Critical incidents in ELT initial teacher training

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A critical incident is any unplanned event that occurs during class. In has been suggested that if trainee teachers formally reflect on these critical incidents, it may be possible for them to uncover new understandings of the teaching and learning process. This paper outlines and discusses how eighteen trainee teachers in an English language teacher education course in Singapore reflected on critical incidents that occurred while they were teaching. Results indicate that while analysing critical incidents can be useful for trainee teachers, language teacher educators should realize that classification of such incidents into neat categories may be problematic and that care should be taken when assigning a critical incident assignment.

Introduction

Reflective practice, now a common inclusion in many language teacher education programmes, helps trainee teachers 'to think about what happened, why it happened, and what else could have been done to reach their goals' (Cruickshank and Applegate, 1981: 553). One method of encouraging trainee teachers to reflect on their teaching is to have them analyse critical incidents that occur while they are teaching (Brennon and Green 1993; Farrell 2004). Brookfield (1990a: 84) says that a critical incident in teaching means any 'vividly remembered event which is unplanned and unanticipated'. Richards and Farrell (2005) have suggested that by reflecting on these incidents in a formal manner, language teachers can uncover new understandings of taken for granted perceptions of the teaching/learning process. Formal reflection on critical incidents consists of a description/production phase followed by an explanation phase (Tripp 1993). In the description/production phase, a specific phenomenon is observed and documented. Thus the incident is 'produced'. The incident is then explained by the teacher in terms of its symbol, value, or role (Measor 1985). An incident can appear to be typical rather than critical at first sight, but really only becomes critical through analysis (Tripp ibid.). This is achieved by viewing it in terms of something that has significance in the wider context (Richards and Farrell ibid.). Thus, when a critical incident occurs, it interrupts (or highlights) the taken for granted ways of thinking about teaching (Brennon and Green ibid.). Although analysing critical incidents is a well established activity in general education programmes, few actual studies exist in the ELT literature (with the exception of Thiel

1999). The purpose of reporting this paper is to make a contribution to the ELT literature on this important topic.

Case study

This study took place in Singapore. English is the medium of instruction in the school system in Singapore; however, for the vast majority of Singaporeans, English is not their mother tongue but represents only one language in the typical speaker's multilingual repertoire. The eighteen Singaporean trainee teachers reported on in this case study, who were enrolled in a one-year Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme at the National Institute of Education in Singapore to certify them as English language teachers, all used English as their mother tongue. As part of their PGDE theory classes (as opposed to the official teaching practice component), the trainees were assigned to team teach (in groups of three) a set of six 90-minute lessons in a secondary school. As part of this assignment the trainees were required to keep a journal in which they were asked to describe and reflect on at least two critical incidents (decided by the PGDE team in order to ensure all trainee teachers came up with something to write about rather than leaving it up to each individual) that happened during their teaching. Each trainee granted me permission to use the data written in their journals for this report.

Outcomes

All eighteen trainees reported on two incidents each, making a total of thirty-six critical incidents as outlined in Table I.

Topic	Number of incidents
Language proficiency	8
Class participation	8
Behaviour	6
Gender	4
Classroom space	4
Lesson objectives	3
Classroom activities	1
Attention spans	1
Additional class assistance	1
Total incidents (Trainee Teachers =18)	36

TABLE 1
Categories of critical incidents

Categories were based where possible on how each trainee presented the incident in his or her journal. However, in certain instances I had to clarify with the trainee when they were unsure of the category or if they had not attributed any category to an incident. All but three of the trainees reported details of the incidents that included their reflections and interpretations as outlined in the following examples. (In all instances pseudonyms have been provided.)

Language proficiency

Eight trainees reported on incidents related to their students' English proficiency levels. For example, Ali discovered that care must be taken when deciding what course of action to take when a student has problems with language proficiency. An incident occurred during the first class that indicated to Ali that one student, Hao Tong, was different from the others:

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> During the writing activity, I noticed a piece of electronic equipment that appeared to belong to Hao Tong [the student], which was an electronic Chinese-English dictionary. He was constantly using this every time the teacher spoke.

