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Reflecting, sharing, acting, reflecting, improving: teachers' professional development in five steps

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Abstract

Teachers' professional development constitutes a lifelong developmental process, since the constantly changing educational data differentiate or augment the challenges of the pedagogical work and create the need for the continuing reform of the teachers' profile. Beyond the manipulation of partial 'technical' didactic issues, training activities have deeper and more sustainable results when they engage the teachers in a profound procedure of continuous reflection, evaluation and reformulation of their teaching and pedagogical practice, so that the degree of their professional awareness can be raised and visible changes in their professional behavior may be traced. The present paper delineates a small scale but multidimensional training programme for the teachers of English in the prefecture of Ilia, Peloponnese, which was implemented in order to promote the self-regulated, responsible and active improvement of their didactic and pedagogical attitude. Using strategies of reflection, sharing, active intervention and reflective evaluation of their teaching choices, the teachers followed the steps of a cyclical process of self-development.

Key words: professional development, reflection, sharing, action research, technology

Introduction

The ongoing economic, social, scientific and technological developments frequently cause the reformulation of the framework of the teachers' roles and tasks and dictate the need for the regular updating of their knowledge and skills (Day, 2000). Professional development aims at the reinforcement of particular aspects or the whole of the teachers' educational profile in the cognitive and/or pedagogical strand, so that their work may demonstrate traits of professionalism (Day, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000). In the light of the broader rearrangements in the education field, the updating of the teachers' profile needs to be permanently and systematically pursued, so as to affect all the elements of their personality, to encourage the regular and deep evaluation of their teaching acts and to result in the improvement of both the partial constituents and also the overall orientation of their work (Wei et al., 2009).

Regardless of the multiple methodological expressions of the professional development programmes (e.g. conferences, seminars, events, workshops, academic courses, e-learning courses, e.t.c.), their structure, and content determine whether these activities aim at the teachers' ability to manage fragmentary surface teaching issues, or at the holistic reform of their personality, that is their attitudes, competences and practices (Richards, 1990). The teacher's ability to realise the reasons behind his teaching choices to reflect

on his performance and to take informed decisions so as to intervene remedially and to impact positively on the developmental process of the educational work is achieved through training activities which promote reflection and action research (Little, 1997). In research, self-improvement constitutes a deeply personal, perennially exploratory process, which is structured on the teachers' active involvement, associated with the data of the educational context, strengthened by collective and collaborative forms of action and targeted towards reflective teaching practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

In order to promote the idea that the improvement of the teaching output, and consequently of the learning results, does not form a prescriptively predetermined procedure, but a lifelong and empirical effort of holistic reform, there was organized a two-month long (February-March 2016) training programme entitled "I share" for the teachers of English in the prefecture of Ilia, Peloponnese. The programme aimed at the promotion of reflective English language teaching and the encouragement of action research via a) the sharing of successfully implemented practices as well as concerns, b) the theoretical empowerment in the principles and procedures of reflective teaching and action research, c) the collaborative solving of problems akin to the implementation of the English curricula and d) the encouragement of critical interventional action for the enhancement of pedagogical performance and learning progress. In this paper we will outline the structure and the implementation process of the programme, with accompanying illustrative samples of the teachers' contribution, as well as the evaluation of the overall venture.

Training as a developmental process: the launch of the programme

The reforms that are periodically introduced in the Greek education system, especially those which address the teaching of English (new curricula, methodological innovations, educational technology issues and so on) typically entail the organisation of thematically linked training activities bearing specific time, content and methodology characteristics. This fact results in the fragmentation of training into a number of discrete areas of teachers' needs on the one hand and on the other, in the inevitable pursuit on the teachers' part of further training opportunities, so that more latent gaps in their pedagogical competence may be filled. Counseling sessions in situ by the teachers' school advisor frequently evoke the need to reinforce the perspective of the teacher as a major agent for the establishment of a quality learning environment and substantial regulator of his students' development.

