

‘ Faute de mieux?
Simulated action research,
from participant perspectives ’

by

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Abstract

This paper reports on an attempt to integrate ‘simulated action research’ into a pre-service MA programme, with a view to developing participants’ capacities for ongoing and self-critical reflection on teaching. A brief summary of the need and rationale for this type of approach in our context is provided, and problems and advantages of the approach are discussed on the basis of participants’ evaluations and reflections. We conclude that the advantages of involving students in a positive, well-supported experience of action research outweigh disadvantages relating to its ‘simulated’ nature. Finally, we note the possible relevance of ‘simulated action research’ in other teacher education settings.

Introduction

Normally action research is conceived of as an ‘on-site’, in-service phenomenon. There have been descriptions of action research projects carried out by student teachers during teaching practice in schools (e.g. Moreira, Vieira and Marques 1999), but often – before teaching practice itself, or when trainees are off-site for the duration of their course – there seems to be no option but to omit the idea of action research, or, perhaps, for trainers to recommend it only in abstract terms.

However, there may be an experiential means of preparing (future) teachers for teacher-research. In this paper we describe how international students enrolled on a year-long MA programme at the University of Warwick have been involved – in one particular ‘Professional Practice’ course – in an intensive, ‘simulated’ experience of action research based on peer-teaching, lesson transcript analysis, classroom observation and interviews with more experienced teachers, followed by repeated peer-teaching.

Two of the authors (Sultan Alagöz and Simla İğmez) were students on the course, and summaries of their action research projects, together with their retrospective reflections, are combined below with a description, evaluation and reflections relating to the overall development of the course by the course tutors (Peter Brown and Richard Smith). On this basis, we hope to provide insights from a variety of participant perspectives into possible advantages as well as problems of incorporating simulated action research into pre-service teacher education more generally.

The paper is structured as follows: in Section 1, background information is provided regarding the particular setting, while in Section 2, the development of the course is described in overall terms, and two action research projects are briefly summarised. Section 3 provides an overall evaluation of the course, and refers to our retrospective reflections and discussions. Finally, Section 4 discusses emerging problems and possible advantages of ‘simulated action research’, drawing implications for possible wider adoption of this innovation.

1. Background

The Centre for English Language Teacher Education (CELTE) at the University of Warwick provides various year-long postgraduate programmes, at MA and Diploma level, as well as English language support for international students across the university, and short tailor-made courses in English and English teaching methodology for groups visiting from overseas (see CELTE n.d.).

All of CELTE’s postgraduate teaching takes place on campus rather than by distance. Almost all students study full-time for one year, coming to Warwick from a wide variety of countries and regions of the world. Most of the MA programmes are for students with teaching experience, but the MA in English Language Studies and Methods (ELSM), is specifically designed for students with little or no substantial experience. The

‘Professional Practice’ course, as implemented within this particular programme in the spring term (‘Term 2’) of 2001, will be focused on in this paper.

In Term 1, all MA in ELSM students take three option courses and a common core course, ‘Introduction to ELT’, on which the Term 2 ‘Professional Practice’ course is intended to build. In Term 2, apart from Professional Practice (which is allotted five timetabled hours per week and is assessed by means of a 6,000-word assignment), students follow ‘Research Methodology’ (one hour per week, unassessed) and two option courses (both 3 hours per week and assessed on the basis of 3,000-word assignments). In Term 3 students complete the Research Methodology course and carry out work for their 15,000-word dissertation (see Appendix 1 for further details).

Thus, within the overall MA in ELSM programme, the Professional Practice course has a central but somewhat ambiguous role, in the sense that it is relied upon to help students translate theory into actual practice in the context of a programme which is academic rather than purely practical in overall intent. How theory may be linked to practice is a continual concern in all of the MA programmes, and is particularly an issue with these students, who have little or no substantial teaching experience. Students, too, are often concerned above all to refine their practical teaching skills. However, there is an institutional pressure even for the Professional Practice component to meet academic criteria, in other words, *not* to be purely practical in nature. Thus, unlike in a conventional teacher training practicum, assessment for the course is based on a 6,000-word assignment rather than on teaching performance *per se*, which is not assessed. Also, there is only time for each student to teach once or twice, and there is no possibility for students to teach in the ‘real’ teaching contexts which they have left behind, coming to the university as they tend to do for a year from overseas.

Taking into account the above constraints, *faute de mieux* as it might appear, a new strategy was adopted for the 2001 MA in ELSM Professional Practice course which we have come to term ‘simulated action research’. This involved small-group peer-teaching, with student-teachers imagining that they were teaching in a context with which they

were already familiar or within which they intended to teach in the future, while over the course of the term they engaged in an assessed action research project related directly to their ‘simulated’ peer-teaching.

At first sight, this arrangement is clearly far from ideal – and limitations due to the simulated, artificial nature of the experience are likely to spring immediately to the reader’s mind. Indeed, initially at least, some students were themselves resistant to the idea that peer-teaching could provide an appropriate alternative to what they themselves termed ‘real’ teaching. We do not wish to deny these limitations (and will consider them further below), but we have discovered that they are counter-balanced by advantages which are not, at first sight, so obvious. We have come to believe that the ‘simulated action research’ model developed in this context may be of interest to others working in comparable ‘academic’ teacher education settings, and, more generally, to teacher educators who may be seeking experiential means of preparing teachers for future action research and/or reflective teaching. At this stage, then, we ask you to keep an open mind!

2. Description of the course

2.1 Starting-points

Participants in the MA in ELSM ‘Professional Practice’ course in the spring term of 2001 were the two tutors (Peter Brown and Richard Smith) and twenty-three students from a variety of countries, namely Japan (3), Taiwan (8), People’s Republic of China / Hong Kong (2), Thailand (2), Turkey (2), Greece (3), Cyprus (2), and the Dominican Republic (1). The course was carried out over a 10-week term, with five contact hours (one three-hour session and one two-hour session) allotted per week,

The course had already been running successfully for several years on a small group peer-teaching model, although with some problems (according to the previous year’s student evaluations) as follows:

- overload in terms of amount of work for the assignment (divided into 3,000 words for a set of three lesson plans with rationale and 3,000 words for a small-scale classroom observation study, plus a portfolio of reflections on others' and own peer-teaching);
- perceived duplication of aspects of the Term 1 Introduction to ELT course during input sessions;
- a feeling that tutor-led whole class feedback sessions were not always of value (since the whole class had not seen both peer-taught lessons being discussed).

Additionally, there was a shared desire on the part of the course tutors to enhance or introduce the following aspects:

- more opportunities for peer-teaching: students consistently requested this in previous years' evaluations, but the challenge was how to meet this request within the time constraints without sacrificing input and the 'academic' nature of the course;
- more reflection by student-teachers on their own practice: this had been previously only a minor element within overall course work (as one component in a portfolio of reflections – see above);
- self-observation and self-evaluation with a view to improvement of practice (few students chose to analyse the video of their own teaching for their assignment, preferring in general to replicate a previous study from the literature through observation of others' classes, thus engaging in 'outsider' academic research and writing rather than 'teacher-research')
- a more integrated assignment, rather than separate components.

In order to meet the above demands the tutors hoped, in the first place, to expand the popular peer-teaching component of previous years. Something had to go if this was to be attempted, and it was decided to reduce the amount of input related to teaching grammar, vocabulary and the four skills (this was achieved partly by negotiating an increase in the number of hours for Term 1 Introduction to ELT, and partly by encouraging and

supporting students to find out for themselves what they needed to know in relation to their lesson planning. A major concern was to improve the assignment, in particular to make it more integrated, involve more reflection on students' own teaching, and to encourage continuous writing throughout the term rather than all at the end of term (in order to reduce 'overload').. The tutors also felt that enhancing the 'teacher-research' dimension of the course would ensure maintenance of academic standards, indeed could provide an effective lead-in to Term 3 dissertation research.

