



Publisher: KAD International, Ghana
Co-publisher: Cherkas Global University, USA
Has been issued since 2014
E-ISSN 2508-1055
2021. 8(3): 88-94

DOI: 10.13187/jare.2021.3.88

Journal homepage:
<http://kadint.net/our-journal.html>



Student Teachers' Preparedness for Classroom Interaction During Teaching Practice: University of Zululand Supervisors' Perspectives

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Abstract

Classroom interaction during teaching practice is the crucial aspect that shapes schools' teaching and learning enterprise. Student teachers must develop their lesson plan guided by classroom interaction as one of the teaching styles similar to those observed from mentors. This exploratory case study was underpinned by a qualitative approach to better understand their experiences and context. The sample consisted of university supervisors who were selected from the Faculty of Education at the University of Zululand, South Africa. Using thematic analysis, narrative reflections, and one-on-one structured interviews with 17 university supervisors were analysed. Findings revealed that most student teachers failed to integrate classroom interaction when teaching, while some relied on question and answer method to implement classroom interaction. This study recommends that students first be exposed to laboratory simulated lessons capable of helping them acclimatise to classroom interaction dynamics. Also, student teachers should be introduced to more dynamics of the question and answer teaching method.

Keywords: classroom interaction, perspectives, student teachers, teaching practice, university supervisors.

1. Introduction

Classroom interaction is one of the aspects through which university supervisors evaluate student teachers at the University of Zululand during teaching practice. Its role during lesson presentation cannot be underestimated as it enables successful engagement with learners during lesson presentation. Therefore, teaching practice programmes always assume that student teachers are competent in promoting classroom interaction to support learners emotionally and academically (Pianta, Hamre, 2009). Classroom interaction tends to be ignored by lecturers, yet it is the lifeblood responsible for supporting learners to achieve their full potential and quality outcomes (Pianta et al., 2012; Vandenbroucke et al., 2018). Most of the challenges besetting classroom interaction tend to surface later when student teachers are allowed to teach for the first time. Therefore, the evaluation process in Higher Education should strengthen their abilities to engage instead of asking why students avoid classroom interaction. Meanwhile, some student teachers perform poorly during teaching practice classroom evaluation due to a lack of readiness to implement pedagogical content knowledge through an interactive classroom approach.

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Mkhasibe and Mncube (2020) argue that even though university supervisors at the University of Zululand are specialists in rendering academics to support, guide, and evaluate student teachers, pressure to help all students compromises the quality of classroom interaction during a teaching practice exercise. Additionally, classroom interaction is one of the essential elements of a prosperous teaching and learning process since it entails the exchange of thoughts, feelings, and ideas between a teacher and learner or a learner and another learner (Brown, 2007; Huriyah, Agustiani, 2018; Li, Arshad, 2015; Rido et al., 2017). Yanita et al. (2016) believe that teachers' efficiency in teaching and learning activities leans on the quality of his/her interaction with learners. However, this exchange needs facilitation. According to Huriyah and Agustiani (2018), teachers should initiate classroom interaction. Additionally, Ginting (2017) purported through verbal communication and detailed strategies that student teachers can employ to affect classroom interaction. These strategies are giving directions, asking questions, correcting learner errors, controlling the learning pace, and monitoring learner performance (Rido et al., 2014, 2015).

Student teachers should be well immune to these means of ensuring classroom interaction to ensure that they can facilitate classroom interaction to strengthen social relationships within a class. Ghazi (2011) argues that classroom interaction can maintain social relationships because it enables all parties to learn from each other and give feedback on performance promptly. Also, Sullivan et al. (2015) posit that the socialisation process that learners endure is contextual, multidirectional and transactional but shaped by the learning environment. Student teachers should be equipped with the context under which to create interaction. Therefore, it is clear that as learners and a teacher interact, they both learn from each other, thus reinforcing the social relationship among themselves.

Additionally, Huriyah and Agustiani (2018) emphasise that interaction is an important social activity that enables learners to construct knowledge and build confidence and identity. The teacher's knowledge about classroom interaction can be viewed as a sign that teachers know their learning environment (Solheim et al., 2018). The evaluation of student teachers is meant to establish whether student teachers can build learners' confidence and identity and be familiar with the environment where learners should construct their knowledge. In support of this notion, Ginting (2017) asserts that classroom interaction is crucial in a learning process since teaching and learning can be achieved through interaction. However, the intensity of an interaction depends on the teacher; hence it is incumbent for student teachers to acquire skills relative to interaction. Moreover, Ginting (2017) argues that if teachers lack creativity for opening discourse in a classroom for interaction, it can be presumed that interaction cannot proceed. Thus, institutions should help build this skill among student teachers during their teaching practice worldwide, including South Africa.

