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14

The role of microteaching in a university initial teacher education (modern languages) context in Scotland

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Abstract: This article will discuss the use of microteaching as a particular aspect of rehearsal in the preparation of teachers of modern languages. The context is a university course in Scotland preparing preservice teachers for secondary school teaching. The course tutor has always used microteaching as a preparation tool for preservice teachers but has more recently increased its use in response to feedback from preservice teachers. This article will look at the history of microteaching and its potential advantages and drawbacks. It will go on to describe how the university course has adapted it for use in its own specific context and for its own preservice teachers. It will also examine preservice teachers' responses to their experiences of microteaching. These show a very positive evaluation of their involvement with the microteaching activities. Finally, the article will consider how the tool of microteaching can be developed in the future.

Keywords: microteaching, modern languages, initial teacher education, secondary schools

Sammendrag: Denne artikkelen vil diskutere bruken av mikroundervisning som et spesielt aspekt ved øving i forberedelsen av lærere i moderne språk. Konteksten er et universitetskurs i Skottland som forbereder lærerstudenter for undervisning i videregående skole. Kursets veileder har alltid brukt mikroundervisning som et forberedelsesverktøy for lærerstudenter, men har nylig økt bruken som svar på tilbakemeldinger fra lærerstudenter. Artikkelen vil se på historien til mikroundervisning og dens potensielle fordeler og ulemper. Den vil videre beskrive hvordan universitetskurset har tilpasset det for bruk i sin egen spesifikke kontekst og for sine egne lærerstudenter. Den vil også undersøke lærerstudenter sine reaksjoner på deres erfaringer med mikroundervisning. Disse viser en svært positiv evaluering av deres deltakelse i mikroundervisningsaktivitetene. Til slutt vil artikkelen vurdere hvordan verktøyet mikroundervisning kan utvikles i fremtiden.

Nøkkelord: mikroundervisning, moderne språk, grunnleggende lærerutdanning, videregående skoler

Introduction

Context of and rationale for the microteaching

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in a university setting always faces the challenge of balancing more theory-based inputs with more practical, teaching, and placement-oriented activities. This leads to talk of a theory–practice divide, and ways to overcome or bridge it (Anderson & Freebody, 2012; Gravett, 2012). Such is the desire in some cases to eliminate this divide that it is said to not exist. Jones, for example, states ‘the divide is false and unnecessary’ (2016, p. 15). A driver for this focus on balancing theory and practice as much as possible is preservice teachers’ wish for practical experiences in teacher education (Resch et al., 2022).

In the context of the current project, the author, tutor for the PGDE modern languages secondary course, had always used in the course of his teaching the approach of microteaching as a way of integrating a very practice-based focus into the university-based teaching block. Eraut (2009) talks of different types of knowledge in academic/educational and workplace settings and transfer as ‘the learning process involved when a person learns to use previously acquired knowledge... in a new situation.’ (p. 10). He notes that transfer from an education setting to a workplace is ‘particularly difficult’ (p. 10).

It is argued here that microteaching can play an important role in facilitating that potentially quite challenging transfer. In response to preservice teachers’ feedback, the tutor increased the number of microteaching activities from two to four.

Literature pertaining to the topic of microteaching

Microteaching has been used by the author as a way of incorporating practice into the university-based course in order to develop teaching skills (Remesh, 2013). One of the attractive elements of microteaching is its ability to scale down the teaching encounter into more manageable component parts, on the one hand, and to target an increased amount of feedback to the preservice teachers (PSTs) on this particular area (Allen & Eve, 1968). The former element resembles what Grossman et al. (2009) describe as decomposition after modelling.

Microteaching is listed by Schutz et al. (2018) as an example of an approximation of practice in teacher education, alongside role plays, rehearsals, and simulations. As with microteaching, approximations of practice are an opportunity for the PSTs to ‘take on and enact the role of the teacher... and to receive immediate feedback’ (p. 58). They also ‘try to target specific elements of practice and create conditions of reduced complexity... while reducing the consequences of failure’ (p. 57).

It is noted by Grossman and McDonald (2008) that opportunities can be missed in approximations of practice for the interactive element of teaching, due to the complexity being reduced to such a large extent. In the author’s microteaching exercise, it was made sure that the very practice itself included interaction, and PSTs were also encouraged to include pairwork and groupwork in their short section of teaching.