2.2 Course aims

In accordance with the above, the following aims were established for the improved course:

- 1) Build on but provide a different experience from Term 1 'Introduction to ELT';
- 2) Develop students' willingness and ability to reflect critically on their own practice;
- 3) Prepare students methodologically and psychologically for future reflective teaching / teacher-research;
- 4) Prepare students for dissertation research in Term 3.

While (1) and (4) obviously have local salience to this particular setting. (2) and (3) appear to have a wider relevance to other teacher education contexts.

The tutors' central idea was to redesign the course according to an action research model, thus providing a motivating structure for reflection on teaching. Essentially they wished to enhance a strategy that had proved to be highly valued in previous years (i.e. peer-teaching) by engaging students in *repeated* peer-teaching. They hoped to develop students' autonomy as learners / future teacher-learners, trusting them more to find out what they needed to learn for themselves and placing more emphasis on their *researching their own practice*, with a view to developing their capacities in these areas for the benefit of their future teaching.

2.3 Course design

On the basis of the above considerations, the following three phases were planned:

Phase 1 (weeks 1–5): Lesson planning, peer-teaching and self-evaluation:

Each student would teach a 30-minute lesson to a small group of peers; no tutor feedback would be provided. Instead, feedback would come from students being taught and self-analysis (including transcription) of audio- and video-recordings. The class would be divided into three sub-groups for simultaneous peer-teaching, allowing time for all to teach and for the experience to be repeated later in the term.

Phase 2 (weeks 6–7): Further investigation and planning improvement:

On the basis of summaries of feedback and their own reflections, and analysis of the lesson transcript and video, students (with appropriate guidance) would identify areas for improvement and further investigation; then, by means of reading, observation of lessons and interviews with more experienced teachers, students would plan changes to their lesson and plan how to evaluate whether improvements took place.

Phase 3 (weeks 8–10): Repetition of peer-teaching, evaluation of change and reporting of findings:

The same lesson, incorporating improvements, would be repeated for a different group of peers (to enhance the interest value for those being taught). Feedback would be gained with regard to intended improvements (e.g. by means of focused questionnaires / observation by a 'critical friend' / transcript analysis), and this data analysed and reported orally and in written form.

The requirement to submit a 6,000-word assignment was unchanged, but the assignment was divided into three parts consisting of reports on the three phases above, drafts of which would be submitted following completion of each phase, i.e. throughout the term.

Appendix 2 (the handout actually given to students to describe the course in advance) provides a more detailed description of these phases and assessment procedures.

2.4 Implementation

The course was implemented more or less as planned, although as a result of feedback from students an extra week (week 8) was allotted to investigation prior to Phase 3, which meant that findings could not be reported to others in as much detail in week 10 as had originally been planned. In order to show how the overall design worked out in practice, we now turn to two descriptions of actual research projects carried out by students, as summarised in their own words:

Sultan Alagöz: Initially, I taught a reading lesson to an imaginary group of Turkish high school students aged 14-15 at pre-intermediate level. After the first peer-teaching, I evaluated the feedback gathered from students who were involved in my reading class, my own immediate post lesson reflections and the transcript and video analysis of the lesson. I found out that the questions I asked were far from encouraging to students to participate in classroom discussions. In Phase 2, I decided to investigate how to improve in the area of teacher questions. Before planning my second lesson I referred to the related literature to learn more about the types of questions that might be asked and to figure out what kinds of research instruments could be benefited from. I observed three classes given by experienced teachers in CELTE to see how they asked questions to elicit information from their students and I used an observation checklist to identify the types of questions which were used for different purposes. Then I interviewed students on other MA courses with more experience of teaching to find out what kind of questions they utilised with their students in their own contexts. During this process I kept a diary and made daily entries of the problems which were the concern of my study and possible

solutions to them. By comparing the transcript of my first lesson with the information I gathered from this investigation, I was able to adopt a different approach for my second peer-teaching. I determined to ask more referential questions and to evaluate the effect of these. By comparing the first and second lessons not only in terms of question type but also in terms of length of student response I was able to see that asking more referential questions had had a positive effect on amount and quality of student response.

Simla İçmez: In my first peer teaching I decided to teach seven vocabulary items connected with clothing. I assumed that the learners were at the ages of 9–10, attending 6th grade in a primary school in Turkey. After the lesson, I wrote my own reflections about the lesson and asked the students to write their comments. Besides, the lesson was recorded on video and audio tapes. The first resource I had after the lesson, my own reflections, was not very helpful, unfortunately, but the students' reflections were very useful and drew my attention to the areas of student-student interaction and student talking time. Having these points in my mind, I watched the video and transcribed the lesson. As a result of analysing the transcript and the video, I found out that the two areas mentioned by the students were problematic. Therefore, I started my research by reading in these two areas. As a result of my reading, I found that group and pair work can increase student talking time, providing opportunities for the students to produce the target language and to have input in the target language and as a result the opportunity to test their hypotheses about the target language.

Because my immediate concern was to increase student-student interaction and student talking time I decided to include pair work and group work in my second peer-teaching. The next step in my research was to observe three lessons (reading/speaking, vocabulary and integrated skills), using three different observation schemes. The first one was to find out the ratio of student turns and teacher turns in whole class activities, The second was used to identify the kinds of interaction taking place in the lesson and the amount of student talking time in pair/group work,. and the last scheme was designed to find out the types of activities and the quality of the interaction in these activities. The data I got from

these schemes were in accordance with what I learned from my reading in the area of student participation.

Therefore, I decided to include pair work and group work in my second peer teaching, and in order to evaluate the changes in student-student interaction and student talking time I decided to use three different methods: giving the students a questionnaire, analysing the transcript of the lesson using two tally sheets and asking a critical friend to make comments. The data I got from these three sources showed that there was an increase in both student-student interaction and student talking time.

3. Evaluations and reflections

3.1 Ongoing and mid-term evaluation

As part of the tutors' own teacher-research into the effectiveness of the changes introduced into the Professional Practice course, feedback from students was elicited on an ongoing basis, both informally and formally. In response to informal feedback, an extra week was added for investigation of research questions, delaying the second peer-teaching experience (as mentioned above). Formally, a mid-term (end of week 5) evaluation was carried out by means of a simple open-ended questionnaire (eliciting 'Good points' and 'Points to improve' about the course). Good points mentioned by many participants at that point were that the course was 'well-structured' and provided good opportunities for practice teaching. However, the evaluation also revealed insecurities and confusion on the part of some participants. In particular, there were many requests for feedback from tutors on peer-teaching. This led the course tutors to explain more carefully why they were not providing feedback, namely so that participants could develop expertise in self-evaluation which would enable them to improve their teaching in the future.

3.2 End-of-course evaluation

Some of the most valuable feedback on the course as a whole came from the overall quality of the students' final assignments. The fact that these inexperienced teachers were often able to produce acute and principled critiques of their own teaching performance in itself indicated that the course had provided a useful structure for their professional development.

More direct feedback was obtained from an end-of-course questionnaire, supplemented by opportunity for open comment. Students were asked to agree or disagree (on a five point scale) with twenty-three statements about the course and to answer four open-ended questions. A total of 16 students responded to this questionnaire.

A summary of the main points emerging is presented here under three headings: overall impressions of the course, perceptions of professional development and anxieties and criticisms.

