaching and looking for who and what they are influenced by; one a reflective essay on the

contents of their diaries to date. Finally, at the end of the semester, they present a portfolio of lesson plans, diaries, observation reports, a critical incident report (Tripp, 1993), a critical friend report (Costa & Kallick, 1993) and a reflective essay on the contents of the portfolio describing and analysing what has changed for the student over the course of the semester.

The Practicum thus exemplifies the “new agenda” for second language teacher education of producing reflective teachers, providing a variety of learning experiences and creating means for evaluating learning (Wright, 2010, p. 267).

### 1.3. The participants

There is no minimum amount of experience required for entry to the program and participants often vary in this respect. In this study there were eight participants. Three were in their first year of teaching; one in her second year; one in her fourth year; two in their sixth year and one in her tenth year. Their motivation for enrolling in the program included the need to compete for jobs in the better resourced schools, the desire to move into university language teaching and personal development goals.

## 2. Course evaluation

Approaches to evaluation in education have been subject to the same debates concerning the nature of knowledge as other fields of research. An interpretivist approach that sees evaluation as illumination is intuitively appealing given that it regards the “learning milieu” (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976, p. 84) as central to understanding educational practice. The aim is thus to illuminate the interacting physical, social, political and psychological factors that constitute the matrix in which teaching and learning take place. The same approach recalls Schon’s (1983) description of reflection on action, analysis and decision making. However, Atkinson & Delamont (1993) argue for evaluation to be based on formulated theory and methods while Bennett (2003) also stresses the need for empirical data to analyse before making and acting on judgments. Without a theoretical framework to contribute to and enrich, it is difficult to generalize beyond single cases.

My approach to evaluation bears in mind the above concerns, drawing on several authors in an attempt to meet the challenge. The starting point is Robitaille et al. (1993) who compare the *intended* with the *implemented* curriculum, which is then compared with the *achieved* curriculum in the form of the knowledge and skills displayed by the learners. In the case of the MA in ELT, what is intended is the development of reflective teaching skills, situated (Egbert, 2006) in real classroom practice. The criteria by which the construct of reflective teaching skills can be identified are explained in the next section. In order to compare the intended curriculum with that implemented, and then actually achieved, the data produced by the student-teachers is collected and analysed. The findings are then considered in relation to the work of Harland & Kinder (1997). These authors propose a three level hierarchical model of outcomes that can be used to evaluate the impact of in-service teacher education (INSET) courses (Table 1).

**Table 1. Harland & Kinder (1997) three level hierarchical model of teacher education outcomes**

| <b>INSET INPUT</b>        |   |  |   |
|---------------------------|---|--|---|
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> order     | <i>Provision</i><br>Resources that result from input                    | <i>Information</i><br>Increased back-ground knowledge                            | <i>New awareness</i><br>...of the conceptual basis of the input |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> order     | <i>Motivation</i><br>Increased engagement with professional development | <i>Affect</i><br>Acknowledgement of emotional engagement                         | <i>Institution</i><br>Impact on the relevant professional group |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> order     | <i>Value congruence</i><br>...with the input provider                   | <i>Knowledge and skills</i><br>Increased theoretical and practical understanding |   |
| <b>IMPACT on practice</b> |   |  |   |

They argue that if 1<sup>st</sup> order outcomes are achieved then the other outcomes are likely to be present, but that 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> order outcomes on their own are insufficient to impact on practice.

Finally, because the evaluation is intended to improve the quality of the Practicum, the student-teachers are invited to comment on the findings and argue for modifications. In this way, they help to render “quality a process, not a state” (Kelly et al. 2004, p. 58), something to be involved in, rather than a product to analyse.

### 2.1. Reflective practice

This section considers the construct of reflective practice and how it can be manifested in the writing of student-teachers. One of the earliest descriptions of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933, p. 29) includes open-mindedness (open to alternative views), responsibility (awareness and consideration of consequences) and wholeheartedness (overcoming of fears and uncertainties in order to critically evaluate the way we do things). Reflection in the context of classroom practice involves awareness of self and learners (and sometimes parents). It can also involve the wider social context (Johnston & Goettsch, 2000), including the institution and community, local, national and international factors. Reflection at all

levels implies the teacher perceiving herself as an agent of change. As Kayes (2004, p. 70) argues, “if experience is left unevaluated, it becomes as stale as common sense”.

