



EYL Teachers' Professional Development by Distance Learning: The Greek Case

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Teacher Professional Development (TPD) has been characterised as a lifelong process of growth which is mainly career orientated. Teacher Development (TD), on the other hand, is more inclusive of personal and moral dimensions and involves the teachers' active participation in a reflexive analysis of their practices. The paper focused on the case of the Hellenic Open University (HOU), and supported that Reflection and Action Research are powerful tools towards TD and TPD, illuminating this through presentation of the way in which Greek ESOL teachers are encouraged to engage in reflection, along the module "Teaching English to Young Learners" (TEYL), as well as through discussion of the findings of a small scale research among 50 teacher-students of the particular module.

Introduction

In adult education, distance learning has facilitated open learning systems to provide education by distance, thus providing opportunities for flexible and independent learning, which takes under consideration the students' personal needs and professional aspirations. A basic characteristic of "open learning" systems is the assumption that learning is open to all and it is a lifelong process.

In Greece, the Hellenic Open University, founded in 1997 as the 19th Greek university has been the first to specialise in providing pre and post graduate, examination free, education to adults through distance learning, based on the principles of lifelong learning (Edwards, 1997) and the methodological approaches of distance learning (Keegan, 1996).

A major innovation of HOU has been the provision of Masters-level courses to language teachers wishing to specialise in foreign language teaching. The "M.Ed. in TESOL" was the first integrated programme at MA level introduced by HOU and one of the pilot ones implemented at HOU's first steps (Sifakis, 2006). The aim of the programme focuses on promotion of quality of classroom teaching, which can be achieved by both improvement of the teacher-students' language and teaching competence and their pedagogical knowledge as well as enhancement of their professional development according to contemporary standards in language education.

The latter is the main issue discussed in this paper which focuses on the module “Teaching English to Young Learners” (TEYL), one of the elective modules within the HOU’s postgraduate programme, and presents the rationale and the findings of a small scale research on its effectiveness for the teacher-students’ professional growth and personal development. The research aim is to investigate the degree to which the EYL module contributes to the teacher- students’ Professional and Personal Development through its Action Research orientation and the reflexive approach to teacher education which it advocates. Impetus for the study stems from the content and the processes of the module, as well as from the fact that offering to teachers the chance to speak about their thoughts, feelings and actions can play a part in the creation of new insights (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000: 172).

Miller, Lord, and Dorney (1994) claim that emphasis on professional development can result in practical and important changes in classroom teaching and can lead to effective innovations. Glatthorn, on the other hand, clarifies that “Teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically” (Glatthorn, 1995: 41). In our case, teacher professional development is examined as a lifelong process of growth which is mainly career orientated while teacher development is considered more inclusive of personal and moral dimensions and involving the teachers’ active participation in a reflexive analysis of their practices.

In order to establish a clear framework for discussion, in this paper, first the basic features of HOU’s “Teaching English to Young Learners” module are presented and discussed under the perspective of the reflection provoking instances that they incorporate. Then, the small scale study is reviewed and its results shed light to the usefulness of the programme and results in several implications for the classroom practice.

Teaching English to young learners: features and processes of the module

General Features of the module

“Teaching English to Young Learners” is a one-year module among the electives in the HOU teacher education programme. It was introduced in 2000 and so far has received approximately 320 student teachers. The introduction of a module focusing on this specific area has been an innovation of the HOU because no similar course is offered at the universities offering initial teacher education to date in Greece. It has come to meet an educational need at post graduate level. Moreover, it has come to meet the practicing teachers’ need for specialization in the area of young learners. The latter has become imperative in the Greek context since 1993, when English was officially introduced as a foreign language to the public primary sector and a great number of teachers moved from the secondary sector or were appointed as primary schools teachers.

In the European context Rixon (1992) critically comments on the problems this practice has raised due to the teachers’ inadequate knowledge of theories about child development and language learning, as well as their ignorance of techniques which can motivate young learners to language learning. Also, data from the European information network “Eurydice” interestingly show that in some countries generalist teachers are responsible for the teaching of English in the primary sector (cf. Bolster, Balandier-Brown and Rea-Dickins, 2004), unlike our country where teachers are language specialists having attended university studies which place more emphasis on their language development and methodology training rather than their pedagogical education (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis, under consideration).