There is one element which Schutz et al. (2018) suggest may also be pertinent, but which was not included in the author’s execution of microteaching, namely the pausing of PSTs at strategic points. This was because the author did not wish to interrupt PSTs’ flow and make the exercise too artificial. It would also risk highlighting, in front of peers, elements of practice which needed to be amended, and this had the potential to unnerve preservice teachers.

Important benefits of microteaching

The choice of the author has always been that the microteaching should be conducted among a group of peers, as advocated by Pauline (1993), rather than as a ‘real teaching situation’ (Remesh, 2013, p. 158), or as a micro class with a small number of school students (Cooper & Allen, 1970). The reason for this is that this ensures the focus can remain on the techniques specifically aimed for the modern languages classroom, without distraction into other related areas, such as behaviour management. This ties in with what Allen and Eve (1986) call ‘seemingly limited parameters’ (p. 181).

Microteaching also places an emphasis on ‘repetitive practice’, which is aimed at helping preservice teachers to become proficient in the teaching

skills required (Amobi & Irwin, 2009, p. 29). This element of rehearsal is an important one in skill acquisition (Fountouki et al., 2021).

Microteaching amongst peers offers the security of a safe practice environment, and a less threatening environment for preservice teachers (Allen & Eve, 1968), in a low-risk situation (Cooper & Allen, 1970). Ralph (2014) also talks of a 'safe/trusting milieu', and 'supportive atmosphere' (p. 22).

The microteaching is an opportunity for valuable feedback (Dayal & Alpana, 2020; Higgins & Nicholl, 2003). The latter study is in the context of nurse education, but the principle still applies.

Microteaching in such a safe and supportive environment also has the potential to increase PSTs' confidence (Remesh, 2013). Crichton et al. (2021) found increased confidence to be an overwhelming outcome of their study into microteaching in modern languages.

A dimension highlighted by Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2011), albeit in the context of a microteaching scheme for academic staff, is the benefit of observing colleagues and getting new ideas from them. Aarsal (2014) also talks about the opportunity for 'knowledge sharing' (p. 454), and Ralph (2014) the benefits of being able to learn from observing peers' teaching.

Caveats in the implementation of microteaching

One, more historic, model of microteaching makes use of checklists to record steps met in the course of the teaching sequence. Remesh (2013) talks of the elimination of errors through microteaching.

The approach proposed in this article, however, advocates a more holistic way of working, which prioritises teacher confidence and a positive experience of techniques, rather than a perfecting of techniques; the latter might suggest a rather inflexible way of teaching, and the idea that errors in delivery cannot be tolerated.

Additionally, the format for the microteaching does not include a re-planning, re-teaching, and re-observing phase as advocated by Remesh (2013) and by Fernandez (2010), who suggest repeated cycles of microteaching les-

son study through which PSTs can adjust their lesson. There are a number of reasons for this non-inclusion, most importantly the limited amount of time available for the university and placement preparation aspects of the course.

Furthermore, an insistence on re-running the microteaching may shift the focus more onto a performance element of the practice, and less on the autonomous, lesson-learning aspect, and may even be associated with a behaviourist approach to learning, unhelpful in this instance.

A key feature of microteaching is the importance one gives to modelling. Remesh (2013) advocates not only the re-plan and re-teach phase mentioned above, but also an observation of a demonstration of the skill. This latter is a phase the author considers to be particularly apposite for preservice teachers, as it sets up a model for them to follow.

Mergler and Tangen (2010) also emphasise the need 'to be exposed to skilled others' (p. 200) as part of the microteaching process, and Boyd (2014) notes the value of explicit modelling of practice with links to theory. Schultz et al. (2018) note that such modelling 'develop[s] a shared understanding of teaching' (p. 80). Certainly, the author is aware that he has used the modelling phase to communicate to PSTs a particular approach to the teaching of modern languages.

There are dangers here, of course: that the emphasis is placed too much upon checking up on the precise replication of the model, and that the microteaching becomes 'an exercise in fault-finding' (Singh, 2011, p. 292); that it becomes behavioural rather than cognitive, and that teaching is being quantified as in the first incarnation of microteaching, through use of a checklist.

