

In my end is my beginning: Trainee teachers' personal aims

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This presentation reported on a research project examining the personal aims of trainees on a TEFL certificate course. These aims are distinct from the learning objectives for each lesson, and concern areas that the trainees personally feel they need to work on in their teaching practice based on reflection and feedback on the previous lesson. We examined data for 193 lessons taught by a total of 19 trainee teachers on two courses with 4 trainers.

Examination of the data for individual teachers showed that those who had relatively high teaching practice grades generally focused on different areas for their personal aims following each lesson, presumably because they were achieving their aims, whereas those with lower grades tended to stick with the same aim repeatedly, and there was a strong correlation between aims relating to the trainee's own language awareness and poor overall performance.

It was found that the most common type of personal aim concerned teaching skills, including checking comprehension, giving clear instructions and managing feedback. Aims focused on the teacher personally included staying calm and focused, while interpersonal aims included building rapport and getting the students involved. Aims relating to planning included making a more detailed lesson plan, preparing more material and designing more challenging activities. In the area of teacher language, issues considered included spelling and grammar as well as speaking slowly and clearly. For student language, the main area of concern was increasing student talk time.

Lessons given the lowest grades frequently gave rise to aims such as preparing more material, working on language awareness, particularly in teaching grammar, and essential teaching skills such as checking comprehension and giving clear instructions. Aims following lessons with high grades also included basic teaching techniques but were more frequently concerned with interpersonal aspects such as building rapport and getting the students involved.

In order to investigate how far the trainees were influenced by trainer bias in their choice of areas to work on, we calculated how many instances of aims in each category were specified following observation and feedback from each of the four trainers. It was found that the proportion of aims in each category was roughly equal

irrespective of the observer, but there were some discrepancies, with one trainer seeming to emphasize student language much more as an area to work on, while another trainer had a much stronger emphasis on planning.

Other findings incidental to the main question include confirmation that trainees generally obtain higher grades towards the end, as should be expected when a trainee improves during the course. It was also found that three of the four observers showed a high degree of uniformity in grading, with the average grades for each observer all lying in the range between 4.100 and 4.175. Grades given by the fourth observer were significantly higher either because all the lessons she graded were near the end of the course, where trainees generally perform better, or because she had not been trained sufficiently to standardize grading. The grades given by the three main trainers showed little discrimination, with 72% of the lessons receiving the same grade. This was one of the key areas identified for further research and modification of our practice.

More generally, the presentation aimed to demonstrate the importance of action research in our own teaching or training context, and indicated how some of the techniques used on an initial training course could be modified for use in ongoing professional development. For trainers observing teaching practice, this might start with an investigation of what we focus on and what we choose to comment on, supported by the same kind of tools for observation and reflection that the trainee teachers are encouraged to use.

In the discussion following the presentation, it was suggested that repeated specification of the same aim might be the result of some trainees having greater self-awareness and realizing that they still need to work on the same areas. However this seems unlikely as, in the data presented, specifying the same aim repeatedly correlated with low grades, and the aims tended to be less sophisticated, often concerning the trainee's own language awareness. It was also suggested that eliciting trainees' aims for their next lesson immediately after they teach might reduce trainer influence on their choice – although the aims that they specify at that stage are often different from the areas that they actually focus on in the next lesson.