Some additional elements, supporting the importance of the TEYL module in our context, refer to research findings which indicate first that inadequate transition between primary and secondary education results in secondary education students' feeling demotivated due to:

- Changes in methodology
- The pace of the lesson which is faster
- More homework and rote learning activities (cf. Boodhoo, 2005: 3)
- Limited Interaction
- More demanding Assessment

Teachers in the primary sector are required to find effective ways to teach their mixed-ability YL classes and also to sustain and further develop students' interest in attending their classes (cf. Cameron, 2003). This is rather challenging mainly because of the unsuccessful transition between primary to secondary education and repetition and private schooling factors (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis, under consideration).

Based on the above mentioned characteristics of the Greek context, the TEYL module takes under consideration the concrete management and training implications that are revealed by decisions to introduce English to young learners in Greek primary schools, on a wide scale and aims to:

- Raise awareness of the importance of context when teaching young learners
- Develop a critical understanding of the contribution to practice made by research in the areas of pedagogy and language acquisition.
- Encourage reflection into the degree to which theory can be applied to instructed language learning at an early age
- Enable students to plan a course and/ or create materials appropriate for their own teaching and learning context
- Urge students to carry on their research into the area of language learning by young learners.

Materials, Content and Procedures of the TEYL module

Materials used for the module consist of a set book and a Study Guide accompanied by parallel texts and electronic material, which are relevant to key issues involved in the Study Guide and aim to extend on information and knowledge or to encourage arguments. These function, to a certain extent, as substitutes to extra sources in the cases when student -teachers do not have access to a library.

The Study Guide currently used for the module has been written locally by the Greek tutors of the module, with the collaboration of an English author specialist in distance learning and in TEYL. It comprises eight (8) chapters leading from theory to practice as follows:

1. Contextualisation of Learning
2. Learning Theories
3. First and Second Language Acquisition
4. Oracy in the Young learners' Classroom
5. Literacy in the Young learners' Classroom
6. Designing Frameworks for teaching Young Learners
7. Assessing Young Learners' English
8. Evaluation of Young Learners' Materials

Narrowing down into the processes in the module it should be pointed out that reflection is a featuring component in the TEYL module and it is combined with knowledge leading to Action Research. Mann (2005:108) describes reflection as a process of inner dialogue and conversation with self. He supports that it is a cognitive process during which the teacher develops awareness of practice and he describes awareness as the outcome of a reflexive dialogue between knowledge and experience which can happen individually or in groups.

Reflection in our case is encouraged, first, through the materials which treat subject matter in a way integrating theoretical knowledge with awareness raising and knowledge based activities, as well as with questions which the student teachers have to elaborate and then assess the outcome based on a key. These self assessment questions (SAQs) aim to help student teachers reflect into their existing knowledge, attitudes to teaching and ways of teaching. SAQs also aim to encourage student-teachers to analyse these by means of their emerging understanding of the language teaching and language learning processes, extending thus their Interteaching (Crandall 2000:35-36), as an analogy to Interlanguage, which refers to the mental development of language learners. Furthermore, SAQs act as triggers which generate a “dialogue” between the student teacher and the material, they promote conceptualization of the issues discussed in the material, encourage further reading, help monitor progress of study and pave the way towards assignment writing. Table 1 presents an example of an SAQ which appears in Unit One of the module and aims to raise the teacher-students’ awareness of the main issues elaborated in the particular unit.

The statements included in the SAQ below reflect the main points which will be raised in this first chapter. Indicate whether you agree [A], disagree [D], or whether you are not really sure [?].			
1. Children mainly learn at school, so education should be structured around teachers / teaching in school.	[A]	[D]	[?]
2. The role of culture does not really have any impact on the EFL curriculum.	[A]	[D]	[?]
3. The role of culture does not really have any impact on the EFL curriculum.	[A]	[D]	[?]
4. The recent CEF does not really concern Greece as the Greek context is very different from other European ones.	[A]	[D]	[?]
5. The Revised Unified Greek Curriculum (2001) was necessary after all new recent changes in the modern world.	[A]	[D]	[?]

Table 1: Example of an awareness raising SAQ

Tutor and student- teachers face to face Contact Sessions (CS) also contribute to reflection. During them, reference to the latter’s context is frequent and students get involved in activities which focus, on the one hand on the subject matter content and on the other on their reaction to it as well as on their understanding of the various issues with relevance to their particular context, learning style, experience and knowledge.