3.2.1 Overall impressions of the course

- 14 students agreed (8 strongly) that they had benefited and learned a lot from the course. 2 students disagreed with this statement.
- 13 students agreed that the course had been challenging and interesting, while 2 disagreed.
- 13 participants agreed that they had succeeded in improving their teaching in the area(s) they had chosen to focus on; 2 disagreed.

In general, a clear majority of the students had a positive impression of the course. However, there remained two students who consistently doubted its benefits. This pattern

of response is generally consistent throughout the questionnaire and is reflected in the questions inviting comment on more specific aspects of the course (below).

3.2.2. Perceptions of Professional Development

- 14 students agreed that the course taught them how to reflect on their own and others' teaching. Again, 2 students disagreed.
- 9 students said that their views about teaching had changed, with 13 agreeing that they were better able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses as a result of the course.
- 12 students agreed that they had learned to use techniques such as (self-) observation which they would like to use for improving their teaching in the future. 13 of the participants felt better equipped to use these techniques for future research.

In general, a large majority of the students agreed that the course had enabled them to develop professionally. Again, there appeared to be two dissenting voices whose specific reservations are detailed in the following section.

3.2.3 Anxieties and Criticisms

The course leaders were aware that the mode of study adopted would make unexpected demands on students who were not accustomed to self-evaluation, self-direction and collaboration with peers, as opposed to direct guidance from the teacher. Students' responses to questions inviting them to comment on this different learning experience generally show an understanding and appreciation of the guiding principles behind the approach adopted, for example: *'This course enabled me to be more active . . . not just*

reading, but reflecting on, analysing and adopting what I have read to suit my own teaching style was what I enjoyed most’.

- The largest number of students had neutral feelings when asked about the difficulties of the course. Similarly, 6 were neutral about the number of activities, with 5 claiming there were too many activities and 5 that there were too few. However, only 2 students said that the course should be simplified because it had been too difficult.
- 8 students agreed that they had received enough feedback from lecturers, but 8 remained neutral or disagreed that they received enough feedback. For example: *‘Sometimes I couldn’t get the feedback that I wanted at that time’*; *‘I really wanted you [the tutors] to see my teaching and give me feedback on it’.*
- 8 students agreed they had sometimes ‘lost their way’, but only one student complained about a lack of feedback from tutors when he or she was confused.
- 13 students agreed that the course encouraged collaborative learning. Only one disagreed with the statement that group work was generally helpful.

3.2.4 Summary

In relation to the specific, local problems identified in previous years – the starting-points for this innovation (see 2.1 above) – the tutors were satisfied that improvements had been made. There were few complaints regarding assignment overload (the biggest single complaint in the previous year). Although students were engaged in a significant amount of work, the spreading-out of this load by means of encouragement of submission of drafts for separate parts throughout the term seems to have had the intended effect, while the fact that students were writing about a topic of immediate relevance to themselves and their future work seems to have developed a degree of intrinsic motivation to write up. Overlap with the Term 1 Introduction to ELT course had been reduced. At the same time, the course had succeeded in building on the strengths identified in previous years’

evaluations, via an increase in the amount of practice teaching without diminishing the academic/research orientations of the course. Indeed, the whole course combined research with reflection by student-teachers on their own practice to an extent not achieved in previous years. At the same time, there was a sense in which the course provided a better preparation for dissertation research in Term 3 (as well as future teacher-research) since students were engaged in formulating and identifying their own research questions, rather than simply replicating previous research in the literature. Indeed, several students chose to extend research begun in the Professional Practice module into dissertation research (for example, on teacher questions).

A clear majority of the students found that the course provided them with the structures and inputs to enable them to develop professionally. The course seems to have been pitched at a suitable level for the students and the majority clearly appreciated the nature of a course which stressed autonomy and self-evaluation. Nevertheless, at the end of the course some anxieties about the quantity of feedback remained. Several students had occasionally felt a lack of direction, but appear to have ultimately realised that such problems were temporary and surmountable. However, others noted that *'There is a need for a clearer explanation about the aims and procedures of the course'*, and: *'Having a general outline of phases of research before we started would make things more clear'*. In fact the tutors believed that the phases of the course had been adequately explained, but comments such as these show the importance of attempting to make sure that all participants are clear about the nature, rationale and methodology of the course in future years. At the same time, some degree of confusion may be necessary as participants 'restructure' their expectations away from dependence on tutors and towards autonomy as teacher-learners: the overall shift from confusion and desire for more tutor feedback (as revealed in mid-term evaluations) towards generally though not completely shared understanding of the rationale for tutors' *not* providing feedback on peer-teaching was gratifying, and requires further investigation, particularly in order to avoid the problem in the future that even at the end of the course a few students were still left confused and unsure of the course's benefits.

3.3 Reflections

Following completion of the course, the four authors of the present paper met together a number of times to reflect on it retrospectively. Each of us prepared reflections on aspects which interested us individually, and reflections by the two student-participant authors are reproduced in full in Appendix 3. Sharing these reflections and jointly considering the student evaluations reported above led us to focus our discussions on the overall disadvantages and advantages of what we began to term ‘simulated action research’, as reported in section 4. below.

4. Simulated action research as a strategy in teacher education: possible problems and advantages

The evaluations and reflections mentioned above encouraged us to believe that this experience was one worth sharing with others in the teacher education community, and that it might be found more generally useful as a strategy in pre-service teacher education in particular. We therefore began to focus our discussions with a view to preparing a presentation for the TDTR5. conference. As we stepped back from our experiences and viewed them from a wider perspective (engaging in the reflections and discussions mentioned above, and thinking about what would be of interest to a wider audience), we began to define the overall experience as one of ‘simulated action research’. This led us naturally into a consideration of associated problems (‘simulated’ generally having a negative connotation), which we all felt needed to be balanced with consideration of advantages, given the overall positive nature of our own collective experience.

Our discussions led us to realise also that the experience we had been engaged in could be viewed from at least three points of view, in other words at three different ‘levels’ of possible impact: firstly, as a course in this (kind of) setting, in other words as one component within an overall MA programme (considered under 4.1 below); secondly, as

a *real* teaching and action research experience (4.2); and thirdly, as a stimulus and preparation for reflection and research in participants' own future teaching contexts (4.3). The advantages and problems, and the balance between these varied, we concluded, depending on the level of impact being considered. Our discussion of these areas is reported, then, in three separate sections below:

4.1 Simulated action research as one component in an academic programme

Advantages and problems of the course as one component within the MA programme in this setting (and possibly in other relatively 'academic' teacher education contexts) may be summarised as follows:

4.1.1 Advantages

- *A valid educational experience:* The course fulfilled academic demands (students were engaged in research of some quality), at the same time as fulfilling student demands for 'practical' experience. A deliberate and sustained effort was made to build on students' own concerns as these emerged from peer-teaching, and this was appreciated by participants. Indeed, the course was one of the most highly evaluated among all MA modules taken by these students.
- *Linking theory to practice:* The course seems to have succeeded in providing an effective bridge between theory and practice. As Wallace (1998: 18) has stated, 'Action research . . . overlaps the areas of professional development and conventional research, and for some practising teachers may well form a bridge between the two'. We would suggest that the direction of exposure can also go in the opposite direction, from theory to practice. When initial teacher education is carried out in an 'academic' setting, an effective bridge to practice *from* theory can be provided by structured reflection on practical concerns through simulated action research.