Reflection is often described in terms of *in-action*, *on-action* and *for-action*. (Regarding reflection *in-action*, Johanson & Kroksmark (2004) propose *intuition-in action* as closer to what actually happens.) It can further be categorized as focusing on teacher behaviour, justifying actions on the basis of theory, and evaluating the meaning of actions in ethical terms (Farrell, 2007). We have here a perception of the teacher as potentially an activist engaged in critical pedagogy, and that reflective skills will provide for the teacher’s emancipation through transformation (Vieira & Marques, 2002). In this view, the teacher is seen as *becoming* a decision maker concerned with social justice rather than *being* an implementer of decisions made by others. These authors judge all teacher education by the extent to which it promotes collaborative reflective practice such that student-teachers learn autonomy and thus produce autonomous learners. Kohonen (2007) also describes the goal of reflective teaching practice as transformation. He describes an enhanced notion of professional identity involving three dimensions (not dissimilar to Farrell’s categories): expertise in language and linguistics; expertise in pedagogy, and finally, “partnership in school development” (p. 10). Similar terminology is used by Slaoui & Motteram (2006) who talk of reconstructing practice through a process of teachers recognising what they do, reflecting on it and articulating their practice in language. The ability to think about *their thinking about their teaching* is what opens up possibilities for reconstruction. They also argue that such metacognition is not second nature and needs to be taught. Kayes (2004) suggests the discourse of reflection itself needs to be modelled because when language is used to reflect on experience it takes it into the realm of the symbolic, reconstructing intuition as representation and stimulating the social process of learning (Vygotsky, 1986).

Johnston (2007) sounds a note of caution while reviewing the literature on reflection. He points out that although teachers belong to a community of practice, some of the discourse on reflection presents it as fundamentally an individual activity. Indeed, management practices that stress individual responsibility for personal and professional development are as present in education as elsewhere. However, for teachers to resist the deskilling of their profession and avoid becoming deliverers of pre-packaged modules of input, they need the confidence to discuss, analyse and defend a pedagogy that integrates practice and learning theory dialectically. This brings us to Johnston’s main point. “Some commitment to a research mentality is needed. If reflection simply equates to ‘in my professional judgment they did well (or badly),’ then it adds nothing” (p. 662). Teachers need to reflect on something that allows for more than simply describing an emotional response. That something is the knowledge base, which all teachers have but which may not be recognised as such in all its parts. Thus an important part of learning to reflect is learning to evaluate one’s knowledge base. Graves (2009) amalgamates two influential views which propose six domains or types of teacher knowledge: 1. *knowledge of the target language* (including proficiency in the language); 2. *general pedagogic skills*; 3. *pedagogical content knowledge* (understanding of how to teach the language); 4. *contextual knowledge* (knowing the personal, institutional and wider social contexts of the learners); 5. *pedagogical reasoning skills* (knowing how to create learning opportunities as events in the classroom unfold); 6.

*communication skills* (Richards, 1998; Roberts, 1998 as cited in Graves, 2009, p. 119). The whole is seen as a complex of personal theory, declarative and procedural knowledge and often unanalysed beliefs and maxims. Graves adds intercultural competence (Velez-Rendon, 2002), although this can arguably be seen as part of contextual knowledge and communication skills.

Learning teaching, as with anything, is a process of relating new information to what is already known. The teacher's knowledge base is the filter through which new information is interpreted. Once the teacher begins to recognise practice, and articulate it in relation to the knowledge base, new, transformative learning can occur and she can reconstruct her teaching. Kayes (2004) sees the process thus, "...learning involves resolving tensions between opposed ways of knowing such as the tension between direct experience versus abstract thinking..." (p. 70). For teachers, a dominant influence in their professional lives has to be the many years of experiencing learning in another teacher's classroom and it is often difficult to reflect beyond the simple act of description. Tripp (1993) recognises this and advocates a question and answer approach to analysing classroom practice. Teaching incidents can then be theorised and evaluated. The detailed description and analysis make professional interpretation possible.

Following a social constructivist view (Vygotsky, 1986), learning to reflect is a collaborative process itself. For example, on a practicum, student-teachers first learn the act of questioning what, how and why events and decisions took place in the company of the tutor. New ways of thinking are externalized in collaboration before becoming internalised, individual ability. Apart from actual dialogue with the tutor, the student-teacher can reflect in writing for an audience which might include the tutor, a peer and herself. Moreover, given that writing (including email and forum discussion) involves conscious composing, it is at the same time reflective (Burton, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2011).