Reflection is also promoted through assignments. These engage student teachers in procedures which encourage them to “capture and exploit events occurring in their lessons in their classrooms” (Richards & Lochart 1994:6). Teacher-students get involved in actively analyzing their context and their practices. They get engaged in keeping records of their classroom events, their thoughts and their experiences from teaching or they write accounts which describe the main features of a lesson. Technology is also used quite often, as they use audio or video recordings of classes for analysis and reflection. They also use surveys and questionnaires to collect information about a particular aspect of teaching and learning or get involved in action research. Observation is another method teacher-students find themselves involved in. Quite often, in the context of assignment writing, they have to observe a colleague’s classroom and keep records of a number of teaching events. The example from Assignment 1, presented in Table 2, illustrates this process of initiation to Action Research which

encourages reflection and problem solving and also helps teachers develop in-depth perspectives about the process of teaching and learning as supported by Lacorte & Krastel (Lacorte & Krastel, 2002 cited in McDonough, 2006: 34).

Assignment 1
Observe two successive teaching sessions taught either by you or by another teacher. Then, do the following:
(a) reflect on the lessons (and/or exchange viewpoints with your colleague who taught them) and evaluate them concentrating on the extent to which the teaching approaches employed are consistent with the theories elaborated in Chapters 2 and 3 of the module;
(b) provide tangible evidence for your reflections and judgements by referring to teacher contact materials, specific topics or excerpts from the actual teacher and learner classroom discourse
(c) make sure that the criteria used in your evaluation reflect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how children think and learn, • how children learn the L2 and • how many of the procedures employed in L1 are reflected in L2 learning and actually show up in the taught/observed lessons.
(d) on the basis of the above, make suggestions on how these lessons can be improved.

Table 2: Example from an assignment

Teacher–students participants in the TEYL module

Teacher-students attending the TEYL module are native or non native speakers of English who have a university degree and are practicing teachers with at least three years of teaching experience in the public or the private sector. The latter implies a basic characteristic of HOU’s teacher education programme and highlights the fact that student teachers do not leave their classrooms during their studies.

Although teacher-students opting for the TEYL module are all teachers who have teaching experience in ESOL, they do not necessarily have specialisation in teaching children. Female in their majority, they may be employed at the primary sector, at the time of their study. Some of them teach in secondary schools but claim to be challenged by the subject matter of the module. Their responses to the question: *“Why have you chosen the TEYL module?”* given to them at the beginning of the course through a needs analysis questionnaire revealed educational/professional and personal incentives, as well as willingness to change of attitudes. The former involved intrinsic motivation led by their appointment in the primary sector or connected with past experience in the particular area of teaching: *“I have always adored teaching young learners and I would like to be guided how to do it properly”*.

Some also highlighted the need to broaden their education in the field of language acquisition: *“To raise awareness of how children think and learn and focus on theories concerning Oracy and Literacy skills”*.

On the other hand, some teacher-students appeared more extrinsically motivated stating that the particular module looked more global than the other electives available but also that the content of the module implied benefits for their personal relation with children in the family.

An analysis of their stated expectations from the course, investigated through the same questionnaire, reveals preference to both theory and practice, rather than only practical ideas and guidance. Willingness to change of attitude and practices is also implied. A teacher student comments: *“To learn how a foreign language is better acquired at the ages of 5 and up, to read what theory says and how this theory turns into practice. All this will hopefully make me a better teacher”*.

Another one explicitly states willingness to transform attitudes in teaching: *“To learn more things about young learners, their needs and their expectations, to re examine myself and my teaching approach in order to improve my “behaviour” in class”*.

Considering the aims of the module, its content, the procedures and the participating people the main questions which initiated our research focused first on the degree to which the module achieves to meet its aims for the teacher-students’ professional and personal development and then on the extend of the contribution of reflection to this respect. An effort to answer these questions is made in the following section which presents the research and includes the discussion of its findings.

The research study

The study took place between October 2008 and February 2009. The research tool we used was a structured questionnaire that was administered electronically. The questionnaire included 15 questions, was divided into 3 sections and a Likert scale was used. A number of 100 questionnaires were sent to teacher- students who had completed their MEd studies for one or more years. This was done intentionally, because we wanted to approach teachers who had had the opportunity to implement some or all of the knowledge they acquired in real classroom situations. Messages had to be twice as many recipients did not respond immediately. In total, 50 teachers, teaching in various areas throughout the country, returned the questionnaires. Figures 1 and 2 below present information about the respondents’ gender and their age range:

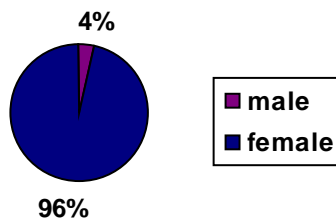


Figure 1: Gender

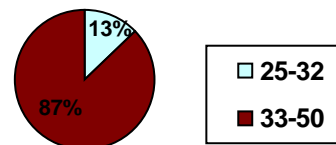


Figure 2: Age-range

We can see that the vast majority was female (96%) and the age ranged mainly among 33-50 (68%). More than half were state primary teachers (60%) which is not surprising considering what we have mentioned before about the Greek case (Figure 3). Most of the teachers had around 10-20 years of overall teaching experience while many of them had a similar amount of experience with young learners (Figure 4).

