Embracing assessment: Improving reflective practice by linking task and assessment design

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Abstract

This paper reports on an action research-type cycle supporting teacher learners (TLs) carrying out first or early experiences of reflective writing. Recognising the significant challenge that reflective activity presents to early-stage teachers, our goal was to develop a procedure for reflective writing that allowed writers to experience a wide range of possibilities for useful reflection, while providing needed clarity and support. To understand our challenge, we investigated examples of TLs' existing writing and interviewed them concerning their experience of producing such work. From this, we found evidence that most teachers had adopted a limited range of reflection strategies, and that much of their work was directed at meeting assessors' perceived requirements. Willingness to generate really personal, authentic responses seemed to be inhibited by preoccupation with imagined constraints of assessment. To address these findings, we developed a response that combined the design of an appropriate task with an accompanying assessment instrument. While much literature is sceptical about the value of assessing reflective activity, our findings had confirmed the need to accept its powerful role, directing its washback positively to support TLs' work. To address the problem of too limited participation in the range of possibilities for reflective writing, our task was structured so as to challenge TLs to take part in an extended reflective sequence. To address the issue of limited authenticity due to the impact of assessment, we provided choices concerning which element they could expand to best capture personal insights. These task design elements were matched to relevant assessment criteria, which were actively shared with writers. Our evaluation of the project's success suggested that TLs had benefited both from the task's challenge to attempt sense-making from a variety of perspectives and from the measure of freedom provided to generate personally useful accounts.

Acknowledgements

About the authors

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1

Introduction

The requirement that teacher learners (TLs) should be encouraged to provide reflections on their teaching practice has become a mainstay of TESOL professional training worldwide. TLs frequently produce written accounts or self-assessments of their teaching, typically commenting on the successes and difficulties experienced. Such reflective commentaries have become integral to an increasing variety of professional and academic courses such as the Trinity CertTESOL, university-based TESOL master's programmes and ongoing INSET development.

Our motivation to carry out this research arose from our experiences as teacher educators (TEs) working on a variety of teacher development programmes, including an entry-level professional EFL course and a master's in TESOL, which involved a component of written reflection. While conscious of the powerful potential of reflective practice for TLs' lifelong development, we had nevertheless encountered challenges in developing and assessing TLs' work involving reflection. These were mainly that TLs were:

- usually encountering the task of generating reflective accounts for the first time, often struggling to identify its requirements and expectations

- capable of generating detailed accounts, but producing writing that often seemed aimed at the approval of assessors, rather than personal and authentic reflection.

Given the central role of reflective written accounts in these programmes, we sought to clarify what instruction, guidance and support we could offer TLs to produce writing that was genuine and useful, providing an account of their teaching experiences that facilitated the development of personal insight. We believed it was crucial that TLs should experience reflective work positively, recognising it as a plausible and powerful component of their future practice.

Our key purposes in carrying out the research were therefore to:

- support writing that fulfils a genuinely reflective purpose for TLs, successfully capturing insight from their teaching practice and developing new understanding

- commend reflection to TLs as plausible and effective, rather than an idealised and theoretical process that had to be demonstrated only for the purposes of assessment.

2

Literature review

2.1 Reflection as tool for teacher education

Within EFL and the field of education more broadly, the notion of reflection has become an increasingly important focus of interest for teachers' development. Indeed, it has come to assume a central position in our professional education (Walsh and Mann, 2017: 4). Zepke's (2003: 17) definition of reflection is that it is a 'process to help us learn from our own or others' experiences and to turn that learning into action'. The idea is generally seen as having its historical foundations in Dewey's (1983) and later Schön's (1983) writings, which describe professionals' ability to contemplate their experience of work and develop solutions to the challenges they face. Rather than looking only to sources of academic authority to refresh their skills, professionals can draw on the resources of their own practical experience to develop new insights. Practitioners in any complex field develop insight that is at least as valuable as expertise gained from formal, theoretical instruction. The concept has been taken up enthusiastically in a variety of fields including engineering and medicine as well as education. It has been discussed intensively within ELT (e.g. Richards and Farrell, 2005) comparatively more recently.

The idea of reflective practice represents an alternative to the traditional route for teacher development in ELT. Conventionally, ELT has looked to applied linguistics as its primary source of ideas for teaching. Accounts of the field's history (Howatt, 2004; Richards and Rodgers, 2014) tend to foreground the role of such knowledge. The general view is that:

> Knowledge and information from such disciplines as linguistics and second language acquisition provide the theoretical basis for the practical components of teacher education programmes (Richards, 1990: 3).

Teacher education in ELT has therefore tended to prioritise teachers' exposure to teaching methods that are consistent with the latest language learning theory. Reflective practice represents an alternative to this theory-informed approach to teacher development. Rather than referring mainly to expert or academic advice, teachers are encouraged instead to look to their own insights as professionals to find ideas for effective teaching (Breen et al., 2001; Ogilvie and Dunn, 2010). The shift can be seen as part of a broader trend in EFL, where teachers are asked to place greater trust in their own experience, actively referring to their own cognitions as a professional guide. Ur (2013), for example, argues against teachers' dependence on teaching 'methods', which claim a basis in research generated by applied linguistics research. They should instead consider the resources of their own expertise and experiences of actual work to develop context-sensitive, teacher-led innovations. The idea is also consistent with the perspective of the post-methods movement, which advocates that teachers develop teaching to meet the particular constraints and opportunities (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) of their own classrooms. Its ethos also overlaps with the tendency in ELT literature to consider teaching issues from the perspective of 'teacher cognition' (e.g. Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009) in which it is the teachers' own experiences and beliefs that provide the key to understanding their practice.