It does, however, mean that the priority can become more of a process of reflection, stimulated by feedback (Singh, 2011, pp. 292–3).

Potential drawbacks to microteaching

Microteaching does not, of course, come without its potential drawbacks. As alluded to above, there is a risk that the microteaching can become overly performance-oriented, with a focus on errors made in a behaviourist way. Bell (2007, pp. 25–26) notes its possible stressful nature, and on how it can become a 'high stakes event'. As a teacher educator, one is very aware of how

the school visit by the visiting university tutor inevitably takes on this nature, so it is important to avoid any additional pressure, and certainly not to create a situation where participants see the exercise in the terms Higgins and Nicholl (2003, p. 224) report, such as ‘very scary’, ‘daunting’, and ‘nerve-wrecking’.

Procedure for microteaching

The procedure for the microteaching is one the author has inherited from colleagues, and is based on Mace (1996). The microteaching exercise as originally implemented by the author involves the preservice teacher in the presentation and practice of new language (one key question, one key structure, and a few accompanying items of vocabulary), using a selection of techniques presented to preservice teachers previously. Ideally, pairwork is used in the practice phase too. If they can, preservice teachers are encouraged to teach items from a language unknown to the rest of the group in order to give the event a bit more authenticity in terms of language learning.

In response to feedback from PSTs in recent years, further microteaching exercises have been added to offer preservice teachers more experience in this area, as it is an aspect of the course which they particularly value. The first additional exercise is where PSTs produce a slide for a starter activity. Another involves the teaching of a grammar point, and the final one focuses on the teaching of culture using a ‘cultural artefact’ (an item such as a souvenir or a photograph).

Preservice teachers are asked to plan a short input of 3–5 minutes in small groups. The remainder of the teaching group acts as both the school students and the observers. If they wish, preservice teachers can ask a peer to video record their session for future personal viewing. Following the microteaching, the teacher is asked to identify what went well, and then the rest of the group is asked the same. Next, the teacher suggests possible improvements, followed by others in the group. At the end, the course tutor adds their comments, including both positive aspects and suggestions for improvement.

The above discussion leads naturally to the drawing together of strands to elaborate how microteaching connects to a theoretical perspective on teaching

and learning in general. The author considers it important that the practice of microteaching mirrors good practice in teaching and learning as a whole. Crucially, the microteaching experience is built on the notion of rehearsal as a key element in the learning process, as per Rosenshine's (2012) principles of instruction relating to the review of learning, and also to the importance of the concept of the automatism of knowledge in second language acquisition (Johnson, 2013). The initial step of providing a model of practice aligns with Rosenshine's (2012) fourth principle of instruction. The provision of a live setting where preservice teachers can experience the interactional, contingent nature of teaching reflects the key teaching and learning strategy of scaffolding, with its emphasis on responsive teaching (Wood et al., 1976), as well as Ellis' (2005) eighth principle of instructed language learning, namely the need for interaction.

This links further to the need for an inclusive experience for the preservice teachers, as well as their learners. This means that the microteaching – whilst built on certain shared principles – can be in line with preservice teachers' own choices as professionals and 'educational thinkers' (Lawes, undated), and not overly prescribed via a checklist. The experience can be set up to minimise stress, in keeping with the need for a positive learning experience in teaching and learning (Bao & Liu, 2021).

Finally, the opportunity for preservice teachers to give, receive, and reflect on feedback exhibits best practice in teaching and learning, in line with the principles of Assessment for Learning (AfL) (Priestley & Sime, 2005), and Visible Learning (Hattie, 2012).

Methods

Mini project to gain feedback from preservice teachers

The author decided that it would be helpful to obtain feedback on the microteaching process, both formally and in the context of a small research project. Whilst the main objective was to obtain feedback overall, the research question to be answered was:

To what extent do preservice teachers of modern languages find the microteaching sessions useful?

The open-ended nature of the question was designed to elicit feedback from PSTs to help improve the microteaching elements of the university-based teaching, and to ensure that PSTs could be as free as possible in their opinions, without being overly guided in their responses. This would help to determine whether the principles on which the sessions were constructed resonated with the PSTs' experiences.