At that time, Ali decided to allow Hao Tong to continue, 'to use the device, because I thought he may feel really handicapped without it'. Ali discovered that Hao Tong was from China (PRC) and his classmates said that he did not have good English language skills. However, after reflecting on this incident Ali decided that he would intervene because he noticed in the following class that Hao Tong was also not participating in class discussions. Ali continued:

> In week two, I noticed that he [Hao Tong] was not participating in the games, which his classmates were enthusiastic about. This is most likely rooted in Hao Tong's frustration at being unable to understand the teacher's instructions, and is a vicious cycle of failed attempts and discouragement.

Ali then planned to change how Hao Tong perceived English. Ali continued: 'I feel that the most urgent concern at the moment is to change his negative perceptions of English (lessons), and this is where our classes must help him'. However, he said he was not sure about how to help students with lower English language proficiency levels and that it was proving to be a real problem. This difficult issue of what to do about lower proficiency students in mixed ability classes was further illustrated by Sara when she noticed that one of her students, Wei Yong, could not express his ideas clearly in English and invariably ended up speaking Mandarin. Sara continues:

> On two separate occasions during the first two weeks of teaching, Wei Yong attempted to speak English to his classmates and me but would mumble incoherently when uncertain about the words or phrases. On both occasions, I responded by asking him to repeat himself. When his second attempts proved as incoherent as the first, we all tried to guess what Wei Yong was trying to tell us and pretended that we understood. But we didn't.

Sara reflected on these incidents and wanted to know why the student could not express himself in English despite the fact that he graduated from primary school the previous year. At a loss as to what to do in the class, she looked at the student's life outside the classroom and learnt that he never spoke English at home. (His family spoke Mandarin at home.) Sara attempted to link this new information to Wei Yong's classroom behaviour as follows:

> English is simply not part of this student's lifestyle. His lack of exposure to the English language may account for Wei Yong's attitude and responses towards communicating in English. When confronted with the necessity to communicate in English, Wei Yong tends either to deflect (by laughter) or to avoid/delay (by refusing to perform the task) the embarrassment he senses when speaking a language that he perceives himself to be inadequate in.

After discussing this later with the other trainees, Sara remarked that she now realizes that rather than forcing students in Singapore like Wei Yong

(who do not speak English in their everyday lives) to speak correct English, teachers should first try to build up their self-confidence by not focusing on their English language mistakes. She continued:

> Care must be taken not to correct him too much, too early as this may be counter-productive, reinforcing Wei Yong's sense of inadequacy and entrenching his negative response to English.

Class participation

Closely related to the problem of students' language proficiency levels were the reported critical incidents on the students' levels of class participation. In fact, many of these critical incidents focused on the reluctance of students to participate in classroom activities. Jack, for instance, noticed that his students were reluctant to participate in an activity that required them to perform a song in English—especially one requiring lots of body movements such as the song 'Simon Says'—Jack continued:

> In the singing [of the song] the students who were reluctant to participate stood behind the desks which they were sitting at even though instructions were given to all students to come forward where there would be enough space for them to carry out the actions of the song.

In particular, Jack noticed that two male students who 'appeared shy' were sitting silently together and were reluctant to carry out any of the actions they were asked to perform. Jack said that he took the following action:

> As a result, I had to coax them to come forward and stand with the rest of their classmates in the semicircle, which they did. I guided them step-by-step in the actions . . . After some practice they were able to perform the actions and even appeared to enjoy the rhythm of the song.

Jack said that this incident was critical for him because it showed that some students more than others might need to be reassured. Jack said that he practised this idea of focusing on the two students exclusively in his next lesson with this group. He said that he took them aside and explained why class participation was important for them in terms of improving their English proficiency levels. Jack said that the two students, although still shy and slightly embarrassed, made the effort to participate in future class activities and even appeared pleased with the special attention given to them by him.

Behaviour

Student behaviour was an important issue for six of the trainees who reported critical incidents that involved two main forms of disruption: refusal to participate in activities and shouting out answers at inappropriate times during class. Related to the first form of disruption, Chin reported on one student who refused in a hostile and loud manner, to take notes for his group during one activity. Chin explained:

> During a group discussion, Kumar was asked to record the points made by the group. He refused loudly to do so and even banged the desk. This came across as surprising as he was very enthusiastic about all the previous activities.