Alongside the general consensus in the literature that reflection is a valuable capacity in teachers, there is also agreement that it is difficult in practice to develop. Dewey's original (1933) description of the idea of the reflective practitioner distinguishes between teachers carrying out *routine* and *reflective* actions without suggesting that it is in the power of every teacher to become a reflective professional. His formulation of the concept of the reflective

teacher as a classroom intellectual, developing tailored solutions to new problems, raises a high bar. Reflective practice is difficult for new teachers to achieve (Berliner, 1994; Akbari, 2007). One possibility is that teachers cannot be reliably 'taught' to reflect in a formal programme of instruction, since it is by definition a practice that centres on a professional's independent capacity to develop personal solutions. Studies (Farrell, 2015; Kiely and Davis, 2010) suggest that large-scale, organised teacher development programmes are less likely to succeed than teacher-by-teacher development initiatives. Accepting these observations, it seems reasonable that within a programme for teacher education, the role of instruction regarding reflective practice (particularly in initial or early training) should be introductory and pedagogic, accepting that new TLs will be feeling their way towards the recommendations of their instructors. Exposure to simple models like Gibbs' (1988; see below) famous cycle that abstract features of an idealised cycle can help TLs to visualise reflection and scaffold their first efforts, even when they simplify the complex reality of a real-word reflective process (Mann and Walsh, 2017: 16).

One concern that relates to the goals of our project is that reflection by its nature does not lend itself easily to formal evaluation. A common view is that it is an essentially personal and subjective procedure that should not be institutionalised by procedures such as summative assessment. Hobbs (2007) claims pessimistically that under conditions of assessment TLs will inevitably be encouraged to 'fake' insight to please markers, rather than engage in the potentially risky and messy process of genuine reflection itself. Gunn's (2010) study seems to partly confirm the view that a key element of TLs' motivation in generating reflective discourse is to comply with assessors' perceived expectations. While acknowledging such reservations, our team's view is that there is a strong case for including assessment of reflection in teacher development programmes. If a programme claims to foster reflective practice as a stated aim, it follows that there is an obligation to measure and evaluate the extent to which TLs have developed understanding of the concept. Willingness to assess reflection also represents a commitment by educators to provide appropriate support and feedback on TLs' efforts in developing their understanding of reflective practice.

2.2 Reflective writing

More specific to the research area is recent literature dealing with the topic of reflective *writing* in particular. This topic has generated increasing interest among ELT researchers (e.g. Lee, 2007; Luk, 2008; Stierer, 2002) as reflective accounts have become commonplace as a component of teacher development. Farrell (2013) draws attention to the unique benefits of writing as a way for teachers to record perceptions and make active sense of their experiences. Writing gives teachers time and opportunity for personal reflection, offering them a private space in which they can attend to their own voice. It also, crucially, generates a record of experiences and analyses that can be used as an enduring resource by teachers. Mann and Walsh have criticised institutional 'reliance on written forms' (2017: 5). However, their purpose is not to oppose the practice of reflective writing, but rather to suggest the need to balance written and spoken procedures. Written and non-written forms of reflection are not exclusive options; private writing to formulate ideas can indeed be an ideal precursor to spoken activities where teachers share perspectives with peers and mentors.

2.3 Models of reflection

A number of models have been proposed by theorists that aim to characterise reflection and related kinds of learning activity. A first group present reflection as a process or cycle consisting of linked steps. Kolb's (1984) cycle offers a general description of 'experiential learning' (concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualisation; active experimentation). It is

an iterative scheme, in which the learner may improve constantly through ongoing contemplation of, and experimentation based on, their experience. Perhaps the most influential model in teacher education is Gibbs' (1988) process, whose six stages (description, feeling, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, action plan) help structure a practitioner's response to their experiences. Rolfe et al.'s (2001) 'What?'; 'So what?'; 'Now what?' has the advantage of demystifying the reflective process, making its practical purposes transparent to TLs. A second group of models represent reflection hierarchically, distinguishing more elementary (or shallow) from advanced (or deeper) processes. Jay and Johnson (2002) differentiate clearly between such superficial and deep reflections. Literature based on this approach tends to outline two levels (description, analysis) or three levels (description, analysis, 'critical' reflection). Studies applying such models prize deeper or critical reflective processes to a greater degree, so that El Dib (2007), for example, concludes that the reflections performed by the TLs in his research lacked valuable depth.

The deeper or critical levels of reflection represented in these models generally require that teachers link insights from their experience of teaching either to abstract theory, or to broader moral, social and political issues. This may well seem challenging to TLs attempting reflection for the first time. TLs exposed to this view of reflective practice may also direct their efforts to privilege critical reflection as a focus of their output (Mann and Walsh, 2017: 67). In our experience, TLs working in an academic environment where critical *thinking* (c.f. Bloom, 1956) is especially valued as the goal of academic production are particularly prone to assigning the same status to critical *reflection*. They may therefore perceive descriptions of practical experience as less valuable than abstract analysis and linkage to academic theory. It cannot be disputed that goals such as intellectual transformation are consistent with Dewey's vision of the reflective teacher. From a

lifelong learning perspective, however, it seems wrong to insist that TLs' accounts should always provide evidence of intellectualisation, or personal transformation, as a typical goal for instances of reflection. Tasks stipulating such goals may fail to commend the idea of reflection to teachers, who may thereafter dismiss it as insufficiently practical. Rushing teachers to generate higher-level conclusions also risks obscuring the reality that gaining illumination from experience typically requires time, discussion with peers and exposure to further experiences. Reflection might in fact be trivialised by an insistence on such 'one-shot' writing. Real reflection indeed often consists of 'puzzling' (Allwright, 1992), which has no short-term or guaranteed resolution.

Nevertheless, some sense of distinction between at least 'descriptive' and 'analytical' phases (as in Gibbs' simple model) seems helpful. Even before research took place, an obstacle we noticed in TLs' production of writing was that they were expected to express their reflective ideas within self-assessment forms completed after each lesson. Teachers were urged to analyse the issues they had observed within the same space that they recorded first impressions of their teaching. It seemed obvious that TLs' writing needed to be more conveniently staged; they required distance to consider and make personal selections from the notes they had generated. Even this simple change would support a distinction between useful stages in a plausible reflective process. It would also place less burden on TLs to provide performances of critical reflection in spaces where simple recording of events, classroom talk and emotions would serve as a more useful first step.