Using the university's ethical approval procedure, the author submitted an application to approach PSTs for their views on the microteaching process, using an online Microsoft form with fields for open-ended responses, and this was approved. As it is not permitted to undertake research with PSTs one is currently teaching due to a potential conflict around assessment, links were sent out to former PSTs shortly after their completion of the course. The project covered two cohorts of PSTs. The first of these completed the course entirely online. Whilst this was not during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was at a time when some restrictions were still in place, and the course had already been set up as an online one due to ongoing uncertainties about restrictions at that time. The second cohort was a face-to-face one, the first to return to this mode of teaching and learning post-pandemic.

PSTs were sent a summary of the mini project so that they could give informed consent, and were told that they could withdraw their consent at any time. Assurances around anonymity and storage of data were given.

The questions asked in the form were as follows:

1. What did you enjoy most about the microteaching sessions and how did you benefit from them?
2. What did you like least?
3. What would you like to improve?
4. To what extent were you able to apply what you learnt in school?
5. Please add anything else you would like.

The questions were kept deliberately open-ended so that preservice teachers could express their opinions in their own words.

The data were analysed qualitatively using a thematic coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Responses were in the form of reflective texts, and

answers varied from one to ten sentences per question. For every question asked, each individual free-text response was read several times in order to engage with it fully. Initial codes were then assigned according to the subjects raised, to represent the important features of the data. For example, one PST, when answering the first question (about what they enjoyed most about the microteaching sessions and how they benefited from them), attracted the initial code categories of improvement in planning, effective teaching, immediate feedback and adjustment, experimentation, building confidence, and reducing anxiety. The codes were subsequently grouped into meaningful patterns, which gave rise to the broader themes, which were present within individual questions but also reached across questions. For example, different aspects of planning were categories which became a theme of impact of planning in its own right.

The themes identified for questions 1–3, and to be explored in the findings section below, are as follows:

Question 1. What did you enjoy most about the microteaching sessions, and how did you benefit from them?

1. Impact on planning
2. Identification with future learners
3. Value of feedback
4. Ability to experiment
5. Impact on confidence
6. Authenticity of the exercise
7. Impact of watching others teach

Questions 2 & 3. What did you like least? What would you like to improve?

1. The format
2. The authenticity of the exercise
3. The demands of the planning
4. The online environment

The online and face-to-face groups' responses were analysed separately, but no noticeable differences emerged between the two groups' responses, apart from a few specific ones which are commented upon in the findings section below.

The relatively small number of participants (six online and seven from the face-to-face group, giving thirteen in total), coupled with the limited number of questions (five), means that the data analysis was manageable and can only provide a very specific snapshot of impressions.

The fact that only questionnaires were included means that answers could not be interrogated further, and answers have to be interpreted at face value.

Findings

Data from PSTs: enjoyment and benefits

In terms of the first open-ended question, about enjoyment and benefits, the themes which emerged, using the process described above, are as follows:

1. Impact on planning
2. Identification with future learners
3. Value of feedback
4. Ability to experiment
5. Impact on confidence
6. Authenticity of the exercise
7. Impact of watching others teach

The collected feedback from PSTs will now be considered below, under the headings given above.

Impact on planning

PSTs comment that the microteaching has helped with organisation, planning in general, and in detail in particular, and that the opportunity to not have to plan for an entire lesson also helped. This chimes in with Allen and Eve's (1968) 'scaled down teaching encounter' (p. 181).

Identification with future learners

The comments around the benefits to teaching cluster around the notion of being able to put oneself in the position of one's future learners in school.

Two PSTs comment on the tutor's modelling of presenting new language in Scottish Gaelic, saying how this learning of an unfamiliar language helped them get a feel for how learners feel and made them feel similar to future learners. This emphasises the affective side of learning, and the need to understand one's learners (Williams & Burden, 1997) but also speaks to the need to appreciate, or appreciate anew, the challenges of language learning.

Indeed, three PSTs comment on how the exercise helped them to see the effect of their teaching, see what PSTs would potentially find confusing, and, in the case of a grammar point, how the teaching of it should be broken down in order to avoid possible problems of understanding.

Value of feedback

Several PSTs commented on the value of the feedback, from both tutor and classmates. One noted that it was the immediate nature of the feedback which was helpful and allowed adjustment. Another spoke of the trust and respect built up in the group, which allowed for the feedback to be honest.

This relates to the literature reviewed earlier, which notes the importance of a supportive environment, and this will be discussed again below.