Chin decided to ask Kumar about his refusal after that class and discovered that he, Kumar, was in fact hiding his proficiency problem with English

language, especially his problem in writing and spelling in English. So although this incident is categorized as a behavioural problem (I clarified this with Chin) I would say its real origin was a language proficiency problem. Chin continued:

> He was worried that his classmates would laugh at him if he got the spelling wrong. In cases like this where students are afraid to make mistakes for fear of being made fun of, teachers have to try to reassure them that it is normal to make mistakes and that everyone does. Perhaps, teachers can share their own experiences or get the class to share how they have coped with such fears so that the student will not feel alone in his/her own insecurities.

Ben noticed a different form of disruption when one student repeatedly shouted his answers to questions. Ben described this incident during one class:

> Many times, Swee Siong would just shout out the answer before anyone does in a loud voice thereby partially drowning out the volunteer who was trying to say something. Sometimes, when a student is in mid-sentence he just shouts his own answer over the voice of the student.

Unfortunately Ben remarked that the student continued to shout out answers during each class that followed despite his best efforts to control this behaviour. At the end of the period of teaching practice, this particular critical incident generated the most discussion among the other trainees. During the discussion Sharm, for example, wondered if teachers should reprimand students for disrupting lessons in this way, or if they should 'simply play along to be amused and skim over the incident?' She outlined her dilemma as follows:

> There is a fine balance between managing the class and killing spontaneity or humour. Classroom misbehaviours disrupt the momentum and learning flow of the other students. Ignoring the misbehaved student stops him/her from getting the attention that he/she wants and signals to him/her that he/she has to get it through other ways such as good conduct. However, ignoring the misbehaviour may also impress on the other students that the teacher is not able to 'tame' the misbehaved student and is not in control. Consequently, students may feel that they have the edge and superiority in 'managing' the class's moods and settings.

Gender

Another issue that was important for four teachers concerned the issue of student gender—in this case the realization that some students did not like working in groups with members of the opposite sex. Jasmine noticed that when she placed two boys and one girl together in a group, the girl was left out completely as the two boys only talked to each other. Jasmine also observed that this also occurred when the girls were in a majority—they also left the boy out of their discussion. Jasmine noted that: 'Arthur was left much out in the cold, not knowing what to do, while Weilin and Eunice just carried on without him'. When Jasmine reflected on these critical incidents, she said that she had not ever thought about gender issues in class before

these incidents and now believes that 'cooperation among the genders can and should be cultivated, given the time and opportunity'.

Classroom space

Four trainees reported incidents related to classroom space. Ali, for example, become more sensitive to classroom seating when he asked the whole class to move from their seating (in rows) and perform a song in front of the classroom. Immediately he observed that two students remained standing behind their desks. He asked them why they did not move and was told that they had never been made to move from their desks before in any class. Ali then realized that teachers in Singaporean classrooms typically teach their classes from the centre of the front of the room and students usually sit in rows of desks; during his days as a student, many teachers did not usually change this seating arrangement. As a result of this incident, Ali said that he became more conscious of classroom space. Ali continued:

> Through this incident, I am made more conscious about my spatial positioning in relation to my students in the classroom. It may be useful for a teacher to continually shift his/her action space around the classroom (particularly the back) so as to accord all students due attention and obtain a holistic sense of how the class is learning.

Lesson objectives

Three teachers reported on critical incidents related to lesson objectives. For example, when a student asked Camille why she was doing certain activities in class, she said that she was shocked. Later when reflecting on this incident with her classmates, she said that she began to realize that as a teacher, she 'must make clear the objectives of activities and the corresponding learning strategies acquired during these activities'. Camille continued:

> The students should not be simply going through the motions of the activities just to have fun. They should be given something to take away from each activity. For example, they should be able to ask themselves at the end of the lesson, 'What kind of listening activity have I just done?' or 'What did I have to look out for when listening?' or 'What were the key words?'