- *Preparation for academic research:* In the context of the overall curriculum, the course seemed to provide a good preparation for dissertation research in Term 3. Students were engaged in identifying research questions, planning and engaging in various methods of enquiry, and analysing and discussing results, to a larger extent than in other courses (including even ‘Research Methodology’, where students are introduced to a variety of research methods but without getting the chance to employ them).
- *Other desirable learning outcomes:* In terms of other desirable and transferable learning outcomes, the course engaged students in self-directed activity and collaborative work in carrying out their individual action research projects, and may be presumed to have developed their capacities in these areas. Curiosity and ability to become critical of oneself and others were also exercised and developed within the course design.

4.1.2 Problems

- *Difficult transition to autonomy:* As we have already noted, there was some initial confusion associated with what might be described as a shift from dependence to autonomy, from academic to reflective work, and/or from consumption to production of knowledge. For some students this shift may have been perceived as too abrupt and stressful, hence perhaps the (few) negative assessments in end-of-course evaluations. The course may involve a kind of culture shock as students are shifted from a relatively ‘applied science’ to a more reflective teacher education paradigm (Wallace 1991). This may be compounded by expectations of students that given the title of the course, ‘Professional Practice’, they will be inducted into a ‘craft paradigm’, involving, for example, tutor judgements on quality of teaching. The reality is that, instead, they are required to rely on their own resources, and this can cause friction, particularly in initial stages, during the course. Students’ lack of preparedness for autonomy, and the ‘process’ nature of the course can give rise to negative evaluations, and effective structure and support need to be provided for students who

are confused. The students who would welcome more feedback have a point, perhaps. Too much teacher intervention would contradict the intentions of developing autonomy and self-evaluation. Nevertheless, as the students do have their lessons on video, it might be possible for them to identify one or two short sections of the tape which raise areas of concern. If they could frame fairly precise questions for the tutor about the clip in question, it might be practically possible to provide feedback without becoming overly directive

- *Constraints on self-direction:* While the course aims to develop students' autonomy in pursuing topics of interest to them individually, a structure for this needs to be provided; as noted above, this is necessary in order to provide the guidance which seems to be necessary in supporting participants' transition to greater autonomy. However, there are also other aspects of 'structure', or 'context' in this academic setting which can be defined as constraints on autonomy. Among these we would mention the need to fit the course into a short (10-week) term, and the apparent impossibility in this context of self-assessment (given needs for accountability and comparability with other courses).
- *Overload:* As recognised by students and teachers, this is a demanding course, involving possible overload on students (although spreading the assignment load over the course of the term reduced overburdening associated with the course in previous terms). Burdens are placed on course tutors also (in particular in relation to the need for extra tutorial time, arising from the need for individualised support in action research projects).
- *Logistical problems:* There are equipment and room requirements which can place excessive demands on institutional resources (in particular where video camera equipment is concerned).

In sum, there were certainly logistical problems to be overcome in implementing this course. Indeed, these could be considered to outweigh the advantages in situations where

logistical support is lacking. Also, there were problems connected with the transition from dependence to autonomy which are bound up with the aims of the course. Nevertheless, we should note the potential usefulness of the module as part of an 'academic' programme in developing general research skills at a relatively early stage in the MA programme; also, in providing a necessary link between theory and practice for students with little or no substantial teaching experience and in developing capacities for independent and collaborative work which are presumably transferable to other subjects and future learning.

4.2 Simulated action research as a 'real' experience

Although at first sight there may appear to be many disadvantages due to the simulated nature of the action research experience we have described, there also appear, surprisingly perhaps, to be many significant benefits as a *real* action research (including teaching as well as teacher-learning) experience. This came through particularly in comments volunteered by participants in assignments. Emerging problems and advantages may be summarised as follows:

4.2.1 Problems

- *Differences from a real teaching situation:* Students being taught were generally of a different age, culture, language level, etc., than in a real situation. Their attitudes, beliefs, interests, etc. were different, and the number of students in the class generally lower. Teaching in English was the only possibility in these mixed nationality classrooms, whereas many of the students would be able to / be forced to teach using students' mother tongue in a real situation in their own country. For these reasons, some students wondered whether the specific insights they had developed through the

course would be transferable to the contexts in which they were likely to teach in the future.

- *Differences from a real teacher research situation:* Students in these classes were able to provide more sophisticated feedback than would normally be possible; students were not able to observe classes similar to those they would be teaching in the future, nor, in most cases, were students able to interview teachers from the same context with similar problems and directly relevant experience (in some cases they were able to do so, however, since students on other MA programmes were from their country, while a few students interviewed their own former teachers by email).

4.2.2 Advantages

In counterbalance to the above problems, paradoxically students tended to take this seriously as a *real* teaching and action research experience. From this point of view, certain advantages of ‘simulated’ action research can be identified:

- *Real teaching:* Generally, participants regarded the course as providing at least some experience of *real* teaching. Of course they recognised the simulated nature of the activity, but both teachers and learners in peer-taught classes were willing to approach the activity in a serious manner – they were willing to ‘suspend their disbelief’ and make the teaching situation as real as possible. The fact that participants did *not* treat the peer teaching as a mere imitation is evident from their comments: the opportunity to do peer teaching is mentioned at least six times as one of the best aspects of the course in end-of-term evaluations; indeed, one student claimed: ‘*I can really take theory into a real teaching situation*’ (emphasis added). Further evidence that participants regarded peer-teaching as a reflection rather than an imitation of actual teaching came from the way in which they described their changing perceptions of the teacher’s role. One student wrote: ‘*Teaching is not as easy as I thought and there are so many details to think of*’. Another, in the same vein, wrote: ‘*Teaching is very sophisticated . . . there are many areas that I had never*

thought about'. A third simply commented: *'Teaching is not an easy job!'*. The participants could not have gained such insights if they had felt they were just engaged in a classroom charade.

- *Simplified teaching*: There is, though, a connected point – peer teaching reflects the classroom situation (*'Teaching is very sophisticated'*), but it also simplifies it. There are a multitude of variables in the real classroom: these range from the pedagogic (planning and teaching the lesson) to the organisational (for example, maintaining order) and purely practical (even making oneself heard against background noise). Classrooms are complex and unpredictable places and, of course, teachers have to gain experience of these difficulties, but via peer-teaching student-teachers can at least have the opportunity to isolate and develop some of the core skills of delivering their lesson and reflecting upon it without coping with a multitude of classroom events all at once. In this connection, tutors were struck by how nervous some of the students were prior to their first peer-teaching. One student complained about the presence of an outside observer: *'He didn't say anything, but his presence gave me extra nerves'*. Generally, the supportive atmosphere of the peer-teaching group was a good environment for many of the students to stand in front of a class for the first time.
- *Real teacher-learning*: Finally, it is clear from evaluations that the course enabled students to gain valuable insights in a variety of areas connected with their own teaching. Apart from having a more sophisticated idea of the complexity of actual teaching (cf. above), they reported having learned in the specific area focused on in their research, having managed to improve in the specific areas for improvement they had identified, and having identified further areas (following their second peer-teaching) which they would like to focus on improving / investigating further in the future.

