Teacher Learning in Action: Reflection on Responses to an Evidence-Based Task on Teaching English to Young Learners

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Abstract This paper presents a response to the call for teacher educators to make their pedagogy explicit and offer their practice up for scrutiny (Johnson & Golombek, 2018). The teacher-educator author (TEA) conducted an action research study of the processes taking place during a postgraduate language teacher education course. A guided observation task was designed with a focus on early reading in English as a foreign language in primary school, which required teacher-learners to produce ethnographic notes that they subsequently wrote up as lesson descriptions. They then presented these in a seminar class which was recorded, transcribed and analyzed for critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) by the TEA. A rigorous analysis of critical moments from the class is conducted, with the aim of evaluating the role played by the observation sheet. In addition, extracts from lesson descriptions and reflective questions are studied for corroboration. The observation task, in combination with the wider series of activities, is found to offer affordances for teacher learning.

Keywords Language teacher educator · Pedagogical process · Primary L2 reading · Reflection · Observation · Dynamic system

1 Introduction

This paper considers whether, through the choice and design of a specific task and associated activities, it is possible to create opportunities for the teacher-learner (TL) participants on a postgraduate language teacher education program, to link theory with practice. The specific area of interest is the teaching/learning of early reading in English as a foreign language in instructed settings, with a focus on fourth-grade primary school learners, aged 9–10. The research described takes the form of a critical self-study in an action research framework.

The chapter first explains the motivation for the study and then presents the theoretical background, giving a brief overview of the development of early skills in

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reading, which was the focus of the observation task under scrutiny, relationships between reading in the first and second language (L1 and L2 respectively) in the case of young learners, and the role of the teacher in supporting reading skills. A review of the literature on the education of L2 primary teachers in L2 reading in English follows and the section closes by indicating the need for research into the pedagogy of teacher education. In the next section the study is introduced, it is set in context, and the instruments and the rationale behind them are described. In the results section, qualitative description is given of critical incidents identified in the lesson transcript, lesson descriptions and reflective questions. These are then analyzed and discussed from a dynamic systems perspective. The conclusion summarizes the findings and evaluates the process of self-study in this instance of language teacher education.

2 Literature Review

This study was motivated in two ways. First, the research in which I have been engaged indicates that a not negligible number of young people in Poland learning English in state schools are under-achieving in relation to core curriculum targets in reading in primary years (Ellis, 2015; Paczuska et al., 2014). The same large-scale study also showed that the dominant form of work in English lessons in the Polish language classroom is based on the coursebook (data from 2012 and 2014). A small-scale observational study of 20 lessons taught by 3 teachers in grade 4 in 2 schools, which I conducted in 2019 (Ellis, 2019b), indicated that the picture remains unchanged. The second motivation was social, with regard to the importance of reading in foreign language development in school, and pedagogic, as teachers have been found to play an important role in learners becoming effective readers (Blair et al., 2007). Both of these notions are expanded in the following subsections.

3 Theoretical Background

3.1 Developing Early Skills in Reading

Difficulty with reading at early stages of learning the foreign language has serious social implications, as it carries with it the danger of the learner becoming excluded. If the young pupil in their fourth year of learning English is still unable to read without struggling to decode (this will be discussed further below) and if the largest part of the lesson is based on exercises from the book which use written prompts, then that child may not be able to do the activities. Alternatively, children may strive to do the activity, but it takes them much longer than their classmates, as they have to pore over decoding the text. This may mean they do not have time to finish the exercise or may become demotivated and give up (taken from my grade 4 observation data).

The difficulty with reading is that one of the ways to improve it is through reading (Grabe, 2009, p. 11). If children become demotivated with reading activities, then they tend to avoid engaging in reading, which means that, rather than developing, their reading fluency deteriorates, thus worsening the problem. This is known as the "Matthew effect" (Stanovich, 1986), a downward spiral of the young person falling further and further behind in general academic achievement as a result of reading difficulties. Reading in the target language (TL) is additionally key, as it is important in developing overall L2 proficiency (Birch, 2007), so the child's general L2 ability will suffer as a result of reading avoidance. I should make it clear that I am not dealing here with specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia, but with children who have not yet grasped what can be described as the mechanics of reading in English, the lower order skills, such as the ability to decode grapheme to phoneme (Grabe, 2009, 2014), which are explained further below.