Discussion

From a language teacher educator's (and a researcher's) point of view, it was not always easy to neatly classify or separate each incident into the categories the trainees reported above and in many cases I had to consult some trainees to give further details about their incidents. So, classifying critical incidents, and in fact any classroom behaviour, may be an uncertain and difficult process (regardless of who does the classification) since they often have multiple meanings and many are high inference examples (Jack Richards, personal communication, 24/8/05). Of course the critical incidents reported in this case study may be considered typical incidents for more experienced language teachers. Nevertheless for trainee teachers it is highly probable that any incident that occurs can be seen as dramatic because they will not have experienced any of these before. It may well be that the type of incidents these trainees reported as being critical are typical for other trainee teachers in other contexts, and as such it may be useful for language teacher educators to replicate this particular assignment in order to investigate what incidents occur and appear critical to trainee language teachers. For example, many of incidents deemed critical by the

trainee teachers in this case study have been suggested as being typical for most trainee teachers in that they tend to cite issues related to classroom management as being most problematic when they first enter teaching be they content teachers (Fuller and Brown 1975) or language teachers (Richards and Crookes 1988; Brinton and Holten 1989). The high number of incidents related to language proficiency could be context related as many people in Singapore use English as a first, second, and foreign language (Gupta 1998). In addition and because the trainee teachers were from backgrounds where English was spoken as a first language at home, they may not have realized that English used in a typical neighbourhood school—the setting for the trainees' practice teaching—was English as a second language (ESL); they were therefore not used to interacting with ESL students.

It is also interesting to note that many of the critical incidents reported by these trainee teachers seemed to focus exclusively on negative rather than positive issues regarding the teaching and learning of English language. This is a similar finding to Francis (1995) who also discovered that trainee teachers found it easier to recall negative incidents more quickly and spontaneously than to recall positive incidents. In addition, the fact that each trainee teacher was only required to write about two incidents is a possible limitation of the original assignment because it may have interfered with each trainee teacher's natural process of reflection. For example, I have no way of knowing if some teachers had less than or more than two incidents occur in their classrooms, so future critical incident assignments should avoid such limitations on the number of incidents they have the trainee teachers report. In addition, I recommend the following procedures be used for critical incident assignments:

1   Each trainee teacher (working alone) writes a brief description of an 'incident' from a teaching practice experience. Include in this description answers to 'who was involved', 'where did it take place', 'when did it take place', 'what happened exactly'. At this first stage, trainee teachers should avoid explanations and interpretations (no 'why' question yet) so that they can include all the details of the incident without having it clouded by explanations or early interpretations.

2   On a separate page, the trainee teachers can next attempt to explain and interpret the incident. Richards and Farrell (op. cit.) suggest that teachers may want to consider what happened directly before and after each incident as well as the teacher's reactions at the time of the incident. In this way, they suggest that teachers may be able to unpack their underlying assumptions about teaching and learning English language.

3   The trainee teachers, with the aid of the class facilitator, can then form pairs and exchange the first page details of the incidents (step 1 above) and after clarifying for adequacy of descriptions provided, can suggest interpretations for the incidents. These interpretations can later be compared with the interpretations already constructed by the trainee teacher (step 2 above) who experienced the incident and any new meaning to the original incident can be added.

4   Finally, the class comes back together and discussions (led by the facilitator) take place about each of the incidents reported and their interpretations. If the incidents reported were mostly of a negative nature

(as was the case reported in this paper), then the facilitator could suggest that the trainee teachers also consider any positive incidents, or 'teaching highs' (Thiel op. cit.), that may have occurred. For example, they could be encouraged to reflect on a strategy or activity that had a positive effect on student learning; something that worked in class but that they had not planned for.

Conclusion

Reflecting critically on teaching is a process of recognizing and analysing assumptions that underlie teachers' thoughts and actions (Brookfield 1990b). This form of critical reflection can be accomplished by encouraging trainee teachers to describe and examine critical incidents (both positive and negative) that occur during teaching practice. As a result of reflecting on the various critical incidents that occurred in their team teaching sessions, the trainee language teachers that participated in this case study were better placed to face the realities of teaching in that they have come to realize that there are no single cause/effect solutions to the various dilemmas they may encounter in a language classroom. Indeed, many of these same trainees reported this to be the case when they went out on their official teaching practice component after their theory classes.

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