4.3 Simulated action research as a stimulus and preparation for future work

At this stage it is difficult to know whether the project was successful as a preparation for future reflective teaching since it has not yet been possible to follow up on participants' experiences once they are in real teaching situations (we intend to do this in the future: see our conclusion); however, a number of possible problems and advantages in this area did emerge from our brainstorming discussions and from participant data:

4.3.1 Problems

- *Possible discouragement*: There might be a possibility of students becoming discouraged through being too exposed to criticism by their peers and/or under 'continual observation' at an early stage in their teaching life. This could demotivate some students from the outset. There might also be a danger of action research / reflective teaching being seen as too complicated, time-consuming or burdensome. There was no direct evidence for either of these possibilities with our students (instead, many reported having gained in confidence as a result of the experience), although two students did seem to reject the experience entirely, and the perceptions of such students require further investigation.
- *Easier than in real life*: Simulated action research in this kind of setting bypasses certain constraints on 'real' action research while tackling others head-on (see 4.3.2 below). 'Personal' constraints (e.g. family commitments) and workplace constraints (both involving lack of time for research) are bypassed, although the course is a demanding one, since study and research are the main rather than 'luxury' pursuits for these full-time MA students. Material constraints which might apply in a school setting (e.g. lack of reference books, journals, recording equipment etc.) are also bypassed, since such resources are readily available in this university setting. Finally, cultural political constraints (e.g. resistance to change among colleagues/elsewhere in an institution) are not an issue here. Since simulated action research is likely to be 'easier' in some ways than in a real work situation there is a possibility that students will become discouraged in the future if they find themselves motivated but unable to

engage in such research in a real teaching context. At present, they are not explicitly prepared for dealing with actual constraints in the above domains, and this is an area for possible improvement in the future (if, for example, feedback from former participants indicates this need). On the other hand, the stimulus and preparation which *are* provided in other spheres (namely psychological and technical preparation: see 4.3.2 below) could be seen as means of developing the confidence needed for overcoming other constraints: As one of us reflected: *'Although the environment of the course was a simulated one, at least I know how to tackle problems with different research tools, how to access the necessary literature in books or journals and I can use this knowledge for any pedagogical treatment with my future students'* (Appendix 3.1: Sultan Alagöz).

4.3.2 Advantages

- *Validation of action research:* Although some problems arise due to the course being an assessed and 'academic' one (in particular in the area of assignment 'overload'), advantages may also accrue: teacher-research is validated due to its place in an MA programme, while extrinsic motivation to complete the project (for assessment purposes) may provide an initial stimulus which enables the development of intrinsic motivation. Thus, one of us noted (Appendix 3.1: Sultan Alagöz): *'By [the] time we were in the 10th week of the course . . . I had completely forgotten that this was in fact something which I was going to be assessed for'*.
- *Overcoming problems of 'real' action research:* As alluded to in 4.3.1 above, there are constraints on action research in real teaching situations, which may be summarised as follows (adapted from Burns 1999: 47–8):
 - Additional work / timetable pressures;
 - Limited local support / Anxiety about divisions being set up between colleagues;

- Anxiety about revealing teaching practices;
- Anxiety about research skills / producing a written account of research;
- Scepticism about the usefulness of practitioner research / Perceived tensions between researching and teaching.

The simulated action research experience we have described bypasses the first two of these constraints, since action research is central to course work, the course is well-resourced and otherwise well-supported and teaching takes place outside a 'real' institutional setting. Potential problems associated with the course's 'avoidance' of certain constraints have already been mentioned, but these may need to be balanced with potential benefits which accrue from providing a positive experience of teacher-research, free from these constraints, at an early stage in teachers' careers. Students may develop confidence and a reflective attitude which will help them tackle constraints *in situ*. In any case, students are not left unaware of the overall effort needed to carry out action research. As one noted, *'It involved quite a lot of work to do during the course, however, the effective outcome could be seen at the end. I feel I really achieved something!'*

At the same time, the course tackles head-on the last three of the above constraints, which are associated more clearly with a lack of 'psychological' or 'technical' preparation for teacher-research among the majority of practising teachers. From the outset, students are forced to admit, or, more positively, shown the value of admitting their weaknesses. As one student noted, *'I could learn how to improve my teaching based on the weaknesses I found in the peer-teaching lessons'*. Thus, students learn to explore their weaknesses collaboratively instead of being afraid to expose them. Even more directly, students are exposed to and acquire confidence in using a variety of research tools. Considering that a major constraint on action research in 'real' settings may be teachers' lack of confidence in their research skills or in producing a written report of research (in other words, a lack of 'technical' preparation), the simulated action research experience we have described clearly provides one means for overcoming this constraint. Finally, the course is founded on the principle that

practice and research are indivisible, indeed that practitioner research is eminently *useful*. The majority of students appear to complete the course with a positive appreciation of this point of view. Final comments such as the following were common: *'It is important to reflect on what I'm doing from an objective point of view'*, or *'I liked the idea of doing research. I learnt some ways of how to evaluate myself and other teachers. This is important (the first step to further improvement)'*. Several students reported having developed an increased confidence to tackle problems for themselves in the future. Thus, one of us noted (Appendix 3.2: Simla İçmez): *'I really enjoyed doing research. I felt really strong because without the lecturers' advice or without an external person's pointing out what went wrong, I could find my way on my own with the help of the students'*.

In sum, several of the constraints on 'real' action research as summarised above appear to result from a lack of knowledge or self-esteem, relating to a lack of psychological and technical preparation which the course we have described seems to succeed in providing, at an early stage in teachers' careers.

- *An important first step towards teacher autonomy*: Overall, the course gave students an experience of a complete action research cycle which might be expected to contribute to their ability to teach reflectively and learn for themselves in the future. This point was well-expressed in one student's assignment, below (cf. also reflections by Simla İçmez in Appendix 3 on the way the course 'promotes autonomy as a teacher'):

'Any findings that I discovered elucidated the fact that action research was an endless work. Even in the areas that I have investigated for a couple of months, I can still find a number of elements to improve. Action research seems to be endless, but it, more or less, gives teachers who are involved in it the sense of achievement, which motivates them to initiate another action circle since this research develops teachers' autonomy and provides multifarious findings including their own improvements as I found in this research. I believe being

one of those reflective teachers can nurture their positive attitudes toward teaching and prevent them from forgetting students' viewpoints, which is essential to be good teachers. Moreover, it may stimulate other colleagues and make the relationship among teachers more collaborative and sophisticated. I appreciate to have this experience of involving action research, which will definitely be useful in my future career' (Yuka Miyachi).

The availability of resources (recording facilities, books, journals, tutor and peer support, etc.) undoubtedly helped to make this a positive experience of teacher-learning for the vast majority of participants. Thus, students gained psychological as well as technical preparation to engage in action research *in situ* in the future.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that as an innovative MA module there are problems in the course described which can be objected to by some participants, including the heavy workload for both students and tutors. Participants evidently adopt multiple perspectives at one and the same time, however. Despite their criticisms of the course, students saw benefit in it overall as a 'conventional' module compared with most others within the MA programme. More surprisingly for the course tutors, students' positive experiences of this process as a *real* action research project generally seemed to outweigh their awareness of its being a *simulated* experience of action research. In other words, they claimed they had gained genuine benefits from the course as a 'deep learning', reflective experience.. We believe (and have presented reasons and some evidence for this belief) that the experience is advantageous also as a preparation for / stimulus to future teacher-research in participants' own 'real' teaching contexts.

As far as we are aware, there have been no previous reports of experiments comparable to our own which involve *preparing* teachers or student-teachers for action research in an experiential manner. This seems to be true in spite of the fact that teachers' lack of psychological and technical preparedness may be important factors preventing them from

researching their own practice (cf. our discussion in 4.3.2 above). The point we wish to stress is that, as Rana Saka has also emphasised at this conference, it may be necessary to ‘catch teachers early’ if they are to develop the confidence and skills necessary for engaging in reflective teaching and/or action research in the future. Evidently the course we have described addresses only some of the constraints students will face in their future teaching situations: indeed, further investigation is required into the fates of students graduating from our programme in order to further evaluate the effectiveness of the course and improve its potential as a preparation for future reflective teaching / action research. In the future we intend to keep contact with participants after they become teachers so as to further support (via electronic networking and web-resources) their attempts to engage in reflective practice. The awareness of constraints on ‘real’ teacher-research practice in a variety of settings which we hope to gain in this manner will then serve to inform future development of the Professional Practice course described in this paper.