It is interesting how I'Anson et al. (2010) place the focus in their initial teacher education programme's microteaching on reflection and deliberation in the widest sense 'through a critical process of personal as well as social reconstruction' (p. 192).

The focus on the author's course is much more on feedback around the technicalities of the particular teaching activities under review. This focus is intended as a way to enhance practice as efficiently as possible, but it may well be that there is scope for this wider reflection, too.

Ability to experiment

A few PSTs spoke of the ability to experiment, to experiment in real time, to try out teaching techniques, and to have a practice run.

This ties in with the literature on how the microteaching exercise can provide a 'safe practice environment' (Allen & Eve, 1968, p. 182), and this will be expanded upon in the section on confidence below.

In terms of experimentation itself, Gwyn-Paquette and Tochon (2003) make the very interesting point about how experimentation in the classroom can make preservice teachers 'extremely vulnerable' (p. 175), both in the face of a mentor teacher and pupils perhaps unused to certain approaches.

In the author's view, this is a key consideration, and experimentation should be managed carefully, ensuring it is appropriate to, and supported by, any given placement context.

Impact on confidence

A number of PSTs spoke of how the exercise boosted or built confidence. This links in very much with Crichton et al.'s (2021) findings. One PST is specific about how this will help confidence once in school, and another about how teaching classmates is not as intimidating as teaching 'real learners.' Another noted how it reduced anxiety. One is clear that there was 'no added pressure,' and another that there was no judgement but really useful advice and praise. One PST provides a summary statement that the microteaching was conducted in a 'low stakes setting.'

This contrasts with Bell's (2007) observation noted earlier that one of the potential issues with microteaching is that it is a 'high-stakes event' (pp. 25–26). The fact that PSTs comment specifically on this suggests that the conduct of the microteaching in a 'safe practice environment' (Allen & Eve, 1968, p. 182) or 'safe/trusting milieu' and 'supportive atmosphere' (Ralph, 2014, p. 22) is important.

Authenticity of the exercise

Perhaps surprisingly, some PSTs commented on the authenticity of the setting. This is despite no attempt being made by the tutor to set this up as a stand-in for a classroom experience.

PSTs comment on the exercise being similar to a classroom experience, more like a real-life setting, and invaluable as a 'teaching simulation.'

Impact of watching others teach

A large number of PSTs commented on the value of seeing other PSTs' approaches and ideas in the microteaching sessions. This included seeing the tutor's modelling, and one says that the modelling helped as they found it difficult to visualise a teaching approach in the abstract.

PSTs said that seeing others was fun, and that it was good to learn from classmates, see approaches they would not have thought about, as well as to build up a bank of resources and ideas. One also said that planning in groups was a useful way to learn from others.

This echoes Ralph's (2014) findings, and Crichton et al.'s (2021) research, which shows PSTs appreciate the benefits of peer-assisted learning.

PSTs did not give much detail about the specifics of the teaching approaches they have practised. One PST did comment about how useful it was to have ideas for teaching using culture and literature, and another about how the dual coding approaches were helpful. The latter are the use of both verbal and non-verbal inputs (Paivio, 2014).

Data from PSTs: Potential issues

In terms of the answers to questions two and three, concerning the less positive aspects and areas for development of the microteaching exercise, students' comments are grouped around the following themes:

1. The format
2. The authenticity of the exercise
3. The demands of the planning
4. The online environment

These will be considered in turn below.

The format

One PST said that they found the exercise repetitive, and three would have liked more examples and/or guidelines from which to work. Two PSTs wanted to change groups more, due to the desire to work with different class members. Two PSTs felt that the exercise was too short. This is an element highlighted by Donnelly and Fitzmaurice's (2011, p. 342) feedback, where one participant found the limited time available 'stressful'.

A further two would have preferred to have done the microteaching in a language they were going to teach in school.

The authenticity of the exercise

In contrast to the comments above, two PSTs questioned the authenticity of the microteaching setting. One said it was difficult to replicate the real-world classroom due to the controlled nature of the environment. Another said it was 'a bit staged', although still valuable due to the supportive nature of the class.