Journal writing by student-teachers has been popular for some time (Lee, 2007), somewhat more so than the critical incident files proposed by Tripp (1993) which consist of written interrogations of classroom events, searching for learning points. Portfolios of documents pertaining to a teacher's practice (including journals) are discussed by Orland-Barak (2005) and seen as suitable tools for developing reflective skills because they are built up over time. This is a key factor in developing complex teaching skills (Sluijsmans, et al., 2004) and allows for progress in reflection to be observed. Kocoglu et al. (2008) use Hatton & Smith's (1995) very practical framework for analysing student-teachers' attempts at writing reflection. There are four stages perceived to occur in sequence as reflection is learned. First, simple *descriptive writing* appears. The second stage, *descriptive reflection*, shows reasoning based on personal judgments. The third stage is *dialogic reflection*, which is a type of discourse with oneself, exploring and theorising about possible reasons. Finally, *critical reflection* occurs which involves giving reasons which take account of the wider cultural, social and political context.

Reflection is thus the process whereby teachers can (re)construct their teaching identity: questioning, observing, analysing and theorising, they become conscious of what they do

and the reasons for, and consequences of, their decisions. Reconstruction is also possible in the sense that teachers can change how they are as teachers because of the insights gained from the analysis and interpretation of reflective practice.

This section has set out the conceptual basis for a study of the reflections of student-teachers on the Practicum. It is linked with the previously described theoretical framework for evaluating the impact of the course and allows the following research questions to be asked:

1. What evidence is there of reflection, as opposed to description, in the student-teachers' portfolios?
2. What aspects of the knowledge base appear to be accessed?
3. What evidence is there of teacher education outcomes?

### 3. Methodology

Permission was sought from the student-teachers to use their work for research and possible publication. The portfolios of 8 student-teachers were examined for evidence in the forms of segments of writing which were analysed and categorised in terms of:

- Hatton & Smith's (1995) stages of reflective writing
- Graves' (2009) review of the language teacher's knowledge base
- Harland & Kinder's (1997) hierarchy of outcomes for teacher education success.

The following data sources were used:

- Diary entries for each student-teacher
- Observation notes written by the student-teachers
- Critical incident reports
- Critical friend reports
- Reflective essays.

After categorising segments, I re-read the definitions and categorised again. For example, when checking the evidence for learning to reflect, segments categorised as *descriptive reflection*, occasionally became *dialogic reflection* and those originally seen as *dialogic reflection* occasionally became *critical reflection*. These re-categorisations were discussed with a colleague and only made final if there was agreement. The appearance of each category in the data was calculated as a percentage to allow for student-teachers writing different amounts. Repeated comments on the same incident were excluded. Categories were then described as occurring *very frequently* (>60%) *frequently* (>30 and <60%) and *occasionally* (<30%). Where a category was not present in any of the data of a student-teacher, this was also highlighted. A segment of data may be placed in a category from more than one framework. For example, a student-teacher who demonstrates *knowledge of the learner's context* (knowledge base) may use that to *critically reflect* (reflective writing) on the learner's behaviour or learning.

A follow up study of how reflective activity varies with experience is planned so the student-teachers were categorised as *inexperienced* (Group 1) or *experienced* (Group 2). Fictitious names have been used.

Group 1 – (Nora, Rose and Mariam – first year teaching; Salma – 1 year experience)

Group 2 – (Sonia– 3 years experience; Sandra – 5 years experience; Leila– 5 years experience; Hiba– 9 years experience).

Finally the evaluation process became a paper that was presented to colleagues and students on the MA ELT program. After the presentation, the eight participants gave feedback which approved of how they had been represented and which allowed for some improvements. It is felt that this methodology is structured enough to overcome some of the difficulty of evaluating one's own course and that it is both practical and meaningful, allowing for the evaluation process to improve future practicum courses and contribute to the participants' learning to reflect.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Reflective writing (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

Table 2 shows that segments displaying *descriptive writing* and *descriptive reflection* are very frequent. Segments displaying *dialogic reflection* are frequent. Segments displaying *critical reflection* are occasional (2 student-teachers gave no indication of engaging in this type of reflection).