Beginning to read in L1 English is a complex skill. The child not only has to develop phonological awareness of the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and print (graphemes), but also to learn the conventions of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) in writing. The specific difficulty of the lower-order processing skills when reading in English is that the GPCs are not one-to-one and are not regular (Goswami, 2008), leading English to be considered to have a deep and opaque orthography (Katz & Frost, 1992). While there has been considerable controversy over how reading in L1 English should be taught (Castles et al., 2018), there is evidence that direct instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary and demonstrating strategies to support comprehension leads to more fluent and effective reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Reading in L1 and in L2 English differs in two main respects for the young learner. First, before they begin to read in L1, children have had substantial exposure to the language and are usually fairly proficient speakers of the L1, while reading in L2 English is often introduced at a stage when the child has had restricted exposure, has limited L2 oral skills and a small linguistic resource. Second, languages differ in the depth of their orthographies (Turvey et al., 1984; Katz & Frost, 1992), with some languages having a shallow depth, meaning that the relationship between how the phoneme is written and how it is sounded is highly regular and one-to-one (Nasserji, 2014), as opposed to a deep orthography, where the grapheme-phoneme relationship is complex, as in English (Goswami, 2008). Consider, for example, the sound /f/ which may be rendered in writing as *f*, *ff*, *gh*, or *ph*, as in *fish*, *cuff*, *cough*, and *photo*. In English, although there are patterns that can be explained, there are a large number of words which are exceptions and which as a result must be learnt as "sight words," such as *our*. For the child who starts to read a language with a shallow orthography moving to reading in L2 English presents a particular challenge, as the child will automatically apply the decoding skills used in their first language when trying to read English (Perfetti & Dunlap, 2008).

Researchers investigating L2 reading have suggested that reading skills in L1 reading may be associated with reading skills in L2 (Koda, 2007); yet evidence from studies with young learners suggests this is not necessarily the case. Nikolov and Csapó (2010), investigating the relationship between L1 Hungarian and L2 English

reading abilities in learners of grades 6 and 8 (aged 12 and 14) in Hungary, found that at grade 6 ability in L1 reading accounted for only 5% of the variance of scores in L2 reading in English, while in grade 8 the difference was not statistically significant, indicating that as the learner advances up the school, the effect caused by his or her ability to read in their first language, which is very small in grade 6, disappears by grade 8. The study found relationships between L2 writing ability and L2 reading skill. The diminishing effect of L1 reading ability as the learner progresses in school was also reflected in findings by Mihaljević Djigunović (2010), although differences were found in the degree of variance explained by L1 skills in earlier studies comparing Croatian and Hungarian students (Csapó & Nikolov, 2009; Mihaljević Djigunović et al., 2008). The DIALUKI study in Finland (Alderson et al., 2014) found that the best predictors of reading in L2 English in grade 4 primary were phonological awareness and lexical access speed. However, Alderson et al. (2016) found that it was other skills in L2 English (particularly knowledge of vocabulary) which were the strongest distinguishing characteristics between grade 4 learners who had stronger and weaker reading scores, although L1, cognitive abilities and some aspects of motivation were also associated. Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg's meta-analysis (2014), where they compared L1 and L2 readers, by contrast, identified "struggling readers" as falling into two groups: those with problems in lower order reading skills (decoding) and those with comprehension problems. This indicates that the difficulty in the second group is caused by limited L2 linguistic resources rather than a problem with reading as such; yet it should be noted that this study was not restricted to young learners.

There is a substantial literature (see Snow, 2002; Rasinski, 2017, for overviews), which shows that teacher-led interventions with L1 struggling readers can help children become fluent readers with time. The studies by Gorsuch and Taguchi (2008, 2010), and Taguchi et al. (2016) show that similar results are possible with L2 readers. In Poland, the doctoral study conducted by Struk (2018) demonstrated how an additional program to support reading in young early years L2 English learners increased lower order decoding skills and automaticity in word recognition. In other words, it seems that teachers can make a difference by working with learners for whom L2 reading is challenging. However, for teachers to be able to conduct such an intervention with L2 readers they need to have knowledge of differences between the L1 and L2 GPCs and conventions of the orthographies, in addition to skills in teaching lower processing skills. Several researchers have noted that there is evidence that teachers of English as a foreign language lack such knowledge (Ellis, 2019a; Kahn-Horwitz, 2015, 2016; Kwok-Shing & Russak, 2020; Zhao et al., 2015). Vaisman and Kahn-Horwitz (2019) found that it was teachers who had greater awareness of orthographic differences that engaged in more directed teaching of reading, for example of GPCs. Luo et al. (2020) suggest that the reason why Chinese teachers of L2 English lack adequate knowledge of concepts of phonological or phonemic awareness may be that their university teacher education courses do not specialize in preparation for teaching in primary schools. As a result, the TLs learn about developing reading skills with secondary school learners, rather than about introducing the basics of reading. In my own work (Ellis, 2019a) I found that teacher learners had limited declarative

knowledge of reading theories, in particular of lower-order reading skills and differences in orthographies, and, more importantly, very little procedural knowledge of how early reading in English could be taught, other than by exposure to print. The TLs were generally of the view that if a child could read in the L1 then there was no need to teach them how to read in English.