More immediately, the course we have described both meets requirements within an academic setting and engages students in actual reflective practice. In many contexts world-wide, teacher education is carried out at universities, with accompanying pressures for an academic approach to be adopted and resulting ‘dysfunctions’ relating to a theory/practice divide (Clarke 1994). In such contexts engaging students in a simulated action research project may provide an effective bridge between theory and practice which at the same time meets relevant academic standards and prepares students for research of an academic as well as ‘practice-oriented’ nature.

Finally, simulated action research represents a valid educational experience in its own right (apart, that is, from its potential to prepare students for *future* action research and to be compatible with established academic norms). As Wallace (1998) suggests, action research is a form of ongoing structured reflection which leads to professional development (p. 4) and more effective teaching (p. 7). Thus, Wallace and others recommend action research as a privileged learning experience for practising teachers. We would argue that since teacher-learning begins during pre-service teacher education there seems to be no reason why the same benefits cannot be expected to accrue in such a

setting. Thus, the immediately apparent disadvantages of our innovation being simulated need to be held in a balance with the advantages gained, in terms of ‘real’ learning. Students on the course we have described clearly perceived this as a *real* experience of teaching and teacher-learning and reported having gained much from the immediate experience of peer-teaching, self-evaluation, collaborative research with a view to self-improvement and repeated peer-teaching and self-evaluation. On this basis, we venture to propose that the ‘simulated action research’ innovation we have described might be adopted/adapted with benefit in other teacher education settings.

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Appendix 1: Further details of the overall MA in ELSM programme

Source: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/CELTE/courses/ma-diploma/eng-lang-studies-methods/index.shtml>

This course is designed to meet the needs of those who wish to gain a substantial postgraduate qualification early in their professional lives in the field of ELT and who may have little or no substantial teaching experience. It is a twelve-month, full-time, programme of study, consisting of a taught course followed by a dissertation. Its aim is to provide an introduction to the academic disciplines that relate to the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. At the same time, it provides a strong professional foundation for developing practical teaching skills.

The programme

Term One

All students follow Core Courses in:

Introduction to English Language Teaching: this is an exploratory and practically oriented approach to theories, principles and skills in the ELT classroom.

Research Methodology: this course introduces students to research methods used within the range of disciplines relevant to ELT. It begins during the first term and continues into the third term..

Students choose three from the following:

Psychology of Language Learning and Teaching: an introduction to theories of language learning and to psycholinguistics.

English as an International Language: an introduction to the issues that lie behind language policy and planning and an examination of their influence in language training, course planning and implementation.

Spoken English: this involves practical investigation of the characteristics of spoken English. Students will learn to identify and compare different speech varieties and genres, and operate the technical equipment necessary for speech capture and analysis.

The Grammar of English: a broad overview of current approaches to grammatical description and theories of linguistics.

Text and Discourse Analysis: the course introduces the major theories of discourse and raises awareness of text types and text structures..

Term Two

All students follow:

Professional Practice: Methodology in English Language Teaching. This major, double-weighted course aims to enable students to describe, analyse, evaluate and put to practical use a range of approaches, activities, techniques, syllabuses and materials to be found within the ELT classroom.

Research Methodology: this unit continues through the second term, focusing on a range of areas from the second term's programme.

Students choose two of the following Specialist Options:

Language Curriculum Evaluation: a specialised option focusing on approaches to curriculum theory and curriculum reform, curriculum planning and evaluation and with techniques of curriculum analysis.

Literature in English Language Teaching: the option examines ways in which the teaching of literature and language can be integrated and explores theoretical and practical dimensions of this integration.

Phonology and the Teaching of Pronunciation: for those working in contexts where the teaching of pronunciation is important, the course aims to facilitate the development of specialist knowledge and skills in the systems and pedagogy of English pronunciation.

The Use of English: Current Issues in Linguistics: this option provides the opportunity for those with a special interest in linguistic areas to become familiar with current research issues in descriptive linguistics and to consider applications to the teaching of English.

Approaches to Teaching Grammar: this option aims at developing an understanding both of different approaches to the teaching of grammar, through the constructs and theories of acquisition that underpin them, and of their potential usefulness in different contexts.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning: this option provides a hands-on introduction to the rapidly-developing area of CALL and includes the following topics: ELT software evaluation; authoring programs; the role of the Internet in English language teaching; website evaluation; the design of web-based materials; computer-mediated communication; concordancing; multimedia materials on CD-ROM.

Language Testing: the option aims to foster critical understanding of the functions of language testing in varied contexts: its pedagogic function, its classification function and its research function as a mechanism for data collection.

Term Three

Students prepare for and carry out the research to be incorporated in their dissertation.

The first five weeks of term involve the completion of the unit on Research Methodology as well as a range of seminars and tutorials relating to dissertations. After five weeks, students work individually on their own 15,000-word dissertation. They are encouraged to select a dissertation topic relating to the linguistic or professional dimensions of the programme they have followed, and are often able to relate their research to their intended professional role.

The nature of the work

During the course, there are lectures, seminars and workshops, and a range of activities, both individual and group-based, are undertaken both in class and outside. There is extensive guided reading and a number of written assignments in the form of long essays and portfolios of materials or tasks.

Research Methodology has an important position in the course and prepares students to carry out research for the dissertation, with the support of a supervisor. Students have a number of tutorials with their supervisor in the process of writing their dissertation.

Assessment

Assessment is by a written assignment for each course followed plus a final dissertation. The written assignments are 3000 words in length, apart from the assignment on the Professional Practice course which is 6000 words. The final dissertation is 15,000 words in length. Students must normally pass in each component to be awarded the degree. The MA can be awarded with Distinction.

Appendix 2: Further details of the MA in ELSM Professional Practice module

Source: Handout given to students as a preview of the course.

1. Course aims

This course is designed to develop and build on the Term 1 course 'Introduction to English Language Teaching'. Its aim is to develop in you a critically reflective view of practice in English language teaching, drawing on experience, observation and analysis of practice, as well as prior research findings. By the end of the course you will have gained a deeper appreciation of issues relating to:

- Lesson planning
- The selection and adaptation of materials
- The teaching of vocabulary and grammar
- The development of language skills
- General teaching skills and strategies
- The nature of teacher-initiated research
- Classroom observation and analysis of classroom interaction

The course will make extensive use of practical activities of various kinds, in particular peer-teaching lesson planning and practice, lesson transcription and analysis, classroom observation, and interviews with more experienced teachers.