Again, this is something noted in the feedback received by Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2011) that the set-up was artificial. In the light of this, one may argue that microteaching is perhaps not such a useful tool after all. The author would contend, however, that, on the flip side, it is precisely the controlled nature of the microteaching and the opportunity for extended feedback (Allen & Eve, 1968) which outweigh the artificial nature of the task in terms of usefulness and effectiveness.

The demands of the planning

Many students commented that the group nature of the task meant that planning was difficult as a group online, in terms of agreeing on a theme, and of the time that the process took as this had to take place online.

The frustration and difficulties experienced during planning, although not necessarily in groups, are commented on by Karlström and Hamza (2019).

The online environment

Four of the online respondents regretted the fact that the microteaching had to take place online rather than face to face.

One specifically noted that the online microteaching placed too much focus on manipulating the PowerPoint slides as opposed to the teaching process.

Data from PSTs: Transfer to the school setting

In response to question four about applying the microteaching activity to their placement school setting, PSTs were positive about their ability to do this. The responses are quite individual, and it is hard to theme them. Overall, they spoke of how they could apply the microteaching directly, how it improved confidence when teaching in class, gave lots of ideas for placement, and was helpful for speaking. Another commented specifically on the usefulness for introducing grammar and breaking down grammar explanations for an S1 class (aged 11–12 years), as well as the successful transfer to teaching culture lessons for S3 and National 5 examination students (aged 13–15 years), motivating more reluctant learners. One PST said the microteaching reinforced the importance of practice and repetition for preservice teachers' confidence and pronunciation, and another said they could apply the microteaching in the introduction of a new unit for S1 and S2 classes. Two PSTs noted how the activity had helped with planning both full lessons and a sequence of lessons. One PST comment gives a real feel for how the microteaching activity had given them a chance to rehearse something which could then be replicated in the classroom: '...invaluable experience for teaching lessons to PSTs during placement as I already had an idea of what kind of teaching and activities I was going to try out in the classroom.' Two PSTs responded at length with very reflective answers on how the microteaching has supported their practice. One of these said it was useful in each of the areas around which microteaching was used (i.e. presentation of new language, teaching of starters, grammar, and culture) and reflected on this. Another talked of the modelling in the Scottish Gaelic lesson by the tutor as a basis for her own lessons.

Linked with this more technical side is the affective side, a feeling of reassurance and confidence: 'It was comforting having a formulaic strategy to stick to while gaining confidence and techniques.'

Data from PSTs: Additional comments

Some PSTs took the opportunity to add additional comments for the last question on the form. Three wanted even more opportunities for microteaching, one because it was their favourite part of the course, and one because they had found the session on songs useful and wanted to see if other PSTs had used songs, and which ones. Another wanted to extend it to practice of a whole teaching period. One found it really effective in formulating ideas and experimenting with technology.

In terms of comments for changes, one PST wanted more preparation time in class, and another did not think the microteaching helped with the planning of full lessons or a sequence of lessons.

Two comments show the overall usefulness of microteaching:

... very fun, useful, and imperative for us to get used to standing up in front of a crowd and teaching prior to going into school.

I believe that microteaching provides invaluable teaching experience and offers a practical way to try out different techniques and activities, and therefore should be a key element of any teacher training programme, no matter the subject being taught.

In summary, the above findings show significant benefits to microteaching, such as improvement in planning, identification with learners, useful feedback, the chance to experiment, to experience an authentic teaching setting, and gain ideas from others, as well as an increase in confidence.

On the flip side, there were issues highlighted around the brief nature of the exercise, the demands of planning, and, in contrast to the above, the lack of authenticity of the exercise.

Discussion

Perhaps the aspect of the data which stands out the most for the author is the benefit PSTs said they gained from the observation of other PSTs' microteach-

ing exercises. Whilst much of the literature focus tends to be on the individual and the process in which the individual is engaged, Mergler and Tangen (2010) do note the value of ‘observing what others do’ and ‘both vicarious and mastery learning experiences’ (p. 200). This is a significant point as it demonstrates something evident to all educators – the valuable contribution the PSTs, and not just the tutor, make to the learning of the whole group. This echoes Slimani’s (1989) findings about how listeners (fellow group members) benefit from the initiations of other members of the teaching group.

It is also helpful for PSTs to understand the learning from the school students’ viewpoint. Watching, and just as importantly, participating in the microteaching activities of others adds an important dimension to the experience. On a postgraduate course, it is also clear that PSTs will have a reservoir of experience and expertise which they bring and can share with their peers.