School diversity, the typology and gravity of issues relating to the teaching of the foreign language across educational sectors and/or classes, as well as the evident heterogeneity of the teachers' competences, pedagogical perceptions and attitudes towards the flow of educational reforms, require deeper and broader pedagogical care. Beyond isolated forms of knowledge and skills, the teacher of English should be competent in not only "knowing something" and "knowing how", but also in "knowing why" and "knowing when" (Bartlett, 1990). This realisation means that in the multifaceted reality of the language classroom, the teacher should have the ability to face all rising challenges, to exploit the positive and negative data in his area and

to act flexibly, autonomously and informatively for the benefit of the total educational context. Such a level can be achieved through continuing updating his subject knowledge, systematic reflective practice, individual or/and collective action and, principally, strengthening his will for personal development.

Systematic supervision, substantiated assessment, self-controlled response and flexible (re)design of teaching and learning experiences constitute elements that are closely linked to teacher personality and their activation might diminish the intervention rate of the school advisor, or the seeking of partial supportive training solutions. In this light, there was launched the "I share" training programme, which aspired to initiate the Ilia primary and secondary school teachers of English into the tenets and the procedures of reflective teaching and action research. The programme lasted for two months, February to March 2016 and combined various forms of training activities, which adhere to the related research-based approaches in the field.

Programme structure

The basic criteria for its design being a) the active participation of the trainees, b) the sustainability of its aims and structure, c) its relevance to the individual school environment and d) the constructive use of contemporary learning approaches and means, the programme comprised the following features:

- a. teacher registration in a special learning group named "I share" created on the educational Edmodo platform (<https://www.edmodo.com>),
- b. uploading by the teachers on a Padlet wall (<https://el.padlet.com>) of a problem or concern they were confronted with during their implementation of the English curriculum in their own classes,
- c. training sessions with the trainees in special interest groups per school sector, and/or geographical area of work, during which they shared via PowerPoint presentations a successful teaching practice they designed and implemented in the framework of the English curriculum (learning scenario, activity, project, e.t.c.),
- d. presentation during the face-to-face training sessions of the theoretical underpinning and the methodological axons of reflective teaching and action research and reflection on the criteria that define the positive and the negative elements of teaching practices respectively (e.g. what makes the practice successful? on what criteria? which factors contributed to the creation of the teacher's concern? how do these affect the teaching/learning experience? e.t.c.),
- e. design and exchange of interventional act proposals for the management of the teachers' shared problems,
- f. implementation of the proposals in the teachers' classes and
- g. digital diary writing using the Penzu diary creator application (<https://penzu.com>) and sharing of the diary entries on a new thematically related Padlet wall.

The title of the programme ("I share") was opted for as declarative of the significance of teacher sharing knowledge, practices and ideas, but also to encourage those teaching a common subject to externalise the facts of their educational daily reality so that creative thinking

and acting can be disseminated. Furthermore, the interaction that is denoted by the title constitutes a basic theoretical principle of reflective teaching and action research. Besides, the active and purposeful development of oral and written topic presentation by the teachers, which forms a significant skill of their role, is considered a long-term benefit of the sharing of the teachers' positive and negative experiences.

The programme began with face-to-face group sessions, where the participant teachers presented to the plenary audience their selected successful teaching practices, on which they were later summoned to reflect, on the basis of the theoretical content of their training. Following to that, they were invited to upload their presentations on the Edmodo platform, where the familiar social networking character of human expression was assessed positively by them and facilitated the flow of communication. An additional web-based task was the description on a publicly accessible Padlet wall of a negative experience/problem/concern related to their teaching reality prior to the sessions. This activity enabled the teachers to perceive that as a group they face common issues, which mitigated their usually confessed sense of loneliness in their professional struggle and reinforced their will for solidarity.

The proposals that were submitted for the resolution or the management of the teachers' shared problems or concerns caused constructive interaction and the second month was dedicated to the implementation of the proposed action plans in class and the teachers' final reflection. The latter was hosted in the form of digital diary entries on Penzu digital diary creator application, which were shared by everyone via the uploading of each teacher's product link on a Padlet wall. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the use of multimedia tools in the programme did not bump at any kind of obstacle, as the participant teachers had been familiarised with the proposed tools during special interest training programmes that have been running in the area for a number of years (e.g. "Synchronous and asynchronous teaching techniques through the Moodle platform", "The digital language class in action", "Digital Storytelling" and others). Apart from that, the task instructions also included succinct guidance regarding the use of the proposed tools.