**Table 2. Reflective writing**

| Quantity      | Category                               |
|---------------|--|
| Very frequent | Descriptive and Descriptive reflection |
| Frequent      | Dialogic reflection                    |
| Occasional    | Critical reflection                    |

##### 4.2. Knowledge base (Graves, 2009).

Table 3 shows that segments relating to *general pedagogical skills* and *pedagogical reasoning skills* are very frequent. Segments relating to *communication skills* and *pedagogical content knowledge* are frequent (2 student-teachers made no reference to *communication skills*; 1 student-teacher made no reference to *pedagogical content knowledge*). Segments relating to *contextual knowledge* are occasional (3 student-teachers made no reference to contextual knowledge). Segments relating to the teacher's own *knowledge of English* are occasional (6 student-teachers made no reference to their own *knowledge of English*).

**Table 3. Knowledge base**

| Quantity      | Category                       |
|---------------|--------------------------------|
| Very frequent | General pedagogical skills     |
| Very frequent | Pedagogical reasoning          |
| Frequent      | Communication skills           |
| Frequent      | Pedagogical content knowledge  |
| Occasional    | Contextual knowledge           |
| Occasional    | Teacher's knowledge of English |

#### 4.3. Evidence of teacher education outcomes (Harland & Kinder, 1997).

Table 4 shows that segments relating to *new awareness* and *knowledge and skill* are very frequent. Segments relating to an *impact on (teaching) practice* are frequent (1 student-teacher made no reference to *impact on practice*). Segments relating to *motivation, affect* and *value congruence* are occasional (4 student-teachers made no reference to *motivation*; 4 student-teachers made no reference to *affect*; 3 student-teachers made no reference to *value congruence*).

Given the fact that the Practicum was taken by individuals, not groups of staff, *institutional* outcomes were not investigated. *Provisionary* and *informational* outcomes (appropriate resources and knowledge input) were assured by staff as part of the teaching component of the Practicum.

**Table 4. Teacher education outcomes**

| Quantity      | Category                   |
|---------------|----------------------------|
| Very frequent | New awareness              |
| Very frequent | Knowledge and skill        |
| Frequent      | Impact on teacher practice |
| Occasional    | Motivation                 |
| Occasional    | Affect                     |
| Occasional    | Value congruence           |

Following on from the basic presentation of results, the findings will be related to each research question. Segments of data will be presented verbatim as examples.

*Research question 1* - What evidence is there of reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995) as opposed to description, in the student-teachers' portfolios?

*Descriptive writing* is very frequent. It appears as neutral narration:

*There were two girls who were drawing on their notebook and not paying attention to what I was saying. (Sandra - 5 years experience.)*

It also appears in the form of comments possibly implying some judgment:

*The teacher asked the students to read silently, and then interrupted them to ask the meaning of certain words. (Hiba - 9 years experience.)*

*Descriptive reflection* is very frequent. It appears as description with an attempt to explain something from the student-teacher's point of view but without recourse to any identified theory or authority:

*I asked the students to work in pairs because it is more beneficial for them. They can chat with each other and get benefit from the knowledge of each other, particularly the question and answer type of exercises. (Leila - 5 years experience.)*

*Dialogic reflection* is frequent. It appears as a stepping back from the action, going beyond a personal rationalizing to theorise about causes and consequences. The theorising can be more or less explicit:

*I had never asked the students up to the board before, but now they were working in pairs with a section of the board for each of them. I corrected mistakes directly...I tried to have the students correct but it seems they were not acquainted with this and it was taking lots of time. I think it is better, but I needed to think of the time. (Rose - first year of teaching.)*

*I saw the students were not happy about reading a long passage. I tried to get information from them about movies related to the topic. To my surprise, most of the students got involved and started reading the text to discover common points with their favourite movie. I assume that approaching the lesson from the student's perspective and contextual knowledge will improve the learning process. (Mariam - first year of teaching.)*

*The teacher used a deductive way to teach grammar, maybe because the students were adults. It seemed to work well. Some theories say that adults prefer to see the rules first. (Sonia - 3 years experience.)*

*I thought about why I do a lot of reading aloud. It's useful at the elementary level. Sometimes I use dialogues for this and practice pronunciation. With reading, I try to build on students' prior knowledge in a low anxiety environment. Darling-Hammond & Bransford (2005) explain how constructivist theory... (Hiba - 9 years experience.)*