Linked to this is the value placed by PSTs on an initial modelling phase by the tutor. Not all writers acknowledge this phase, although Remesh (2013) does talk specifically about a ‘knowledge acquisition phase’ (p. 159) which involves demonstration and analysis of the skill. In the author’s opinion, this stage is crucial for preservice teachers in order for them to have a model from which to work. The choice by the tutor of a language unfamiliar to the PSTs (Scottish Gaelic) also reinforces that experience of just how clear the teaching steps need to be for their own school students.

It is interesting how one PST says that the group was ‘vulnerable’ when talking about their lack of knowledge of Scottish Gaelic (and other unfamiliar languages in the microteaching experiences) and how this put them in a similar position to future learners. A limitation of questionnaires, of course, is the inability to follow up on the meaning of what is written, for example by means of short interviews. One can only speculate. The word ‘vulnerable’ may suggest that not being an expert in a language and ‘having the tables turned’ was potentially challenging. This may well, however, have been a positive if it helped PSTs see the learning from their school students’ point of view.

In terms of the overall benefits of microteaching, these fall into two distinct categories. On the one hand, there is the acquisition of planning skills, ideas, resources, and approaches (overall and to specific aspects such as grammar teaching), both from their own and others’ microteaching experiences. A part of this is the feedback, which contributes to the improvement

in practice. On the other are the more affective benefits, such as the boost in confidence, and the practice of teaching to a group in real time.

As for the drawbacks of using microteaching in the author's course, the potential negative affective ones highlighted by Bell (2007) and Higgins and Nicholl (2003) seem to have been avoided. The only potentially stressful aspect which comes across is the difficulty of working in a group. This could be avoided by asking PSTs to work singly, but would then also present the challenge of allocating longer in the course timetable for the inputs, but would also remove the benefits of collaborative working.

It may be possible to rotate groupings, but this would be dependent on there being enough PSTs focusing on the same language to enable this. The issue of the microteaching exercises being too short is also hard to change without reducing other important aspects of the course.

Potential developments for the microteaching aspect of the course

One possible development is the formalising of the activity more through more consistent and systematic use of technology. This could include, for example, that PSTs and/or the tutor review a recording of the microteaching exercise. The risk here, however, is that this will change the nature of the activity for PSTs and make it a higher-stakes activity.

Such a change may work well on a course where there is more significant time for the preparation and the microteaching, and where this is a main focus of the course, for example, as formative or summative assessment. In the case of the tutor's course, where the microteaching is one informal element of the course, any formalising of the activity could be counter-productive. On the other hand, it would also give the preservice teachers access to the 'raw data' of their own 'performance', and this would enhance the element of self-evaluation.

The same argument as above could apply to a possible change whereby PSTs submit written reflections afterwards (Karlström & Hamza, 2019), or watch the video of their microteaching and submit a self-evaluation (Benton-

Kupper, 2001). Once again, there is a fear that this formalising of the process might take away the spontaneity and enjoyment from the learning.

Conclusion

This has been a very small-scale project looking at preservice teachers' impressions of a series of microteaching exercises as part of their modern languages initial teacher education course. Responses in the study suggest that this is a worthwhile and valuable component of the course.

Firstly, it provides PSTs with a worked tutor example of how to present new language and, due to the unfamiliar nature of that language, an understanding of what it is like for the school students to learn a language from scratch.

Secondly, PSTs benefit from the process of planning and drawing together ideas and resources, but also from insights gained through observing their peers' approaches.

Thirdly, there are some less tangible gains, such as an increase in confidence and, related to this, PSTs comment on the supportive nature of the exercise which, in the tutor's view, is an essential prerequisite for the successful conducting of microteaching activities.

There are inevitably some less positive aspects, such as the need to facilitate group planning as much as possible, and to enable face-to-face sessions, which may be a challenge for purely online courses. There is also the need to integrate this activity – which can be time-consuming in terms of PSTs' preparation, liaison time, and curriculum time – into what may well be an already full programme.

Overall, microteaching can be a very positive aspect of an initial teacher education programme. Its outcomes may well be enhanced by a tutor's success in identifying key areas that PSTs need to practise, and the ability to create a supportive environment.

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