The theoretical axons of the training programme: professional development, reflective teaching and action research

According to Desimone (2011:29), professional development forms "a complex array of interrelated learning opportunities", therefore, the effectiveness of its activities is characterised as a multi-factor, cyclical rather than linear process. The form of the present training generically abstains itself from the usual training activities, is methodologically hybrid and to a significant degree includes several of the features which international research attributes professional development. Specifically, according to the five criteria Desimone (2011) sets, the training procedure focuses on the content and the methodology of the subject matter, contains activities which engage the teachers actively, reflectively and exploratively in the pursuit of knowledge, relates to the official national education aims, inspires development practices of extended duration and is

characterised by collaborative and participatory collective procedures.

In the daily educational routine, there is an observable tendency for teachers to address the school advisor for the search for solutions even to small scale or technical issues, which could well be dealt with through the teachers' own individual interventions. Given the fact that no training activity can possibly answer exclusively and fully to the teachers' differentiated needs, the management of issues that are associated with the implementation of the curriculum requires continuous theoretical training, knowledge of data collection and exploitation methods will for cooperation and boldness for experimentation with action research projects (Wallace, 19991).

The theoretical background of reflective teaching and action research assumes that teachers should engage themselves in a circle of observation, reflection, design, application, new observation, new reflection and action, in order to improve their pedagogical attitude (Farrel, 2007). Richards (1990:5) posits that through reflective teaching and action research, "key components of professional development", teachers move "move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition, or routine, to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking". The transition from the "what" and the "how" to the "why" of the educational process constitutes a deeply personal systemic approach, which presupposes knowledge and multi-level intervention (Bartlett, 1990). The implementation framework of reflective teaching is outlined by Rolfe et al. (2001), which pose as its spinal elements the question words/phrases "What?", "So what?" and "Now what?". Interpreting the questions, the teachers record whatever in the teaching causes them difficulty or concern, analyse its causes and effects and design interventional corrective acts. In the "I share" programme, the teachers attempted to familiarise themselves with the usefulness and practicality of personally investigating the elements that compose the positive and negative aspects of their teaching, so that they may enrich and enhance the former and reduce the latter knowledgeably and strategically.

The training programme was designed to combine multiple modes of conventional and digital learning, but its nuclear elements in all the stages were *sharing* and *interaction*. The uploading of the teachers' successful practices on the Edmodo platform was frequently followed by not only a brief praising comment but also the statement of a teacher's intention to adopt a shared practice in their own class context, either as such or appropriately adapted (see Figures 1a, 1b and 1c).

The sharing of the teachers' problems and concerns was equivalently significant and triggered the sincere and uninhibited confessions of commonly experienced issues in a friendly and genuine interest-filled climate, which nurtured solidarity attitudes and individual problem solving skills. Figure 2 depicts the exchange of the junior secondary school teachers' negative experiences on the Padlet wall, whereas Figure 3 exhibits the proposals addressed to primary school teachers by their colleagues for the resolution or the management of their expressed problems. Each proposal is entitled by the word "To" and the name of the teacher whom it concerns.