3

Investigating the problem: teacher learners' present written reflections

To carry out research that is genuinely solution-focused and addressed to our practical aims, we took an action research (AR) approach to our study. Richards and Farrell (2005: 171) refer to AR as a 'systematic approach to carrying out investigations and collecting information that is designed to illuminate an issue or problem and to improve classroom practice'. AR addresses practical rather than wholly theoretical aims. Unlike most forms of traditional academic research, AR does not culminate in the presentation of conclusions concerning a particular problem; rather it applies stages of investigation and action to develop, then test a real and workable solution or 'intervention' (Nunan, 1992: 41–42). It tends to follow cyclical phases, as new findings and insights from literature allow researchers to revisit stages in the investigation and even revise goals and aims. Formally, our research process was AR-like rather than strictly aligned with the AR model since the results of our intervention could not be easily compared with those achieved before taking action. Since we foresaw the need for new instruments and a new ethos of assessment of writing, direct measurement of 'before' and 'after' work would be made difficult. Nevertheless, our design retained key features of a classic AR initiative,

both in our intention to investigate present problems as a starting point for research, and then to develop a response that built on the understanding gained. Our report hereafter follows the structure of a typical AR report (investigation, action/intervention, evaluation). We will introduce relevant emerging theory when appropriate, but largely draw on ideas from the literature review provided above.

To investigate TLs' struggle with their production of reflective writing, we began by collecting two forms of data to help us to assess both their writing and experiences of writing. The first set of data was a collection of reflective texts produced by TLs which could be read, analysed and coded; the second, a series of interviews with the TLs themselves. We deemed the second step particularly important. So far, suggestions for improvement of TLs' reflective writing have tended to centre on trainers' or experts' evaluations of their performance (e.g. Luk, 2008; El Dib, 2007). However, given the action-oriented character of the research we were performing, we felt the appropriate target of investigation, and best informants on the production of accounts, would be the TLs themselves.

4

Data gathering: text analysis and interviews

We analysed 97 texts over the whole course of the project to investigate the types of reflective writing the TLs had produced. To increase the potential generalisability of our findings for others interested in issues surrounding reflection, we drew samples from as broad a range of programmes and nationalities as we could. This variety also served as a measure to 'triangulate' findings, discovering issues that extended beyond the contingencies of a particular programme.

As there was some variation in the formats of the self-evaluation sheets used across these programmes, we focused our analysis on one section of text that was sufficiently similar across most (88 of our 97) accounts to be directly comparable. The detail of the responses provided in this section, which focused on the area of classroom management and interaction, clearly captured observations about their teaching that TLs felt important. We coded the passages intensively, applying intuitive and transparent 'template codes' (Dörnyei, 2007: 251–254) developed from literature (e.g. 'teacher action', 'link to theory'), which we modified and expanded open-endedly as the investigation progressed.

TLs were interviewed a few weeks after their work had been formally assessed so that they had the opportunity to gain distance from their writing without forgetting the experience entirely. A semi-structured interview (*ibid.*: 136) was used to investigate TLs' experiences of writing self-assessments. To assist their recall of the programme and the experience of producing their written work, participants were first asked to talk through their experiences of teaching and subsequent reflective writing as a prelude to the more structured section of the interview. To address the practical goals of our AR cycle, we focused on TLs' own evaluation of the usefulness of their writing in terms of their teacher development. Also in line with these goals, we further elicited their perceptions as to whether, and if possible how, their writing was influenced by their concern for its assessment.

Table 1: Overview of reflective accounts analysed

Cohort	Number of accounts	Main nationalities
MA cohort 1	36	Chinese, Saudi, Vietnamese, UK
MA cohort 2	33	Chinese, Saudi, Vietnamese, UK
Professional TESOL training	16	UK or EU nationals
Work experience placement for UG students	12	UK nationals

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Findings: limited variety in reflection, preoccupation with assessment

Our coding of TLs' accounts showed that they had produced some variety of 'types' of reflective writing. However, as Figure 1 shows, much of the writing generated was coded as having a descriptive function. On noticing this trend, a sample of the passages were analysed to identify tendencies in the structure and function of sentences. A common pattern was for TLs to begin the section with an assessment – usually positive – of their performance, then enumerate one or more classroom measures that supported their claim of success or failure in classroom management. Where it occurred, this pattern imposed limitations on the types of reflective ideas the writers expressed.

The chart also indicates that other types of writing were attempted, even including some of the prized categories described in the literature as 'deep'

reflection. These included (using our coding categories) linkage to theory, speculation on alternative or future courses of action and recall of the TLs' emotional response to classroom events. Table 2 provides examples for each category. As shown, the samples of writing even included a few comments that appeared to have a quite critical function, considering TLs' own roles and presuppositions as teachers. Interpreted positively, some TLs had attempted more than mere description of their experiences. More cautiously, taking into account interviewees' comments (see below), the data suggested that there was a lack of clarity of purpose in writers' responses, as well as evidence of their guessing what kinds of writing were valued by their assessors.