3.2 Educating L2 Primary School Teachers to Teach Reading in L2 English

Very little research has been conducted on the process of teaching early reading in English during language teacher education (LTE) courses. Kahn-Horwitz (2015) found a significant improvement in knowledge about orthography after a one-semester intervention on phonics and phonology in teaching English as a foreign language reading to L2 TLs in Israel who reported that the experience helped them develop their knowledge. Kahn-Horwitz (2016), in an experimental study, compared intervention and control groups for both in-service and pre-service teachers and found significant increases in orthographical content knowledge in both sets of intervention groups. Finkbeiner and Schuler (2017) described using excerpts from selected videos showing L2 reading strategies in use as prompts in helping TLs identify and analyze difficulties learners of L2 English were having with vocabulary and concepts in reading comprehension. Pavlak and Cavender (2019) described engaging TLs in field work with English language learners in the US from kindergarten to grade 2. TLs cooperated with teachers in the school to plan and implement small group reading lessons for struggling readers. Meunier et al. (2019) reported engaging TLs on a teacher education course for L2 Dutch in a project-based experience. TLs prepared a mobile app for use in a museum by beginner learners. The aim was to help the learners develop their reading strategies. Although the main focus of the project was for the TLs to develop digital skills, engagement in creation of the app required practical application of what they had learned in the university about reading strategies.

3.3 Research into the Practice of Teacher Education

There has been considerable concern that university-based teacher education courses lack sufficient connection with practice (Moon, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Work in contexts such as the Netherlands (e.g., Brower & Korthagen, 2005) has shown that increasing links between school and university positively affects teacher learning and increases teaching competences. Darling Hammond (2016), noting like others (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Golombek, 2018; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Wright, 2010) that little is known about the

process of how teachers are in fact prepared, calls on teacher educators to investigate their teacher education practice and courses.

Freeman and Johnson (1998) called for a reconceptualization of teacher education courses, to move away from concern with the *what* of the LTE course to a focus on the *how* of the course room, asking such questions as (Freeman, 2001, p. 79): How do teachers learn? What is it that can be done to support them in this process? In order, therefore, to improve the quality of teacher education, there is a need for educators to make explicit the process of how they work, explaining and rationalizing their choices and decisions, and reflecting on the effects brought into play by the interactions. Johnson and Golombek (2018) declared that "LTE pedagogy must be intentional and goal-directed, and this requires that teacher educators make explicit their motives, intentions, goals, and ideologies when designing, sequencing, and enacting LTE pedagogy" (p. 6, preprint version). While this has been taken up in general education, particularly within the self-study movement, research on language teacher educator practice is scant (Peercy & Sharkey, 2020). This study aims to contribute towards filling this gap in the literature.

4 The Study

This study investigated an approach to bringing the university course room and the school experience closer by asking the teacher-learners (TLs) to carry out a field task in schools. They were asked to observe an L2 English class in primary school where reading was being taught using a guided observation sheet. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. Is there evidence that including an observation field task in the language teacher education (LTE) seminar helps the TLs connect theory to practice?
2. How does the guided observation sheet function as a tool for promoting critical reflection on early L2 reading?

4.1 Research Context

The study was conducted during the seminar for TLs who had chosen the methodology of English teaching specialization, which was part of a two year postgraduate teacher education program leading to an MA and a national qualification in English language teaching at a Polish university. It took place during the second half of the first year of the program, in spring 2019, and comprised 8 meetings held for 90 minutes every second week and totaled 16 hours. It was planned and taught by the researcher and was credit bearing, but not subject to grading or examinations. Information about the requirements for obtaining a credit was shared with participants in the first meeting of the course. TLs were concurrently taking part in three

courses on the psychology of teaching, and one on the methodology of the teaching of English among others. Each of these were taught by different members of staff.

The national curriculum framework for foreign language teacher education includes obligatory teaching practice in school at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, which involves both observation and the teaching of lessons under the supervision of a school-based mentor. In the university in which this study took place there is no provision for university staff to visit the schools, or observe lessons during the 120 hour practicum in the postgraduate program, nor is there any direct contact with the mentor teachers, except by the program administrator. No teaching practice was taking place during the seminar described.