Figure 1a: response on teacher's post by the School Advisor

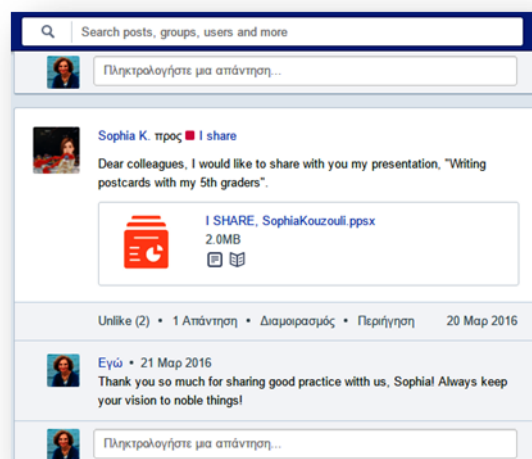


Figure 1b: positive comment on teacher's post by another teacher

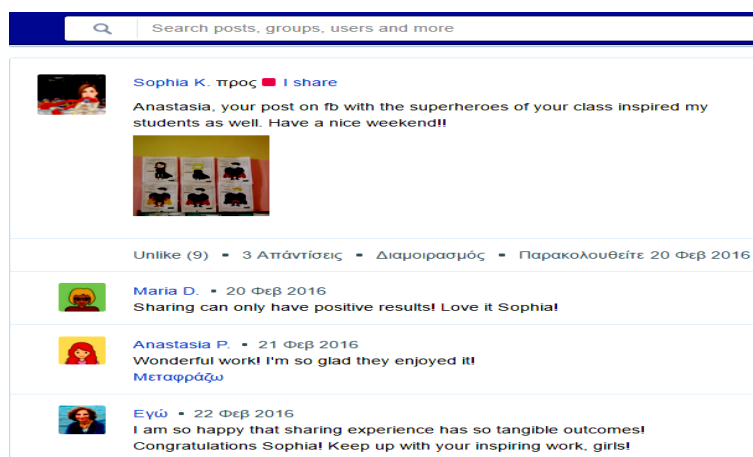


Figure 1c: announcement of the use of a teacher's practice by another teacher

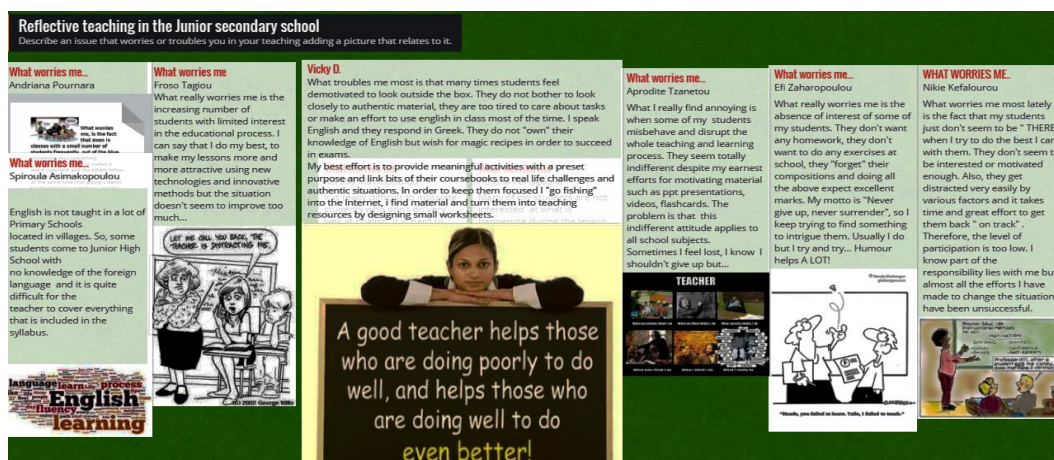


Figure 2: teachers sharing problems and concerns on a Padlet wall



Figure 3: teachers' proposals of action plans to their colleagues for the management of their problems

The last stage of the training programme involved a) the implementation of the action plans which were either proposed to the teachers by their colleagues, or designed by themselves, b) the writing of their reflection on the effects of the action research in digital diaries and c) the sharing of the diary entry links on a thematically related new Padlet wall (Figure 4).