Figure 1: Types of reflection identified in the accounts

Legend:
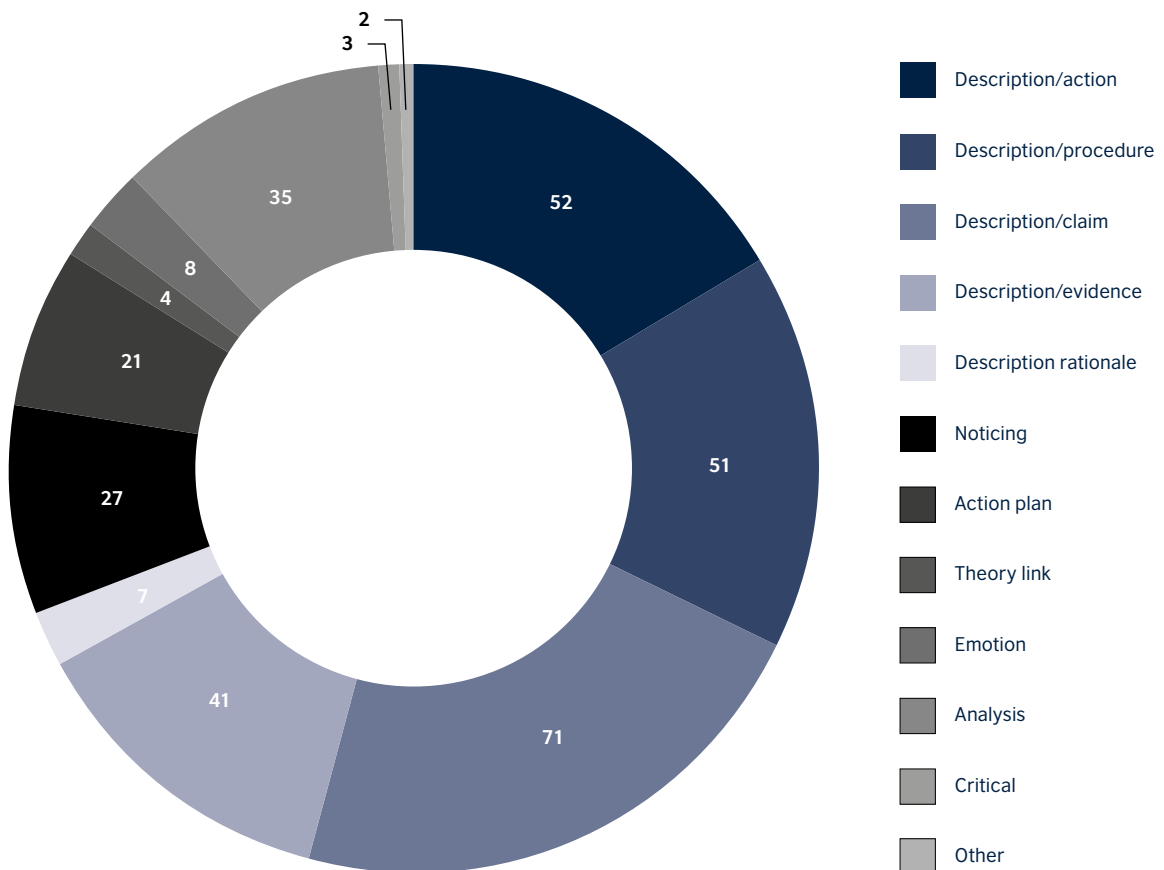- Description/action
- Description/procedure
- Description/claim
- Description/evidence
- Description rationale
- Noticing
- Action plan
- Theory link
- Emotion
- Analysis
- Critical
- Other

Values shown: 2, 3, 35, 52, 51, 71, 41, 7, 27, 21, 4, 8

Table 2: Illustrative examples of TL reflective writing coded as having a non-descriptive function

Codes/themes	Example text[1]
Theory link	The lesson started with a 'schema processing' (Urquhart and Weir, 1998) to have learners guess the form of reading text and finished with the set of reading questions.
Action plan	Another way is give students more chance to answer question, for example, throw some open questions to them.
Emotion	I found it comforting that the students seemed at ease with me, sharing aspects about their specific cultures.
Critical reflection	Through this reflection, I have realised that the teacher should embrace a flexible teaching strategy that can accommodate the different needs of the students.
Noticing	When I introduced the exercise to the students, they were listening carefully and to finish it according to my requires.
Analysis	When it comes to foster the relationships and equal opportunities, every learners in my class had the equal chances to share their ideas.

Interviews with the first group of TLs were carried out concurrently with the analysis of writing. Many of the TLs (14 of those interviewed) said explicitly that they had found the reflective writing work very useful. One interviewee said the experience had been 'critical' to her – an opportunity to 'grow up a little bit'. Another described it as an 'opportunity to change'. A third said that in the past she had 'hated reflections' but had now 'had a chance to write it down, express challenges'. This contradicted the gloomy evaluation of assessed writing that had appeared in some of the literature. Despite their struggle, these TLs clearly appreciated the opportunity to carry out this work, and some even saw it as a special opportunity, making the best of the limited teaching practice they had been afforded.

However, in response to our queries as to how TLs had been affected by their consciousness of assessment, many shared that they had indeed felt its pressure and worked primarily towards perceived requirements. Fourteen of the interviewees gave responses that underlined a tension between the authenticity of their content and their desire to demonstrate ideas that would be judged favourably by assessors. Some comments on these lines were:

- 'Just for marks I tried to make marker aware [...] I had good knowledge, [e.g.] using references'

- 'It is possible that I [changed it for assessment]. I might add some problems but I am not sure if these are [real].'

- 'I didn't write authentically'

Not all of the respondents felt this pressure. One TL said explicitly they had not carried out the work only to satisfy the course's requirements ('I didn't do because I need to'). Another said that they avoided writing non-authentic reflections because assessors could 'figure out' what was real. However, three of those interviewed mentioned specific strategies used to impress markers. One said that they 'didn't write negative things', excluding records of events that might reflect poorly on their teaching. Another said that they had modified their writing to enhance good elements in their performance, while they 'removed bad' points. A third said that 'to get a high mark' they had to spend a long time generating an account that was longer than they could practically sustain in real-world practice.

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1   Where non-native-speaker English has been provided by participants, comments are presented as written or spoken.