*Critical reflection* is occasional and 2 student-teachers gave no indication of engaging in this type of reflection. It appears as questioning or explanation of events by reference to the wider social context in which the student-teacher's school is situated:

*The teacher's accent and fluency in English gives her credit and respect among the students, although it's a sword that can cut both ways as some students cannot follow her especially with a quiet voice. (Salma - 1 year experience.)*

*This student was not interested in learning, he hates learning, he likes annoying others. On this occasion he made a pulley with some rope and his pencil case. Why did he do that? Why is he like this? I know his family background – it is ordinary. His father is a mechanic and Salim is someone who also likes to work by manipulating objects. Now I treat him as a kinesthetic learner. (Sandra - 5 years experience.)*

*I'm stuck with time management! I have to follow the book in order not to lose time. This is a disadvantage – the time limit and being glued to the materials in our institutions. There are policies and procedures that must be followed and implemented. (Leila - 5 years experience.)*

*I realize my teaching changes. I am not anymore directed by the parents' point of view or the students' final grade. I used to teach them mostly what is required for the test to ensure they will get good grades. I was afraid of taking new challenges and trying new techniques. What interests me now is their ability to communicate in class using the target language. (Hiba - 9 years experience.)*

Research question 2 - What aspects of the knowledge base (Graves, 2009) appear to be accessed?

Segments related to *general pedagogical skills* and *pedagogical reasoning skills* are very frequent:

*In my observations, I noticed things that had significance for the way the classroom is run: opening up schemata with discussions at the beginning; the organization of the chairs; having the students rely on themselves; the way grammar is taught. (Rose - first year of teaching.)*

*In grade 4B I brought a menu, a pen and a small notebook to class – a role play was done – bringing materials into class makes things seem real – they can feel how to be a waiter or customer. (Sandra - 5 years experience.)*

There are occasional segments that relate to *communication skills*– 2 student-teachers made no reference to these:

*Another difficulty is stating clear instructions. I consider that the students are equipped with a higher level of processing the information, but my expectations failed. So I try as much as I can to organize my questions in a simpler form, avoiding ambiguous terms to meet with the students' cognitive abilities. (Mariam - first year of teaching.)*

*The teaching went smoothly, my voice was normal, my position effective. I was behind the desk – I think it made me feel more powerful in talking to the students. (Salma - 1 year of experience.)*

*No one is following, even no-one knows or has an idea on which lesson they had to open their books. I think there were a missing of the clear instructions from the teacher's side. She gave the instructions very fast. I would prefer if she waited till the class is ready or at least repeat the instructions more than once, or write the page number on the board – she didn't do any of that. (Leila - 5 years experience.)*

Other frequent comments refer to *pedagogical content knowledge* - 1 student-teacher made no reference to this:

*Arabic is OK to use, in a principled way – it may help the students to learn faster, to organize their ideas. (Rose - first year of teaching.)*

*Why are the students unable to apply the rule in controlled practice exercises despite having just taken it? What do I have to do? (Salma – 1 year of experience.)*

*I made a role play with two students – offering something and then giving them a problem - to help them get the idea of “help yourself” and “help each other”. (Sonia - 3 years experience.)*

*I have observed a grammar class explaining countable and uncountable nouns – the teacher was holding the book, made lots of mistakes and gave wrong information. The students were lost and confused. She could have started with words the students know already, write them side by side on the board – it can be easier for them to grasp. Or the students can call out words randomly and the teacher can write them in two lists. (Leila - 5 years experience.)*

There are occasional segments that relate to *contextual knowledge* – 3 student-teachers made no reference to this:

*The teacher devoted a large amount of time to discipline. Her attempts failed – the students' context prevents any kind of cooperation since they consider themselves unfairly placed in the beginner's level. The students are negative about English because of the perceived notion for language courses in our society that orient the learners towards scientific fields and to disregard the literary one. (Mariam - first year of teaching.)*

*I have increased my awareness toward text book biases and the effects on students' perceptions and learning experiences. Each time I feel the possibility of a cultural bias in the text book, I do some research or an individual study in order to properly convey “the picture” to the students. (Salma - 1 year's experience.)*

There are occasional segments that relate to the student-teacher's own *knowledge of English* – 6 student-teachers made no reference to their own *knowledge of English*:

*This portfolio had many benefits for me. It helped me plan my development, develop many English language skills too. (Sonia - 3 years experience.)*