Teaching practice in South Africa is the actual teaching process opened to student teachers during their third year of study for six to eight weeks in schools. Although students are expected to put what they have learnt into practice, few studies have qualitatively explored their preparedness from their supervisors' perspectives. According to Marais and Meier (2004), teaching practice encapsulates a range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when working in classrooms and schools. Teaching practice allows student teachers to try the art of teaching before actually getting into the real world of the teaching profession (Kasanda, 1995). Therefore, our study sought to explore supervisors' perspectives of student teachers' preparedness for classroom interaction during teaching practice at the University of Zululand.

2. Methods and Materials

We conducted our study based on the qualitative method. The qualitative approach was the most suitable in this research because it enabled us to secure in-depth information about the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2009). In line with the qualitative method, we employed narrative reflections among university supervisors in this research. Narrative enquiry is a way to understand and then present real-life experiences through the stories of the research participants (Wang, Geale, 2015). Sequel to this description, the narrative approach allowed the researcher to construct a detailed description of university supervisors' experiences and explore the meanings that the university supervisors derived from their experiences.

We obtained ethical approval for the study Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Zululand. Subsequently, seventeen lecturers at the University of Zululand were

conveniently selected as participants following approved ethical standards for human studies. These lecturers supervised student teachers during teaching practice between August to September 2019. The participants of this study, who are lecturers and also referred to as supervisors, had visited different schools in various areas within and outside the province where the student teachers undertook their teaching practice exercises. The selected participants had just supervised seven primary and ten high schools during data collection. Table 1 shows the demographic details of participants.

Table 1. Demography of Participants, (N=17)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	8	47
Female	9	53
Position		
Lecturer	11	65
Senior Lecturer	6	35
Race		
Black	17	100
Teaching Practice Schools		
Primary	7	41
High School	10	59

The researchers proceeded to collect data using a structured interview guide. This type of interview was selected to ensure that all interviewees responded strictly to the same set of questions (Fauvelle, 2020). The responses retrieved through the narrative reflections conducted with the selected university supervisors were used to proffer answers to the identified research question guiding the study. Samples of these questions include: what are the perspectives of university supervisors on student teachers' classroom interaction during teaching practice?

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was conducted (Creswell, 2009). Also, we maintained the narrative reports were to complement data generated from interviews (Leedy, Ormrod, 2005). Furthermore, we included all necessary steps to ensure the rigour of our qualitative study (Hadi, José Closs, 2016; Rolfe, 2006).

3. Results and Discussion

This study was guided by the research question: what are the perspectives of university supervisors on student teachers' classroom interaction during teaching practice? Also, participants were coded as 'US', which stands for 'University Supervisor.' Following our analysis, our data yielded four major themes. These themes were student teachers' implementation of classroom interaction, some classroom interaction practices that need improvement, question and answer as a teaching and learning method for classroom interaction, and the importance of in-depth content knowledge to facilitate classroom interaction.

Theme 1: Student teachers' implementation of classroom interaction

The university supervisors acknowledged that most student teachers managed to facilitate classroom interaction with their learners. In an extract, US17 indicated that:

"...classroom interaction was evident because student teachers could conduct their lesson properly".

Similarly, US16 elaborated:

"Generally, the interaction was good between the teacher and learners; student teachers knew what was expected of them when teaching, checking previous knowledge, explaining the topic, introducing the topic and presenting lesson using Learner Teacher Support Material".

It is good to note that US17 noted the effectiveness of student teachers to implement classroom interaction. It is worth recognising that there was no presentation of issues that the student teacher engaged with to prove that they could promote interaction. Some of the activities that US16 noted to encourage classroom interaction can be regarded as a culmination of those

presented by Rido et al. (2014, 2015). This finding shows that some student teachers made attempts to implement classroom interaction. These responses demonstrate that while most student teachers do well will create a platform for conducive classroom interaction, some struggle with effecting classroom interaction.

Examining the reason for some of the challenges student teachers face, one of the participants blamed academic staff for not inculcating classroom interaction skills adequately for student teachers to implement an interactive learning environment for learners. According to US1:

“classroom interaction is one area that needs further support from lecturers so that student teachers can be well equipped with interaction skills before attending teaching practice”.

Theme 2: Some classroom interaction practices that need improvement

Some participants noted that student teachers still need to facilitate their lesson introduction and conclusion. For instance, US4 stated:

“...some student teachers still lack the introduction and conclusion of the lesson”.

Besides, US1 argued that:

“some student teachers need to improve especially in the introduction and conclusion of the lesson”.