6

Action: using washback as a tool for change

An obvious conclusion from the analysis of the reflective writing was that the TLs were clearly struggling with the considerable task of learning reflection as an unfamiliar and daunting new practice. Despite some TLs' exposure to models describing the reflective process during programmes, most interviewees indicated little to no experience of actual reflective writing beforehand. While the range of types of reflection observed in the accounts pointed to TLs' wholehearted engagement with the task of reflective writing, it also at times suggested confusion and lack of certainty concerning the type of writing desired. Luk (2008) has posited that reflective accounts represent an emerging new written genre, in which writers are restricted by the implicit conventions of content, organisation and function that adhere to any genre type. Analysis of TLs' accounts and interviews suggested that they were indeed struggling to master reflective writing as an unfamiliar type of written performance.

Drawing conclusions that related directly to the practical aims of our project, we noted overall that TLs' writing:

■ was limited in terms of demonstrating TLs' appreciation of the various stages of reflection; this suggested that the present task did not adequately expose TLs to the range of options available for sense-making of teaching experience

■ was inhibited by a preoccupation with the imagined constraints of assessment, limiting the willingness of TLs to generate really authentic, personally relevant responses.

An obvious first site of intervention, targeted even at the start of the research, was to provide an additional instrument to the pro formas used by the TLs. Although the pro formas were formatted to record teachers' accounts of events shortly after teaching, TLs had nevertheless felt the pressure to produce 'deeper' linkage to theory or action plans. Such comments, inserted immediately after or during passages describing early impressions, sometimes felt forced. A common theme in the literature describing reflection is that we can distinguish between descriptive ('What?') and analytical ('So what?') phases of cognition. TLs' writing needed to be staged explicitly according to this distinction. To improve writing we would therefore develop an alternative instrument, completed after there had been time to make sense of their experiences, to scaffold a second stage of more analytical writing. Use of the pro formas was retained for a variety of reasons – some institutional – and kept as a first step in a more feasible, staged process. Apart from its alignment with the tendency in literature to separate descriptive and analytical stages, this design supported the recommendation that reflective work should be 'data-driven' (Walsh and Mann, 2017), since teachers could use their self-assessment notes to identify recurring themes and discern ideas that retained significance after time. It also addressed the obvious need for TLs to select events they found personally relevant, improving the likelihood that reflections would be authentic.

After this minor but important practical amendment, our main intervention was in the development of a new task to support teachers' writing, with an accompanying set of assessment criteria that supported its intended impact on writers' efforts. This was an acknowledgement of the observed importance of assessment to TLs' experience of writing. In much of the literature surveyed, there had been a tendency to consider the assessment of reflection problematic – something to be avoided. Yet writers also acknowledge the growing importance of reflective practice as a locus for teacher development in formal programmes, where assessment might seem inevitable. Our interviews had shown that efforts to calm TLs' concerns about impending scrutiny of their writing would likely be in vain; their consciousness of assessment had preoccupied their efforts. Rather than attempting to remove or mitigate its presence in TLs' cognitions, we aimed to accept and even use washback from assessment as an inevitable dimension of their experience.

To illuminate TLs' tendency to direct their efforts towards assessment, and understand how the impact of assessment might be turned to productive ends, we reviewed our understanding of the concept of 'washback'. This is a phenomenon increasingly studied in educational and TESOL testing literature (c.f. Taylor's (2005) overview of its history in TESOL), which describes the tendency for both educators and learners to attend to the requirements of a programme's assessment, focusing their efforts in order to do as well as possible according to its criteria. It can be evaluated as either 'positive' or 'negative' (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Hughes, 2003; Taylor, 2005) depending on whether learners' (and educators') efforts are improved or hindered by their consciousness of the assessment they are working towards. In our case, evidence from the investigation stage of our action cycle had suggested that writers had been hindered by their consciousness of impending assessment, particularly as they had often seemed to be guessing markers' preferences. This was therefore evidence of obviously negative washback on TLs' experience of learning concerning reflection.

Based on these insights, we developed a solution aimed at acknowledging the powerful role of washback from assessment in the programmes we had observed. We therefore attempted to clarify the ethos of assessment, realised through the design of new instruments and criteria, in order to reward TLs' authentic engagement with the process. Practically, our intervention consisted of the following steps:

1. As mentioned, use of the pro formas (which were anyway a requirement of the programmes they were embarked on) was retained but a new writing instrument was developed that elicited TLs' choice of a single issue they considered valuable from their experiences of teaching on which to focus their reflective writing.

2. In the design of the new instrument, the problem of too limited participation in the range of possibilities for reflective writing was directly addressed by providing sections that challenged TLs to participate in a full reflective sequence. By scaffolding their efforts to generate a tentative but fully realised sequence, TLs would gain appreciation of the potential of each stage as an option to make sense of their experience.

3. To address the issue that authenticity in writing was being hindered by unhelpful negative washback from assessment, TLs were given choice concerning which elements of their accounts to expand, selecting a focus for the writing element that they felt personally illuminating.

4. Crucially, we developed criteria for assessment which supported these decisions. These would be made transparent to the writers. They aimed at: first, rewarding TLs for attempting, even if tentatively and selectively, the whole range of reflective perspectives afforded by a full cycle; second, also supporting choice by providing flexible criteria that rewarded all choices equally.

7

Task design

The task itself was designed to:

1. focus on a single issue selected by the TLs, drawing from the notes they had collected in their post-teaching self-assessment forms

2. support and scaffold their writing, using a template that corresponded to the models presented in preparation sessions

3. 'showcase' the potential of each option in a full reflective cycle, requiring writers to 'have a go', at least briefly and tentatively, at every category

4. permit choice in terms of TLs' engagement by requiring a longer answer for just one element of the reflective cycle.

To scaffold the production of writing, the task led TLs to follow an extended reflective sequence that synthesised stages/elements represented in familiar pedagogic models for reflective writing. While based on categories gleaned from a broad consideration of literature, it was organised so as to resemble Gibbs' familiar and famous sequence. However, it also included some elements not present in Gibbs' model, but which we felt would be of value to the writers. The categories, presented with a brief rationale for their inclusion, are as follows.