*I really do make word order errors and I'm very annoyed from it – anxiety and stress are everywhere. I should work on this default. (Leila - 5 years experience.)*

*Research question 3 - What evidence is there of teacher education outcomes (Harland & Kinder, 1997)?*

There are very frequent references to *new awareness*:

*The portfolio actually makes reflection more possible because everything is there. (Salma - 1 years experience.)*

*Doing the observations has allowed me to relate my reading to what I see in the class, and to compare my teaching to others. (Hiba - 9 years experience.)*

*I decided to deal with this incident (discovering she had finished a 50 minute class in 35) in a critical way. I first thought about the "how", then the "why" and following the "how" and the "why", I thought about the "so...?" (Nora - first year of experience)*

There are very frequent references to *knowledge and skill* in reflection:

*It's a listening class but no one is listening. Why? Students are chatting, even in Arabic language. Probably because it was a bad tape recorder. The teacher wanted to do her job and leave, no matter what the content of the learning activity. She should have stopped and started a different activity. The students need to hear something clear, it helps them focus – we need to motivate the students, not give them reasons for distraction. (Leila - 5 years experience.)*

*After meeting with my critical friend, I can see that many of my actions are about making a warm atmosphere. I want to change from being like my teachers are school to the one I would like to have studied under. (Sonia - 3 years experience.)*

*I can see from the notes I have made so far that some things are significant for me. I know how they are important but sometimes theory eludes me, but experience, or others' experience can help. (Rose - first year of experience.)*

There are frequent references to an actual *impact* on teacher practice – 1 student-teacher made no reference to this:

*I believe that taking a few minutes at the end of the class and making notes can be amazingly productive. (Hiba - 9 years experience.)*

*I really found the critical friendship very beneficial for my present and future professional development. I hope I can use it along my teaching career and maybe advice my other colleagues to make benefit of it. (Leila - 5 years experience)*

*Now the course is over, after experiencing the support provided by my critical friend, I am still seeking her advice in order to improve and enhance my teaching practice. (Mariam - first year of teaching)*

*For my action research I am preparing diaries, lesson plans etc – since I have encountered all these practices through the Practicum, I am feeling confident and relaxed. (Nora - first year of teaching.)*

Occasional segments relate to *motivation* – 5 student-teachers made no reference to this:

*My diaries and reflections the two most important things that I have developed on my Practicum. I edited my diaries more than once as each time I recalled back the events, I remembered a detail that I felt of great importance or related to a relevant one. (Salma - 1 years experience.)*

*Being given the opportunity to observe my friend motivated me to reflect on what I have done. (Sonia - 3 years experience.)*

Occasional segments relate to *affect* – 4 student-teachers made no reference to this:

*All the questions and comments the observer wrote, I could give answers to. They made me really reflect on what was going on in class. I realized I can teach adults. The observer gave me confidence and a push toward thinking about teaching at university. (Sandra – 5 years experience.)*

*Now and after I learned I can theorise my work, I realized that I am a good teacher that can practice different ways of teaching. (Leila - 5 years experience.)*

Occasional segments relate to *value congruence* – 4 student-teachers made no reference to this:

*Being critical of one's self and having the spirit of developing one's self I believe are important characteristics of a teacher working towards professionalism. (Rose - first year teaching.)*

*I have learnt the crucial goal of asking why questions, reflecting and then to answer. (Sandra - 5 years teaching.)*

*I believe it is crucial for teachers to become aware of the theories and principles that guide their approach to teaching. (Hiba - 9 years experience.)*

This section has given an overview of the analysis as well as some samples to illustrate the nature of the data. The next section will consider what this means for my evaluation of the Practicum.

## 5. Discussion

In this evaluation of the Practicum, student-teacher writing has been theorised as essentially a reflective exercise although this is refined by using Hatton & Smith's (1995) hierarchy of categories. Data has been used to show what aspects of the knowledge base were accessed. Finally, we have looked at the indications that reflection is likely to become part of the student-teachers' reconstructed professional conduct.

The data shows that the student-teachers were indeed taught reflection that goes beyond *description*, even though this is the most frequent type of writing. Inevitably, the teachers begin their reflections by telling the story of the classroom events (but it is interesting to see how often the *description* gives way to more complex reflection). In terms of focus, the inexperienced student-teachers seem more concerned with issues of control and how to avoid discipline problems. Hammerness et al. (2005) explain that beginning teachers are usually concerned with the process of getting "through the day" (p. 379). The experienced student-teachers refer more to classroom management issues, understanding learner preferences and theories of learning in their reasoning comments.