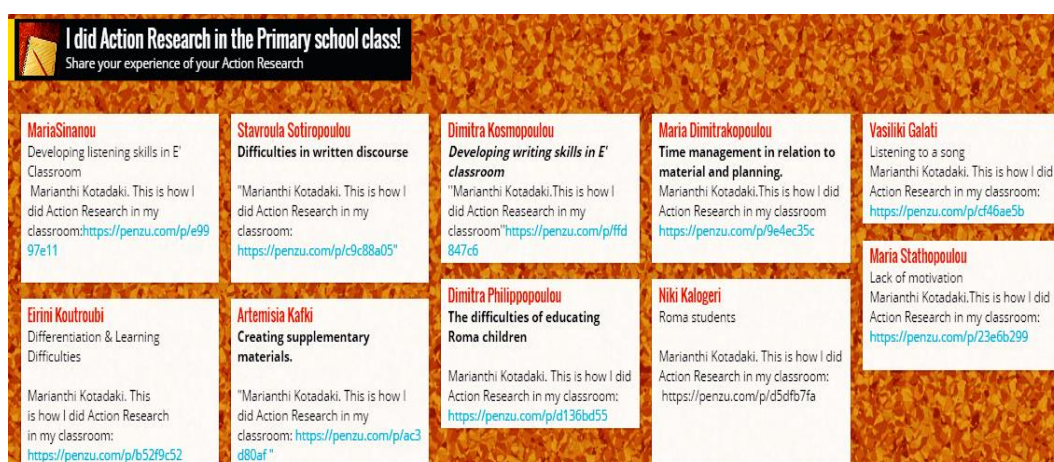


Figure 4: teachers sharing their reflection after the action research on a Padlet wall

Action research refers to the systematic investigation of issues that arise in class, which is conducted by the teachers themselves for the collection data, their evaluation and the construction of interventional action plans, which lead to the examination of the change or non change of the situation and the transformation of learning results (Burns, 2010). As primary investigators, the teachers did not merely record in their diaries their reflection after their active interventions in their classes, but plenty of them also provided tangible evidence of their actions' impact on their students' progress, embedding in their texts related classroom material. For example, a primary school teacher reported the issue of her fourth grade students' inability to produce written texts which are longer than a sentence in English. After researching various methodological

practices that would enable her to solve this problem, the teacher structured an action plan based on the data she collected by using the strategy of student interview.

Gauging the students' major difficulties and needs, the teacher experimented with a series of actions which involved a) the implementation of preparatory writing activities, b) the encouragement of her students to use dictionaries and take notes on the topic, c) the gradual development of their written speech via verbal and non verbal prompts, d) the assignment to them of differentiated activities tuned to the their abilities, e) the use of technology, and so on. The transformation of the writing lesson into an experience of guided language expression, in combination with the feedback gathered both through personal as well as peer observation, granted significant benefits. The increasingly developing written performance of the students on the one hand, and the participation of the linguistically weaker students in the lesson procedures on the other, provided the teacher with the opportunity to not simply assess the classroom data, but also to take decisions on her future teaching acts. As she mentioned in her diary entry, after the preceded teaching of the structure of the written text, *"the next step would aim at greater orientation to quality"*.

Especially interesting was also the action plan devised by a teacher who faced the challenge of the lack of motivation among her Roma students for the production of written language. Here is what she reported in her reflection: *"I designed activities using Esmeralda in order to attract the Roma students' attention and motivate them to practise their speaking and writing skills. I asked them to role-play and introduce Esmeralda to Pinocchio. Then, Esmeralda asked Pinocchio questions using the verb 'can' and words from the lesson (e.g. Can you run?). Then I asked them to draw Esmeralda and Pinocchio and write dialogues using words from lesson 1 and lesson 2. I used an observation checklist to record the Roma students' performance. All Roma students were willing to role-play and they asked for the teacher's help to write the dialogues. Only one boy didn't write dialogues"*. Figure 5 demonstrates samples of the teachers' written reflection in their digital diaries, with accompanying reference to the development of the students' leaning results.