In **Part A**, short answers to the first three descriptive stages were required, forming a foundation for writing in the 'deeper' categories that followed in Part B.

Identifying an issue. In this first stage, TLs were asked to identify a single issue, taking account of the post-teaching notes they had made in their self-assessment forms.

Description. This was a logical next step, familiar to TLs as the first step in Gibbs' classic reflective cycle. We included a cue eliciting details and evidence of classroom events so as to encourage 'noticing', a skill related to reflection that has received increased attention in educational literature (e.g. Sherin, 2001). Attending vigilantly and intelligently to classroom events, learners' responses, instances of 'talk', etc. might be seen as the foundation of all reflective practice. From a second perspective, TLs' use of their own records could also be considered as attention to 'data' (following Mann and Walsh's (2017) recommendation), strengthening the reflective process.

Recall of emotions. The third step and second stage of Gibbs' cycle, teachers' recording of affect, is also encouraged by more recent writers (e.g. Farrell, 2007). Making a note of emotional responses (either their own, learners' or a class 'vibe') would help writers to access memories of classroom events more readily.

In **Part B,** TLs were asked to provide short responses to each of the following, more challenging sections, participating in cognition that corresponds to the expectations of 'deeper' reflection. They were required to expand just one section of their choice.

Analysis. This is the third stage in Gibbs' cycle. TLs were invited here to step back and 'make sense' of what had happened, offering a practical or empathetic analysis.

Principles and theories. TLs were challenged to create links between theory and practice, drawing on input from sessions or reading. Here we departed slightly from Gibbs' model, which does not necessarily require linkage to academic ideas. The section was included to offer writers the option of making such connections, regarded as important in some of the literature (e.g. Farrell, 2007).

Changes in future practice. Corresponding roughly to Gibbs' final 'Action Plan' phase, in this stage teachers were asked to propose practical solutions that related to their issue.

Evaluating perspectives on teaching and learning. The ultimate goal of reflection in some of the more ambitious literature (e.g. Jay and Johnson, 2002) is to produce insight that challenges existing moral and social frames; other writers (Mann and Walsh, 2017: 67) have wondered whether insistence on such 'depth' in reflection is helpful. Nevertheless, we included the section, lowering the stakes by restricting the topic to issues of teaching and learning, to offer TLs the opportunity to attempt such writing.

In **Part C,** TLs were asked to develop discussion points or questions to share with peers and tutors. The goal here was to encourage a view both that: first, reflection is not only a private process but can benefit from discussion (Edge, 2002); second, that cycles of reflection cannot always be conveniently completed (returning to Allwright's (1992) idea of 'puzzling'), but may require discussion, time and further contemplation to deal with meaningfully.

The template was designed to appear as simple and straightforward to TLs as possible, but in fact its design implemented several of the ideas we had developed to solve the problems identified in the investigation stage of our research.

7.1 Assessment design

Ideas recovered from literature concerning washback had obvious, direct implications concerning the design of our assessment instrument for the written reflection. In order for the reflective task to be really useful, assessment criteria needed to be developed that directly supported TLs' efforts to respond personally and authentically to their experiences of teaching. Furthermore, these criteria needed to be clearly communicated to the writers so that their consciousness of impending assessment – evidenced so strongly in the survey and interview findings – would encourage rather than impede their development of individualised, meaningful accounts. The assessment criteria (see the Appendix) for the task were shared with the teachers at the same time as the instrument itself. Underpinning the aims of the task itself, these criteria were written to communicate chiefly that TLs:

■ would be rewarded for 'having a go' at each stage, and that their use of tentative language would be welcomed where ideas were still emerging

■ could expand one category of their own choice, but could be confident they would benefit from flexible criteria that ensured all options (e.g. practical analysis, abstract linkage to theory) would be prized equally.

7.2 Evaluation of our action

The new instrument and linked assessment was used with one group of 11 master's-level students, whom we felt would benefit from (rather than be inconvenienced by) our intervention. The students were presented with the task and assessment criteria in the same session. After their completion of the task at the end of their period of practical education, we assessed whether our action had successfully managed to:

■ develop TLs' appreciation of the potential of each stage as a result of their participation in a full, quite ambitious cycle of reflection

■ generate choice and variety in TLs' writing, thereby increasing the likelihood that their work had been personally relevant and authentic.

Looking first at the TLs' responses to the task, it was clear that they had managed to follow the template successfully, generating complete cycles of written reflection. TLs' decisions concerning which option in the template they had chosen to expand provided objective evidence as to whether we had succeeded in encouraging variety in their responses. We recorded the number of instances where TLs expanded one of the four options offered for deeper reflection: analysis, link to theory, future plans or critical reflection (see Figure 2). Encouragingly, all four categories had been attempted by at least one writer. TLs showed a preference for 'analysis' as a category for expansion, with 'link to theory' the next most popular choice. This was another heartening outcome; we had feared that despite our efforts writers would perceive the 'link to theory' option as the one most likely to be assessed positively, since it provided most opportunities to provide a performance of conventionally academic writing using references, descriptions of models, etc. The finding that they instead preferred analysis, the simplest and most practical of the categories according to our setup of the task, suggests that many had chosen a category that aligned with their own reflective instincts.