As mentioned above, the data shows it was possible to teach reflection and reflective writing at *descriptive reflection* and *dialogic reflection* levels. *Critical reflection*, which considers the wider social context, was understandably harder, but not impossible. Generally speaking, it is probably harder because student-teachers are focused on the details of the action in the classroom, and indeed, this is what is required, for example in critical incident writing. Despite Farrell's (2008) concern about beginning teachers having difficulty with critical incident analysis, they can start to progress through different levels of mastery as the samples from Rose and Mariam show. However, I do believe Farrell's (2007) presentation of reflective practice covers too wide a variety of activities for each of these to be given equal attention. Creating a file of critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) during the Practicum, would, I think, be a more useful activity for learning reflection than including just one such analysis in the portfolio. This was also proposed by Mariam in the feedback session after I presented the original evaluation.

With regard to the knowledge base (Graves, 2009), an obvious point is that the student-teachers seem to think more in terms of *general pedagogic skills*, utilized principally to keep order and frequently rationalised as providing for a warm, caring environment conducive to learning, and relatively little in terms of L2 teaching skills (*pedagogic content knowledge*). There are frequent references to teaching as explaining and delivering lessons, albeit moderated through having the learners do practice exercises in pairs and groups. The comments indicate a tension between wanting to be more student-centred and feeling the need to teach. These student-teachers may still see explanation as their main role, with innovation, in this classic presentation, practice (and perhaps production) model, taking the

form of relinquishing control at the practice stage. Although there are general comments about approaches to teaching grammar, there are virtually no examples. Sonia's story of acting out the use of reflexive pronouns ("help yourself" versus "help each other") is one of very few. One of the teachers mentions that the students are "unable to apply the rule in controlled practice exercises despite having just taken it". On the one hand, the data suggests a need for revisiting the focus on form/forms distinction in the SLA course. On the other, perhaps the Methodology course needs to include more practical examples of teaching specific L2 forms and uses prior to generalizing about methodology. It will also be useful to synthesise input from both courses and spend more time considering the rationale for, and ways to encourage, negotiation of meaning (Ellis, 1999).

The frequent references to *Communication skills* are almost all about clarity of instructions. This is interesting because it suggests they notice communication breakdown when students do not know what exercise to do or how to carry out an activity. The student-teachers do not appear to see any communication breakdown when they are "explaining" their lesson. Two people mentioned standing behind or in front of the desk while teaching and what this communicated about her feelings, but no mention was made of how communication between students and teachers could be affected. Indeed, there appears to be a uni-directional focus of communication. None of the student-teachers mentioned finding out anything interesting from their students, which seems at odds with the professed concern for creating an atmosphere favourable to learning. This, and the previous observation about the lack of references to *pedagogic content knowledge*, suggests a need (recalling Kayes (2004) on teaching the discourse of reflection) for scaffolded reflection which highlights and then questions these aspects of a lesson or incident. In fact, following feedback early in the Practicum on seeing the whiteboard as a communication tool, there was an increase in references to how the student-teachers saw this being used, or how they used it themselves.

*Contextual knowledge* did feature, but little, and the student-teachers' own *knowledge of English* hardly at all. It might be that the first of these is less clearly conceived as part of the knowledge base. The second point however is a matter of concern given that there is always room for development and the requirement that key subjects in the Lebanese curriculum are given and assessed in English. It is also at odds with Hanson's (2011) finding that L2 proficiency was the primary concern of student-teachers of foreign languages. It is tempting to speculate that the reason is to do with the language itself. Lebanese teachers of English may have less concern for a notional native-speaker competence in English given its instrumental use in the country, divorced from any immediate connection to a native-speaker culture. Moreover, Hanson's student-teachers in the USA are likely familiar with the idea of foreign languages being a door to foreign cultures and thus think that access improves with proficiency. In the case of Lebanese teachers, it maybe that they are more conscious of their knowledge of other curriculum subjects than the language of instruction itself. However, given that Lebanese pupils are assessed on some content through the medium of English, success depends in part on their level of proficiency and one would expect the student-teachers to be more obviously conscious of their own expertise (Rampton, 1990) in the language. Whatever the reasons, this is a useful pointer to where improvement can be made.