The following assumptions about the nature of teacher development inform the design of the course:

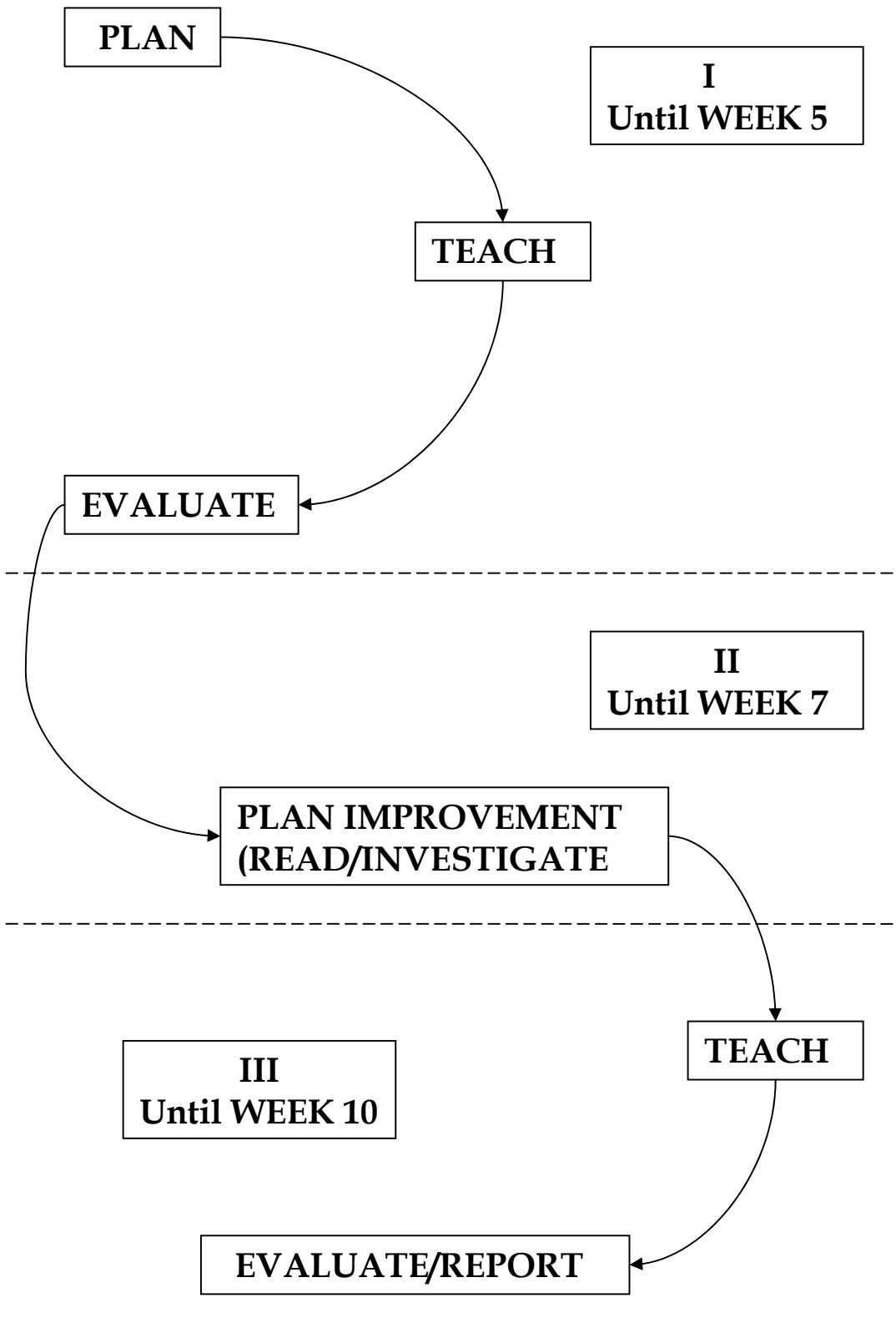
- An informed teacher has an extensive knowledge base about teaching;
- This knowledge base can be extended through self-inquiry;



- Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher;
- Experience is insufficient on its own as a basis for development;
- Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching.

The course is designed according to an 'action research' model. You will have the opportunity to teach, identify areas for improvement, investigate areas of particular concern, plan improvements, teach again and evaluate whether improvements were made. We hope that the experience of engaging in an 'action research project' will be a positive and enjoyable one which will encourage you to continue improving your teaching in the future, at the same time as giving you an experience of research which will benefit your work in Term 3.

2 Course overview



3. Course work

You will be actively engaged in course work throughout the term, and attendance at all sessions is essential. The main activities you will be engaged in are the following:

Phase 1 (Weeks 1 to 5)

Planning

- Decide on aims and materials for a 30-minute lesson to be taught in a particular context;
- Plan the lesson, preparing all necessary materials (including a lesson plan and, if time, a draft theoretical rationale (500–1,000 words) for the tutor observing);
- Prepare to teach the lesson to a group of 6–7 of your peers;
- Prepare a brief note for all participants to explain the (imagined) context for the lesson; hand this out at the beginning of the lesson;
- Arrange for the lesson to be recorded on video- and audio-tape;

Teaching

- Teach the lesson;

Evaluating

- Gather written feedback on ‘good points’ and ‘points for improvement’ immediately after the lesson, from the students present;
- Write down your own reflections on ‘good points’ and ‘points for improvement’ as other students are writing;

- After the lesson, make a transcript by watching the video / listening to the audio-tape; keeping a note of any further points for improvement or other reflections that occur to you as you watch / listen / make the transcript
- Write a lesson report (approx. 1,000 words) on the basis of student feedback, your own post-lesson reflections, your analysis of the transcript, and any other reflections that occurred to you as you watched / listened / made the transcript. End up by highlighting some points for improvement in your teaching / some areas connected with your teaching which you feel you need and want to study further.
- One week after your lesson, hand in your theoretical rationale and lesson report (max. 2,000 words), plus (in appendices) lesson plan, transcript of lesson, all student feedback on lesson, plus your own immediate post-lesson reflections.

Phase 2 (Weeks 6 to 7)

Planning improvement

- Read as much as you can about the area(s) you have chosen to improve and/or study further, taking notes;
- Begin to write a literature review and analysis of your transcript / video in relation to your concerns (approx. 1,000 words)
- Begin to think about how you will attempt to improve / change your teaching the second time you teach;
- Prepare to interview more experienced teachers in relation to your concerns;
- Prepare to observe lessons taught by other teachers in relation to your concerns;
- Carry out interviews with more experienced teachers;
- Observe lessons taught by other teachers;
- Develop your ideas about how you will attempt to improve / change your teaching the second time you teach; Begin to write a description of how you plan to change your teaching, and how you plan to evaluate whether improvement occurs (via student feedback / self-observation / analysis of transcript / comparison of the two videos and/or transcripts); hand in a draft description of your plans (in note form if you like; max. 500 words) at the end of week 7;

- Prepare to teach a second time;
- Complete your literature review, and write a report of your small-scale interview and observational study (approx. 1,000 words for the literature review, 1,000 words for the report, plus (in appendices) the questions you asked in interviews, and the observation 'schedule' you used). Hand these in by the end of week 7;

Phase 3 (Weeks 8 to 10)

Teaching

- Teach the same lesson as before, to a different group of your peers. Don't forget to: Prepare a brief note for all participants to explain the (imagined) context for the lesson; hand this out at the beginning of the lesson; arrange for the lesson to be recorded on video- and audio-tape.

Evaluating improvement

- Gather written feedback in relation to your area of concern, immediately after the lesson, from the students present;
- Write down your own reflections in relation to your area of concern, as other students are writing;
- After the lesson, make a transcript by watching the video / listening to the audio-tape; keeping a note of any reflections that occur to you as you watch / listen / make the transcript;
- Analyse the video / audio-recording / transcript from the point(s) of view you planned, comparing with the first lesson;
- Write a report on this analysis, evaluating whether change / improvement occurred (approx. 1,500 words);
- One week after your lesson, hand in your plan for improvement and plan for evaluation of improvement (max. 500 words), together with the report on your post-lesson analysis (approx. 1,500 words), plus (in appendices) second lesson plan (if

different from the first lesson plan), ‘instruments’ used for evaluating improvement, and raw data (e.g. student feedback) from evaluation of second lesson

Reporting your findings to others

- Prepare to give a presentation to others in the class on either Phase 2 or Phase 3 of your action research project.
- Give the presentation
- Put together the final report on your completed action research project, adding to what you have already written an overall introduction and a conclusion which includes points for possible further improvement in your teaching / reflections on what you have learned from this project.
- Hand in the final version by 26 March.