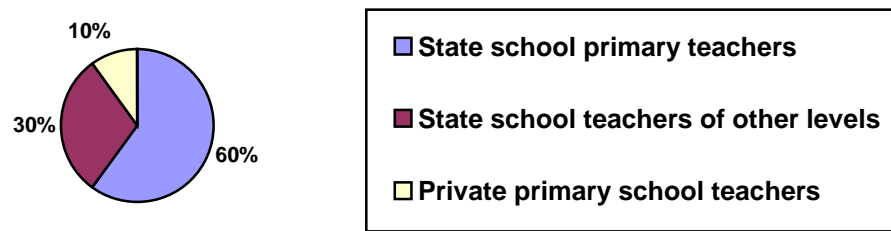


Figure 3: Teachers' position

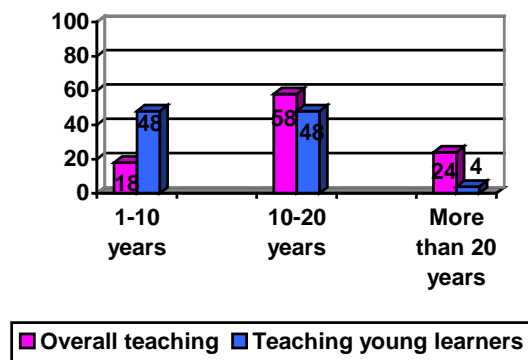


Figure 4: Teachers' experience

Results and discussion

Our first section elicited answers on the effectiveness of the module regarding the teachers' professional development. An overwhelming 98% of the respondents thought it was effective in raising awareness of pedagogical methods and principles while 92% thought that the module improved their professional skills. Similarly, 92% found that the module changed their ways of teaching young learners and 94% considered that the module helped them develop their skills of applying theory to practice (see table 3 overleaf).

In practice, 98% of the teachers found that the module promoted their ability to design materials appropriate to young learners and 96% concluded that there was effective transfer of knowledge to their teaching and learning context. This confirms the earlier finding about the teachers' development into practitioners who make informed choices in teaching. The module seems to have influenced attitudinal factors as well, since the majority of the teachers (94%) felt that after completing the module they perceived a change of attitude to teaching young learners. We think that this is a very important parameter as regards their professional growth. As Lim *et al* (2003:60) argue:

'The attitude of open-mindedness (being attuned to "seeing"), responsibility (seeing the problem situation in different ways) and whole-heartedness (accepting the consequences of action) may be more critical to the reflective process than the specific steps of the process itself'.

In the second section, we also asked whether the module has contributed to teachers' personal development (see table 4). An impressive 98% thought that the module enriched their educational background and enhanced their insights in teaching and learning. Referring to professional status,

60% claimed that they enjoyed an improvement of their professional status. However, 38% argued that they had not experienced any difference in status. This is an interesting, if not alarming finding because it reflects the EFL teachers' dissatisfaction with the estimation of the subject of English within the public school sector as well as their disappointment with the limited measures that have been taken in the primary education sector regarding EFL teachers' rise in higher positions in hierarchy. We think that inadequate response to the teachers' expectations for career improvement can lead to teacher attrition and it definitely demotivates people with high qualifications to enter the primary sector.

	Effective	Ineffective	No answer
Awareness of pedagogical methods and principles	98%	2%	0 %
Improvement of professional skills	92%	4%	4%
Change of ways of teaching TEYL	92%	8%	0%
Application of the principles pertaining teaching young learners	94%	4%	2%
Ability to design materials for YLs	98%	2%	0%
Transfer of knowledge, acquired through the module, to teaching and learning context	96%	4%	0%
Change of attitude to teaching young learners	94%	6%	0%

Table 3: How effective has the module been for the teachers' professional development?

Furthermore, on the question whether the teachers were able to transfer their knowledge to their personal life, 88% responded that they had indeed. This finding is also quite encouraging as regards the choices that have been made for the content of the module. Actually, it confirms what students often claim, at the Contact Sessions, about the benefits they get from the pedagogical content of the module. Mothers often even claim that they become able to understand better their children's nature as well as the way they act and learn.