4.2   Participants

There were 10 participants, one male and 9 female, aged between 20–25 years (specific ages were not collected) in the group which took part in the study. The TLs were studying full-time, but 7 of them were also working as teachers of English, one in nursery school, two in private language schools and four as private tutors. Those participants who were teaching declared having between 1 and 3 years' experience. All the participants had completed a three-year undergraduate degree in English. All of them were Polish, with varying levels of proficiency in L2 English, at approximately level C1. The target level for the end of the two year program is C1+ on the *Common European Framework of Reference* scale. The LTE program is mainly English-medium, with the exception of classes in psychology, which are in Polish.

4.3   Research Design

I adopted an action research approach, following the cycle of plan—act—observe—reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), using a multi-methods approach to data collection, with myself as the teacher educator/researcher. As action research was originally conceived as a way to find solutions to real-life social problems (Adelman, 1993), it seemed an appropriate research frame for work on the complex and dynamic design and implementation of an experiment in LTE.

The stance I take is that teacher learning is a complex system, where the TLs are nested within a university in which they are concurrently studying many different courses taught by a variety of different staff. In addition to this, some of them are also working as language teachers in different contexts. Each TL brings with him or her to the LTE course all of their previous learning experience, both as a language learner and from their undergraduate degree courses which included teaching practicum in schools. The socio-constructivist approach (Johnson, 2006) holds that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction, between participants, and with the educator, but also with different artifacts and through activities (Vygotsky, 1978), rather than being

transmitted. Thus, any encounter or task in the seminar room is mediated through the TL's experience; yet as it is a complex, dynamic system, there is no causal or linear reaction since each and every part of the system is sensitive to change and may react individually and differently. My role as the teacher educator is create opportunities for learning to take place, to monitor what occurs and mediate if I sense a "push" is needed for re-organization of the TL's personal system view of teaching and learning. Each one of us has agency in the process and this affects how we behave.

4.4 Research Instruments

The data was collected with the use of a guided observation sheet on the basis of which TLs produced written descriptions of lessons, the transcript of a lesson where they made oral presentations of their descriptions and provided written responses to a set of reflective question and a critical report I prepared. These are described in more detail below.

4.4.1   The Guided Observation Sheet

This tool was designed to produce a factual account, organized chronologically, of what happens during a lesson including L2 reading in primary school, from the perspective of both teacher and learners, including as much verbatim reporting as possible (e.g., what the teacher says, in the language in which it is said, learner responses, etc.). It also includes the timing of the lesson. A record of materials used and the board is made by taking photos, which are then attached to the description. The sheet also included factual questions (e.g., Did the learners ask any questions? What? What about? In English/Polish? If yes, how did the teacher respond?) and the TLs were tasked "to produce ethnographic notes which give a clear idea what happened in the lesson." Questions were blocked into sections headed *Before reading*, *As the reading starts*, *While reading* (subdivided into *Silent reading* and *Reading as a whole class*), and *After reading*. At the end, the TLs were asked to give an overall impression of the main focus of the reading, given the choice of "Learners were supported to develop their reading skills/Reading comprehension was tested." Finally, they were asked to "Note down two questions you would like to ask the teacher," find a suitable time to this and write down the answers afterwards.

On the basis of the observation and their notes, they were asked to write up a detailed description of the lesson, and submit it together with accompanying materials. This was a course requirement. This document was intended for two purposes. First, was to obtain reliable, ethnographic descriptions of lessons which contained reading, conducted in a range of state primary schools, with a preference for class 4, with the aim of creating a database to complement descriptions of 20 lessons, which I was concurrently observing and preparing in schools in another region. At the same time I wanted to engage the TLs in the role of researchers, collecting data in school,

using part of a procedure which had been implemented in a large-scale study on observation (BUNJO, 2012, cf. Ellis, 2015). It was hypothesized that engaging the TLs in an observation project would give them hands-on experience of school-based research, which could serve to help them as they considered how to design their own research for dissertation projects. I also anticipated, on the basis of comments from these and other TLs, that they had had little or no training in observing lessons and that guidance was needed to help them focus on what to look at. Next, I intended that the observation data would serve the TLs as material for critical reflection on how early reading is conducted in primary classrooms and designed the follow-up written lesson description task as a prompt to instigate this process. I hoped that this writing-up process would give the TLs opportunity to reflect-on-action (here the action being active observation of a lesson). It also offered them the possibility of linking theory to practice, through considering the theories of reading which they were studying during a second course in Academic Writing, which was running concurrently. I had selected academic texts on the theory of first and second language early reading as source texts about which they had to prepare summaries. Finally, I intended that writing ethnographic notes while observing live lessons could also be a technique they might adopt during the practicum in which they would participate in the following year. Decisions made about the design of the guided observation sheet were based on my own experience in writing ethnographic notes during lessons. In preparing the observation sheet, I visualized myself in a lesson and imagined what I look for and what I might see, preparing a set of questions intended to elicit the desired information.