Figure 2: Comparison of instances of choice for each of the four types of reflection that were voluntarily expanded by TLs
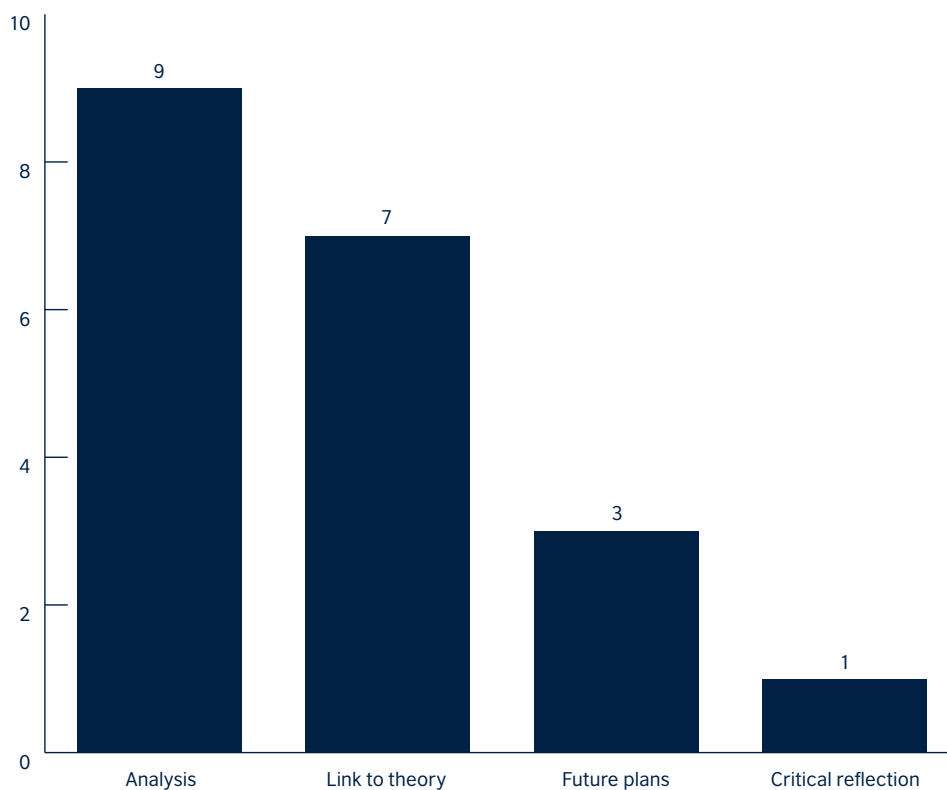
To determine whether the experience had been useful in terms of 'showcasing' the options for reflection afforded by present practice, eight of the TLs were interviewed. They were asked to consider their writing and both rate and comment on the perceived usefulness of each stage in terms of supporting authentic reflection. TLs' responses varied widely concerning which sections of the form (and by extension the stages of reflection) they had found most useful. 'Analysis', in which TLs had been asked to make sense of their experience, was the most popular and least controversial category. This confirmed the findings of our textual analysis (see Table 3) concerning which categories on the task template had been expanded by writers. In their comments, TLs demonstrated a wide variety of preferences concerning the types of reflective writing they felt were useful. The usefulness of all questions was rated as 'extremely useful/essential' by at least one interviewee. To confirm our understanding concerning TLs' preferences, they were also asked which section they would remove from the task if they were given the option, and which they would keep if they could only answer in one category. 'Analysis' was the section most (six out of eight) students would keep; 'discussion' was the question some (three out of eight) students would remove.

Table 3: Average preferences for each section of the reflection template

Section of task template	Perceived usefulness rated 1 (not useful) to 6 (extremely useful)			Illustrative comment: (+) positive or (-) negative
	Highest rating	**Lowest rating**	**Average rating**	
Identify issue	6	2	4.5	(+) I have to think about the problem. Notice what the problem is
Recall events	6	3	4.3	(+) Because I need to remember detail and reflect (+) Just make me feel better
Emotional response	6	3	4.5	(+) It attaches importance to student reactions
Analysis	6	4	5.1	(+) Made me confident… [in what I did]
Link to theory	6	1	4.3	(-) Can't always specify principles (+) In [home country we] didn't pay attention to references
Future changes	6	2.5	4.6	(+) Make this better than this next time
Critical, personal change	6	3	4.5	(+) When I was writing this I did change my opinions about teaching
Discussion with peers	6	3	3.7	(+) Important to know your own ideas
Questions for tutor	6	1	3.3	

Conclusions

In reviewing the literature surrounding this topic, we became highly conscious that much is being expected of TLs undertaking reflective work for the first time. Depending on educators' expectations and the models they present during learning, successful production of reflective writing by TLs might entail numerous stages, phases or levels that may each require careful illustration. Even beginning the task, noticing events that can sustain further reflection, requires the development of skills and awareness that will usually in reality only emerge over time. Further outcomes, such as proposing practical solutions to problems identified during teaching, represent significant tasks that require considerable additional scaffolding. Our actions were primarily addressed to meet TLs' uncertainty dealing with such new skills. We aimed to provide useful support and use the opportunity of their writing to make a case for reflection as a plausible lifelong activity.

Overall, we judged that our intervention to address the issues we identified in our initial investigation – learner uncertainty and concern for assessment that seemed to hinder personal expression – had been successful. By encouraging TLs to participate in a complete process of reflection, 'having a go' where they felt less confident on the understanding that tentative responses would be welcomed, we encouraged writers to produce accounts in which every category was usefully attempted. By providing choice, asking writers to engage more deeply with a single element that corresponded to their intuitions concerning their experience, we promoted variety in their responses. This diversity in the focus of TLs' writing provided hope that they had engaged in more personal and authentic reflection.

Despite their awareness that their written work was destined to be assessed – before as well as after our intervention – TLs tended to rate the experience of reflective writing positively, citing it as a valuable opportunity to make sense of their teaching experiences. This suggested that some fears in the literature concerning the impact of assessment on reflective activity may be overstated. A stronger position might propose that assessment is not only inevitable under circumstances of formal instruction, but can play a positive role as part of a scaffolded learning process. After all, reflective work carried out in such conditions might be usefully conceptualised as having a primarily pedagogic role, purposed towards demonstrating and promoting the potential of reflective practice as much as functioning as a mechanism for actual classroom learning during the programme. Our conclusion is that those involved in teacher development that involves reflective practice should accept the potential value of assessment but be sensitive to the character of its washback on teachers. Any goals attempted in the design of tasks should be supported by matching assessment criteria. Even where educators' opinions concerning the purpose and content of assessment procedures differ from ours, their own purposes should be made explicit in the design of their own tasks, then matched to carefully designed assessment criteria supporting the same goals. The aim of our project is not to present our instruments as ideal for reflective writing (we intend to adapt and improve them as we continue to learn from our own experience), but to offer them as an example where task and assessment design are linked in a principled way.