As for evaluating the success of the Practicum in developing reflective practice skills in terms of its impact on professional practice (Harland & Kinder, 1997), firstly, the 3<sup>rd</sup> order *provisionary* and *informational* outcomes were assured in the actual input sessions. In the model, 3<sup>rd</sup> order *new awareness* and 1<sup>st</sup> order *knowledge and skills* are related and indeed, evidence of both combined is common throughout the data. Borg (2006) reports on research that suggests teachers in training can reproduce approved of teaching behaviours for assessment purposes while not incorporating the changes long term into their practice. It is surely possible that the same can be said of reflective practice (although one would not actually expect the teachers to carry on writing journals and the like in their normal, busy, everyday work). For this reason, I have looked for evidence of the additional 1<sup>st</sup> order outcome – *value congruence*. There are not many references, but those that were made indicate a high likelihood of reflective practice becoming part of the student-teacher's perception of their professional selves. Furthermore, the fact that the explicit intention to make reflection part of their practice (*impact*) was indicated by all but 1 of the student-teachers is a positive finding. This is confirmed by the feedback from the student-teachers themselves in the post-presentation discussion:

*Reflecting is not easy, we had to think, record and analyse, and a little bit stressful. But now we know the value.*

*We should reflect on everything.*

*If you are trained to reflect you can change.*

## 6. Conclusion

Reflection is something of a buzzword in education and a plethora of research papers have given examples of the variety of reflection that takes place. There is rather less research on the outcomes of teaching reflection. This initial piece of research suggests there is still important work to be done on designing and managing my Practicum in such a way that desired outcomes can be achieved. More work is needed to increase *critical reflection*, as well as reflection on *communication skills*, *pedagogic content knowledge* and the teachers' own *knowledge of English*. This is to be done in the expectation that such reflection will generate more obvious *value congruence*.

In future research I want to examine my understanding of the use of certain key words by the teachers, e.g. seeing *explain* as synonymous with *teach*, to see how my perceptions of their thinking are affected by the way I interpret the use of these words. These teachers are working in a second language. For me as a western trained teacher working in my first language, words like *explain* in the context of the language classroom have quite clear connotations. However, I am not sure that such words occupy the same semantic space for me and for any individual student-teacher, or group of student-teachers that I am working with. Further work is also needed to find out how years of experience affect the development of reflective practice skills. I will start by looking at the teachers whose data shows they made no references in some of the categories.

More generally, it seems to me that English Language Teacher Education needs more developed categories for assessing teacher thinking. Buitnik (2009) shows how impressive the work is that is being done in general teacher education and I think we can learn something from that field. For example, the categories I have used make it possible to miss indications of thinking about student learning (rather than student reactions to what the teacher does). The most experienced student-teacher on the Practicum actually mentions that *the teaching and observing experiences have helped focus on what my students are learning rather than on what I am doing in class*, but it is not nearly so clear in anyone else's writing. However, on a more optimistic note, in the feedback session, student-teachers did show a concern for learning-centredness. For example, Sandra reports, *I am pleased that now I can say traditional is not always bad. People are used to saying traditional is not good. But it's not true. I can say that traditional teaching can be good for some learning*. One of the student-teachers in her first year of teaching, Nora, described how she responded to the familiar experience of finding it difficult to teach according to the established practice of a given school:

*I was being accused by admin that I'm wasting my time with grade 7 students. The parents were complaining we do video, music etc... In the school mission statement, you read these ideas, it's wonderland, but I try to do it. So I prepared a 2000 word essay, I used my methodology course, my SLA course etc, and I defended my point of view, why I'm using this material, why I use alternative activities in the last hour, which comes after PE, instead of trying to be heard and shouting at the students. I wrote the essay, backed up my actions with the theoretical background and the Principle called me and told me that she's happy she's got me as a teacher. But as well, I'm new in the system, I'm not supposed to be different from everyone, so she said she was with me, but back in the class I should do what the coordinator wants. So I need to find the way.*

The reflective practice focused Practicum described in this paper is far from perfect but this young teacher, new to the realities of compromise, seems to be a good example of someone who has learnt to "theorize from their practice and to practice what they theorize" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 70). Thus I am both usefully informed by the evaluation process and encouraged about the future.

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