4. Course timetable (subject to change)

	<u>Tuesday (3 hours)</u>	<u>Friday (2 hours)</u>
<u>Week 1</u>	Introduction to the course; Introduction to classroom research	Evaluating classroom materials
<u>Week 2</u>	Lesson planning; Demonstration lesson (PB/RS)	First peer teaching
<u>Week 3</u>	First peer teaching; Debriefing / transcribing lessons	First peer teaching
<u>Week 4</u>	First peer teaching;	Insights from classroom



Debriefing / summarising
feedback research (1)

Week 5 Insights from classroom research (2) Approaches to classroom research (1)

Week 6 Approaches to classroom research (2) Planning improvements / planning evaluation of improvements

Week 7 Reading week

Week 8 Second peer teaching; Debriefing / Demonstration lesson (PB/RS) Second peer teaching

Week 9 Second peer teaching; Debriefing / evaluating improvement Second peer teaching

Week 10 Mini-conference (1) Mini-conference (2)
Evaluation of course

5. Course assessment

Assessment: A 6,000 word assignment (final submission date: 26 March, 2001)

The assignment will be structured as follows:

Overall introduction

Part 1: A. Theoretical rationale for lesson plan;

B. Report on first lesson

Part 2: A. Literature review / analysis of transcript and/or video on a particular area for improvement

B. Report of a small-scale interview and observational study

Part 3: A. Plan for modifying teaching and evaluating change

B. Report on change between first and second lessons

Conclusion

As can be seen from 'Course work' above, work on the assignment will occur throughout the term, with suggested deadlines for completing drafts of different parts of the assignment as follows:

Part I, and associated appendices: one week after your first peer-teaching experience (at the latest, end of Week 5).

Part II and appendices: three weeks after your first peer-teaching experience (at the latest, end of Week 7).



Part III and appendices: one week after your second peer-teaching experience (at the latest, end of Week 10).

Appendix 3: Retrospective reflections by two course participants

1. Sultan Alagöz

What I had assumed about the nature of the professional practice course before we were introduced to its aims and goals was completely different from what I experienced throughout the course.

I had thought that we would try to practice teaching particular kinds of lessons following some predetermined rules in front of our ‘classmates’ (this word always reminds me of competition) and tutors who would reflect on our performance and critique us. This was the way I had completed my pre-service teacher training course. I couldn’t guess at the beginning that a different approach was taken into account while planning this course, in the sense that we were going to be trained as teacher researchers.

Everything was planned and set clearly at the very first meeting of our class. We gained a common understanding that teaching and training ourselves for teaching were ongoing processes and no matter how experienced we were, critically evaluating ourselves was a necessity for further professional development. I was encouraged to see that this course was also prepared to let us evaluate and reflect on what we were going to do in our practice teaching sessions.

The Process

The plan had three parts: first, we were to choose a specific skill (e.g. speaking) to teach to our peers in groups, choosing the context and age group of students ourselves. As an initial training we observed the demonstration of a thirty minute lesson from our course tutors and learned how to use the necessary equipment like cameras and tape recorders effectively, how to transcribe a lesson and how to recognise our strengths and weaknesses according to our post lesson reflections and the feedback we were to collect from our peers.

We had to create our own contexts and age group of students so we were able to feel the atmosphere in a classroom environment although the situation was artificial. The method that this course followed had left no room for competition, in fact I found myself in collaboration with my friends in every step I took.

The aim of the first peer teaching was to get us start thinking critically over our performance in classroom and to identify an area for development. After having identified a specific point for improvement we were to get involved in an action research cycle to understand and find out possible ways of solutions to the problem. This consisted the second part of the course plan. We all reviewed the literature in the area related with our focus and searched for/examined suitable research tools like conducting questionnaires, interviews and observing other classes from various experienced teachers to better understand how others had tackled similar problems. This provided us with valuable data and insights to use for our second peer teaching. We shared our findings with each other and exchanged views while preparing for the third part of the course plan, our second peer teaching.

This time we all taught the same lesson that we had taught before and tried to see whether any change – either positive or negative – took place and whether there were any other points for improvement. We followed the similar methodology as before; recording and transcribing, having feedback from our peer-students, our own reflections and a few more activities. Some of us gave questionnaires to our students right after the class, some of us involved a ‘critical friend’ and used observation checklists to be able to reflect more objectively on the issue. By this time we were in the 10th week of the course and I had completely forgotten that this was in fact something which I was going to be assessed for.

How I feel about the course

I owe this (not having the anxiety of being assessed) particularly to our course tutors, who provided us with enormous feedback and support during the whole process. While

the course was on its route, we were frequently asked to evaluate the content of the course and to share our impressions and suggestions for its future directions. In this sense, this course was something that we created and brought about all together collaboratively. After completing each part we had to hand in a report to our tutors and in return we received feedback on our work. This made me gain self-discipline and appropriate planning habits, which I am sure I will need for my future career.

I was able to see how theory linked to practice and got many useful ideas by observing other experienced teachers and by participating in my peers' lessons. I learned that the word 'critique' doesn't always have a destructive meaning and becoming critical of oneself and others leads us to recognise the strengths and weaknesses that we all might have. I believe that some curiosity is essential to succeed in any profession. This process I went through established a sustained curiosity and critical thinking in me. Now that I am more aware of myself I feel more confident. Although the environment of the course was a simulated one, at least I know how to tackle problems with different research tools, how to access the necessary literature in books or journals and I feel I can use this knowledge for any pedagogical treatment with my future students.

2. Simla İcmez

- At the beginning of the course: I did not know that I would be doing an action research. I thought that it would be just teaching peers. Therefore, I tried to do my best to prepare for the lesson, which is good because at the end I felt that no matter how well you are prepared, there will still be points to improve.
- While I was teaching: I felt that there was not much difference from teaching in an actual class. The age of the students was important (because I was supposed to teach young learners) but it was not a very important obstacle. I think it was actually good because you can see that in an ideal class with a carefully prepared lesson plan still it is very likely that you will have problems (because the students in my peer teaching

were not actually young learners, there were no classroom management problems, which is an ideal situation in comparison with a class full of young learners).

- After the teaching: When I had to find a point to improve, I felt that this was not real. I felt like this was a kind of game. I had to pretend to find what to improve. Because of the fact that the students were not real students and what I was teaching was not a part of continuous curriculum, but an isolated unit.
- However, after I got the students' feedback and watched the video: I found out that I did not need to pretend. The problem I had was real, i.e., I felt when I was actually teaching in Turkey that I had had the same problem.
- After I started reading and doing research: I really enjoyed doing research. I felt really strong because without the lecturers' advice or without an external person's pointing out what went wrong, I could find my way on my own with the help of the students. Having started to read about the area of student participation, I felt that this was a huge area. Seeing that it is not possible to cover these issues in a BA or in MA completely, I felt that my learning had to go on as long as I kept teaching. Besides, finding on my own what went wrong and doing a research on it was highly motivating. I think this course promotes autonomy as a teacher, making research on a particular subject., while promoting learner autonomy since the teacher has to find out what the learners need to learn for their own specific situation.
- During my second teaching: I was more confident, focused, and motivated. I knew what I was looking for and how to look for it. I knew that this lesson would show me the results of my research so I was very motivated.
- After my second teaching: I particularly enjoyed the fact that I got prepared both for a lesson and for evaluating a point that I wanted to improve. I felt strong as a teacher.
- Overall the course showed me how to be autonomous and confident as a teacher. Within the course we learnt in accordance with what we needed, not wasting time on areas where we feel we are strong enough already. It also showed me the importance of learner autonomy, as the research process brought me closer to the students' perspectives.