Our own reflections on the action research cycle and ideas for further phases of improvement are as follows. First, providing strong tasks and assessments to support TLs' writing (our main intervention) cannot be used as a replacement for teacher-led instruction and learning activities to promote TLs' understanding of reflective practice. Our post-action interviews indicated that writers had managed to generate successful accounts, but not that they were always able to distinguish between different reflection types or stages. A second observation is that great care needs to be taken not to present reflection as a predictable and mechanical activity. Classic models (e.g. Kolb, Gibbs) have value in priming TLs' understanding, not least because they play a strong role in EFL and education as a community of practice. However, models like the Gibbs' cycle should be presented critically, making TLs aware of their idealised nature and indeed the flexibility intended by their creators. As a further

measure to mitigate the danger of teachers coming to see the process over-mechanically, Allwright's (1992) idea of 'puzzling' should be presented, with its sense that real-world teaching problems cannot always be easily (or perhaps ever) resolved. Finally, we accept the observation in literature that reflective writing should form one phase of reflective practice, even (or especially) during training. Writing generated by TLs generates an excellent resource and starting point for discussion and counselling. The crucial private space permitted by writing allows teachers to collect ideas that they will often wish to share with others. Our task therefore included a section where TLs produced questions and discussion topics for this purpose. Exploring the development of even stronger connections between private, written work and spoken dialogue/discussion represents an excellent next step for further investigation and action.

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Appendix 1: Final reflection

Write about ONE issue that you have noticed from your experience of teaching during the programme.

Part A.

Provide about 100 words of commentary for the sections below. Write complete sentences rather than notes.

1. **Identify** the issue (problem, challenge or opportunity) that relates to your recent practice of teaching English. Select an issue which you feel will benefit from this reflection.

100 words

2. **Describe** the events (situation, people, etc.) that led to your noticing of this issue.
    Use the notes you have collected in your self-assessment forms to help you recall experiences.

100 words

3. What were any immediate **emotions** and **feelings** that you can recall?
    Emotional recall can often help stimulate real memories of events.

100 words

Part B.

Provide about 100 words of commentary for the sections below but provide ONE longer response of about 500 words. Write your longer passage in the section where you think you have developed your ideas most clearly.

4. 'Stand back' from the issue to **analyse** what happened (e.g. if a problem, what might have 'caused' it; what was really happening? If an opportunity or realisation; what is 'important' about what you realised?).

100 words (500 words for ONE answer in this section)

5. Consider any **principles or theories** (from seminars, or reading) that seem to shed light on this issue.

> **100 words (500 words for ONE answer in this section)**

6. What **changes in your future practices** as a teacher would you consider as a result of these reflections?

> **100 words (500 words for ONE answer in this section)**

7. Has your reflection on this issue caused you to **change your perspective on teaching and learning language** in some way? How?

> **100 words (500 words for ONE answer in this section)**

Part C.

Reflection is not only a private activity. Given the opportunity to discuss the issue in class with peers and/or tutors, what questions or discussion topics would help you make sense of your experience? Bullet points are permitted in this section.

Appendix 2: Framework for assessment

	Process of reflection (50%) ■ This mark assesses writing for all sections except the ONE extended section you have chosen for Part B. ■ The writer:	**Depth of reflection (50%)** ■ This mark assesses writing for the ONE section you have extended in Part B. *Note that markers will assess all options (practical analysis, linkage to theory, future plans, perspectives on learning/teaching) equally.* ■ The writer:
5 (excellent)	■ selected an issue that was **extremely relevant** to their experience of teaching ■ demonstrated **excellent** understanding of the overall process of reflection ■ understood the goals of each stage and differentiated between stages **extremely successfully** ■ engaged **extremely successfully** with every stage, even if tentatively and briefly when necessary	■ captured **extremely thoughtful** and plausible personal insights concerning their chosen issue ■ understood the goals of reflection for this stage **extremely successfully** ■ provided **excellent depth** (e.g. references, concrete suggestions) *relevant to the category selected*
4 (very good)	■ selected an issue that was **highly relevant** to their experience of teaching ■ demonstrated **strong** understanding of the overall process of reflection ■ understood the goals of each stage and differentiated between stages **highly successfully** ■ engaged **highly successfully** with every stage, even if tentatively and briefly when necessary	■ captured **very thoughtful** and plausible personal insights concerning their chosen issue ■ understood the goals of reflection for this stage **highly successfully** ■ provided **strong depth** (e.g. references, concrete suggestions) *relevant to the category selected*
3 (successful)	■ selected an issue that was **generally relevant** to their experience of teaching ■ demonstrated **some** understanding of the overall process of reflection ■ understood the goals of each stage and differentiated between stages **fairly successfully** ■ engaged **fairly successfully** with every stage, even if tentatively and briefly when necessary	■ captured **some thoughtful** and plausible personal insights concerning their chosen issue ■ understood the goals of reflection for this stage **fairly successfully** ■ provided **some depth** (e.g. references, concrete suggestions) *relevant to the category selected*
1 or 2 (emerging)	■ selected an issue that was **not clearly relevant** to their experience of teaching ■ demonstrated **insufficient understanding** of the overall process of reflection ■ failed to understand the goals of each stage and/or differentiate between stages ■ engaged **unsuccessfully** with most/all stages	■ failed to capture thoughtful and/or plausible personal insights concerning their chosen issue ■ failed to understand the goals of reflection for this stage ■ provided little or no depth (e.g. references, concrete suggestions) *relevant to the category selected*