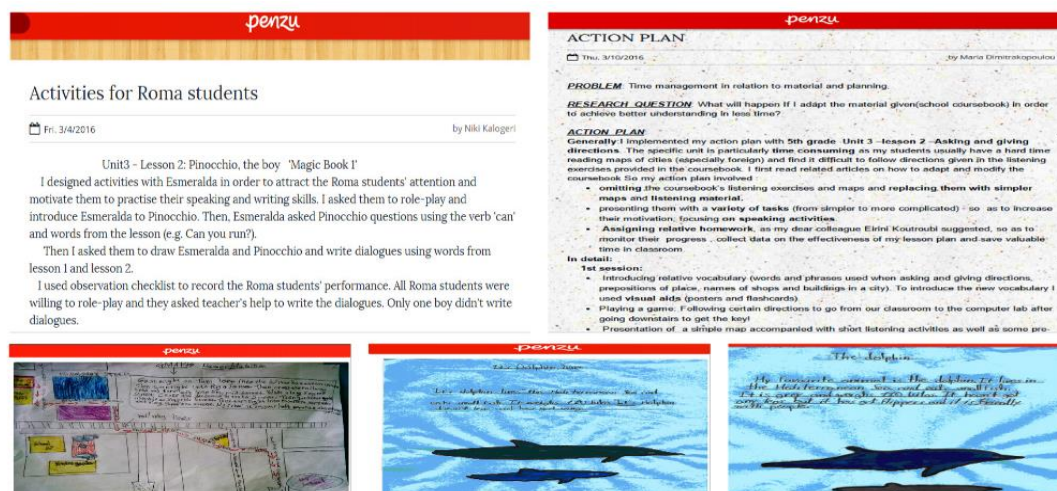


Figure 5: samples of teachers' diary reflection (top) and students' learning results (bottom)

Evaluation

This training experience aimed at the reinforcement of the teachers' autonomy and responsibility in observing the classroom data, locating the factors which boost or restrain student progress, proceeding to hypotheses formation about possible solutions to the emerging problems and implementing action plans for the improvement of the educational conditions. All the training activities were intertwined with the theoretical framework and the real language classroom conditions, so that it would become clear that the recording, interpretation and productive use of the educational data all form part of an ongoing cyclical process (Mertler, 2012b). Substantial qualitative feedback is drawn from the teachers' diaries. Despite the fact that in their final reflection ventures, the number of the participating teachers decreased dramatically (16 out of 47 wrote an entry), their texts include visible and clear evidence of a) the positive contribution of peer interaction, b) the use of numerous and varying data collection strategies, c) the study of thematically related sources, d) their cooperation with various agents and e) generally the strengthening of their professional sensitivity and conduct. The limited teacher participation in the reflective journal writing phase is primarily attributed to the absence from the Greek formal education and teacher training procedures of the parameters of a) the practice of journal writing as a means for professional development, as theory defines, and b) the practice of sharing perceptions, attitudes, concerns and practices among peers.

The holistic evaluation of this complex training scheme was pursued through a short web-based survey, which was designed with the use of Riddle ((<https://www.riddle.com>) online survey creator tool. The ten questions posed initially sought to investigate the participant teachers' assessment of the programme structure, the type and functionality of the activities and the quality of the theoretical content. Subsequently, they researched the teachers' appreciation of the pedagogical utility of action research, the effectiveness of the data collection techniques and the prospects for the integration of reflective teaching practices in their daily teaching, while the suggestion of possible inhibiting factors for the implementation of the training content was also required.

As expected, considering the duration of similar professional development activities, even though the structure of the training programme was assessed to be very clear (78%), the reflection and action research activities were deemed achievable but time-consuming (58%). With regard to the theoretical strand of the programme, the survey provided considerable feedback, since 68% of the participants characterized it as essentially interesting for an English language teacher, 63% acknowledged its potential in enriching the teachers' pedagogical background, 58% commented that it builds self-confidence and responsibility and 47% suggested that it reinforces teacher autonomy. 58% of the trainees also appraised positively the practice of sharing experiences, knowledge, skills and ideas among teachers, whereas 21% of them described this practice as very exciting. 79% of the teachers who participated in the programme conducted action research using various methods of data collection, such as student interviews (74%), samples of student work (74%) and journal writing (63%). Far less (26%) sought the support or collaboration of other

teachers for the management of their problems, while even less (16%) confessed that they would feel comfortable with the video recording of their teaching as a vehicle for monitoring their own performance and the one of their students. No teacher ever mentioned any concern about the prospect of the integration of reflective teaching and action research in his/her daily practice, whereas the overall training programme was very positively assessed (997%).

A dynamic procedure as is the teaching of English, presupposes the use of equally dynamic methods, which shape and enhance the teachers' pedagogical output, the students' progress and the quality of the broader educational procedures. The opportunity that was provided to the teachers to sense their personal role and also their power in designing fruitful educational acts is highlighted in the teachers' diary entries. There, words and phrases such as "I tried out", "I observed", "I realized", "in the next lesson I will need to ...", "I learnt that ...", "there is always something that needs improving" and others, confirm the significance of each teacher's personal contribution to both the development of his working environment and also his own professional development.

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