From this theme, the introduction and conclusion parts of the lesson are essential for classroom interaction. This finding agrees with Nurpahmi (2017) work, which states that classroom interaction can be implemented at the beginning and closing of the class. Similarly, US12 elaborated:

“some student teachers fail to create enthusiasm when they introduce; hence lessons were ineffective”. Since introduction sets the mode for the entire lesson, if it is not well articulated, that can jeopardise the whole lesson. Student teachers should be clear on making their introduction catchy so that learners’ enthusiasm is ensured. So, it is incumbent for student teachers to learn to handle classroom interaction conveniently and superbly at the right time.

Theme 3: Question and answer as a teaching and learning method for classroom interaction

Under theme 3, US9 suggested:

“...most student teachers rely on question and answer method for classroom interaction, but some do not use it appropriately”.

US10 mentioned that:

“student teachers’ questioning skill remains a challenge; they do not question using different levels of cognitive development as presented in Bloom Taxonomy”.

As much as question and answer methods can promote interaction, questions should cover different levels of cognitive development to promote different skills for learners.

Another concern was from US8, who argued that

“student teachers need to improve on their questions during lessons; questions should be aligned to lesson objectives”.

On the same note, US7 posited:

“classroom interaction was good, but student teachers need help with questioning technique”.

There is more to questioning than just spitting out words in the form of questions. The way questions are phrased have a bearing on how learners should respond. Therefore, if questions are not adequately expressed, the whole lesson may flop since learners may fail to answer or give inappropriate answers. This suggests that student teachers should be well guided and supported to master techniques of questioning. Some participants like US15 noted this assertion:

“...for some student teachers, they successfully involved learners throughout the lesson by asking them questions based on the lesson; asking them to give examples, and allowing them to add their views”.

Also, US6 posited:

“...in some lessons, student teachers tried to involve the learners in their lesson delivery by having learner participate in demonstrations”.

Furthermore, US13 added that:

“those student teachers who were good with classroom interaction were able to engage learners throughout the lesson”.

This finding is congruent with the cognitive stimulation put forward by Hamre et al. (2014). They indicated that student teachers' questioning skills could help learners give examples that encourage intersubjectivity through communicative exchanges. As noted by van de Pol et al. (2010), communicative exchanges can be achieved through student teachers' engagement with their learners.

Theme 4: The importance of in-depth content knowledge for facilitating classroom interaction

The fourth theme focused on the importance of in-depth content knowledge for facilitating classroom interaction. It is good to note that some student teachers had secured extensive content knowledge to easily implement classroom interaction. Hence, it was easy for them to give feedback to learners. Meanwhile, a review of the work of Uleanya (2021) shows that timely feedback to learners impacts their learning abilities and academic performances.

As noted by US4:

“student teachers did not have the problem of interacting with learners because they knew content for subjects specialisations”. In line with this view, Solheim et al. (2018) argue that teachers can undertake classroom interaction if they know the learning environment. Thus, content knowledge can enable student teachers to give directions, ask questions, correct learner errors and monitor learner performance (Rido et al., 2014, 2015).

Furthermore, adequate content knowledge can enable student teachers to give feedback to learners because they are well versed of the logistics of their subject. US3 argued:

“...student teachers provided constructive feedback to learners in a timely manner to complement this idea”.

4. Limitation

The study was limited to analysing the narrative reflections of 17 university supervisors from the University of Zululand. Although this qualitative study provides insights into student teachers' preparedness for classroom interaction, findings cannot be generalised.

5. Conclusion

This paper explored the student teachers' preparedness for classroom interaction with their learners during teaching practice from university supervisors. The qualitative method was adopted for the study. Following the findings of the analysed data, our study concludes that the guidance that student teachers receive about classroom interaction is not sufficient for them to be exposed to teaching practice exercises. Furthermore, most student teachers heavily rely on question and answer methods to engage with classroom interaction; however, they face questioning challenges. As a sequel to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- student teachers should receive more exposure to classroom interaction before they undertake teaching practice. This can be done by ensuring practical sections in class and during their observation period as level two students. Such would help prepare them and enhance their interaction skills with their learners, making them more effective during the teaching practice exercises.

- Also, student teachers should be supported and guided grossly on conducting questions and answer method. This can be done by constantly giving them tasks that demand the generation and use of question and answer type of communication. In this regard, student teachers would develop the skill of interacting with their learners through teaching practice exercises.

6. Acknowledgement

The researcher would like to thank participants and the University of Zululand, South Africa, for their support during the study. Furthermore, the researchers are grateful for the support they received from their institutions during the study.

7. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there is no interest in conflict, and all reference materials were duly acknowledged.

8. Funding

None.

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