Moreover, 90% of the respondents found that the module improved their personal qualities and their awareness of the role of English language learning at early age & of the role of English in promoting multilingualism. What is promising is that they got many opportunities for further studies (70%) and an incentive to study further issues related to the content of the module (88%). Our findings confirm the benefits that Villegas-Reimers (2003.19) acknowledges to teacher professional development activities:

'Successful professional-development experiences have a noticeable impact on teachers' work, both in and out of the classroom, especially considering that a significant number of teachers throughout the world are under-prepared for their profession.'

Implications of the module on teachers' Development and Professional growth

The results of the study provide encouraging insights connected with the degree to which the module achieves its aims. Traditionally training programmes such as the one we are discussing target to foresee and describe potential difficulties and problems in class and suggest solutions and alternative ways to cope with them (Peck & Tucker, 1973).

Teachers who have studied in the module seem to have been benefited by the combination of theory and practice and to have enriched their education in the area of language learning and in that of teaching a foreign language.

	Effective	Ineffective	No answer
Enrichment of educational background	98%	2%	0%
Improvement of professional status	60%	38%	2%
Enhancement of insights in teaching and learning	98%	2%	0%
Transfer of knowledge to personal life	88%	12%	0%
Improvement of personal qualities	90%	8%	2%
Opportunities for further studies	70%	28%	2%
Incentive to study further issues related to the content of the module	88%	10%	2%
Awareness of the role of English language learning at early age & awareness of the role of English in promoting multilingualism	90%	10%	0%

Table 4: Has the module contributed to the teachers' personal improvement?

Reflection has also been one of the major concerns in this study. Reflection according to Ashraf & Rarieya (2008: 269) is a 'deliberate and meaningful process that leads to critical inquiry into the teaching process whose outcomes help improve teaching practices which is done by individuals or groups of people'. The intention of reflection is to realise and comprehend a problem and to solve the problem effectively. This involves steps like suggestions, problem, hypothesis, reasoning and testing Loughran, 1996 cited in Ashraf & Rariey, 2008). We think that there is evidence that successful reflection takes place during the contact sessions and also by involving student teachers to perform Action Research for their assignments.

The module has also helped teacher-students develop a whole new, critical perspective to their role and has enabled them to realize that teaching children is not the same as teaching any other age of language learners, although it is based on the same theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, it is obvious that there have also been changes regarding attitudes and beliefs. This also confirms former evidence which showed that professional development impacts on teachers' beliefs and behaviour (Cobb, Wood and Yackel, 1990; Franke *et al.*, 1997; Thompson, 1992, all cited in Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Moreover, teachers have been helped to learn and reflect upon: how to extend on the theory of the various frameworks covered in the units of the material, how to better understand the various frameworks involved in TEYL contexts, how to better understand the various forms of alternative assessment involved in TEYL and how to apply theory to practice.

The main conclusion derived from the data is that the EYL module, offered by HOU, has considerable contribution to the teacher-students' Professional as well as Personal Development. The results of the study imply that the module fulfils its aims and that by involving student teachers in reflection it encourages modification of their values, principles and practices.

Implications of the research study

Several implications emerge from the study. These refer mainly to the issues approached by the study but can be used as food for thought in future planning for teacher education not only in the area of foreign languages. The most salient of these implications implies that in order to develop both professionally and personally, teachers need to:

- a. Have a deep understanding of the content of their subject as well as of the pedagogical knowledge required to teach that content to students and
- b. Think more reflectively about their practice and identify the links between theory and practice.
- c. According to Wang and Odell (2002 cited in Alvarado 2006:3) this is a process that requires structured guidance for all teachers, but especially for novice teachers'.

Furthermore, this study supports the suggestion for an alternative approach to teacher development as recommended by Silberstein & Tamir (1991). According to this approach, expert teachers are selected and for reflection purposes they are observed, their behaviours are recorded and they act as models. The process also involves 'clustering observed events into generalised cases through uncovering behavioural patterns and implicit theories of the teacher' (Silberstein & Tamir 199:178).

It is widely accepted that teachers' professional development significantly influences the success of educational reforms and students' learning. 'The more opportunities the teachers have to be both subjects and objects of educational reform, the more effective the reform and the teachers' work is' Villegas-Reimers (2003:141) comments.

Professional development is an effective way of updating, expanding and widening the knowledge teachers have received while at the same time it provides new input, knowledge, skills and professional erudition. When combined with reflection it can promote teachers capacities and help transformation of attitudes and change in practices. On the other hand, 'the introduction of new curricula, changes in the characteristics and learning needs of students, new research on teaching and learning, and increased pressure for accountability of teacher and school performance' (Education and Training Policy 2005:122) nowadays call for an imperative continuous update and emphasise the need for effective and practical life-long professional development programmes.

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