4.4.2 Lesson Transcript

After the TLs had observed a class in school and written their descriptions, they gave presentations of the lessons they had observed during one of the seminar meetings. This was audio recorded with the participants' consent. The recording was then transcribed by the author.

4.5 Reflective Questions

The TLs were sent a set of four reflective questions one month after making their presentations and asked to send responses in writing. The first question asked them to explain briefly what aspects of reading they had observed being taught or practiced. Next they were asked to describe what they viewed as the greatest challenge in reading for the learners they saw. The third question asked them to describe what presented the greatest challenge for the teacher in terms of developing reading skills in the lesson they observed. The final question asked what approach the TL would take in teaching reading in grade 4 primary and what their focus of attention would be.

4.5.1 Critical Report

Throughout the process of designing and producing the instruments I kept note of my intentions and of what drove my decision-making. During the presentation lesson I made notes, to which I added reflections immediately after the end of the class. During and after reading the lesson descriptions and reflective questions I also kept notes. While transcribing the lesson, I began the process of cross-referencing, turning to the written lesson descriptions for clarification if needed. I then re-read all the data many times, adding new thoughts and reflections to my notes. Next I began the process of analysis, identifying critical incidents in the lesson transcript, lesson descriptions and reflective questions which I interpreted as moments when there was evidence of the TL learning about/becoming aware of the L2 reading process. Finally, I compiled a critical report for myself in which I evaluated the action research cycle. During the preparation of this report I identified the guided observation task as being a key point for the TLs in the process. This motivated me to focus on this task when writing up the research.

4.6 Procedure

In this section I will first give a short overview of all the action undertaken and then focus on one part, explaining reasons for the selection. The overview aims to situate the selected part firmly in context and offer a sense of the whole. The following stages were involved:

1. Preparation of forms for obtaining informed consent for participation in the research from TLs.
2. Information given to the group about the observation project and their consent obtained. TLs consented to the use of questionnaire data and lesson descriptions in my research as well as to the recording of presentations and class discussion, but unanimously declined to take part in interviews.
3. Information collected from TLs on their knowledge and beliefs about the early teaching of reading. This was done in the form of a print questionnaire with open-ended questions, distributed during a seminar class and completed at home. It was to serve as baseline information on their explicit and procedural knowledge of early FL reading and assumptions and beliefs about the topic.
4. Analysis of the questionnaire.
5. Preparation of guided observation sheet to assist TLs in preparing a detailed descriptive account of an English lesson in primary school which included reading. This was done concurrently with 3–4 above.
6. Selection of a lesson transcript and appropriate excerpts and support materials to serve as introduction to the observation task. Planning of the lesson to implement this.

7.   A volunteer TL prepares letter to schools requesting permission for TLs to conduct the observation task. The letter is co-edited, the final version is submitted to university authority for official stamp and signature, and then distributed to TLs.

8.   TLs obtain permissions, conduct the observation task, complete written lesson descriptions and prepare presentations.

9.   TLs in seminar class present their lesson descriptions. A discussion follows. The whole of the class is audio-recorded with the TLs' consent.

10. TLs submit written lesson descriptions, which is a course requirement. These are later read and analyzed by the author.

11. The reflective questions sheet is prepared. Four weeks after presentations this is sent to TLs electronically. This is a course requirement.

12. Answers to the reflective questions are received electronically and analyzed.

13. Recording of TLE class with presentations is transcribed.

14. Iterative reading of transcription takes place. Critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) are identified. Excerpts from transcription are selected.

15. Cross-referencing of data is done. TLE discussion transcript and lesson descriptions are matched and compared with reflective questions. Iterative reading occurs. Individual TLs are tracked across the data set.

16. Reflection-on-action takes place and as a result the critical report is prepared which provides the focus for future action. This also happens concurrently with points 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17.

17. Preparation of action plan, which involves both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

18. Consideration of what can be reported, how, to whom, and for what purpose.

For the purposes of this chapter I have chosen to focus on how the guided observation sheet functioned, drawing on evidence from data taken from the lesson descriptions prepared by the TLs on the basis of the LTE class transcript made when the TLs presented their lesson descriptions to the group and from the reflective questions (points 8–11 above). This choice was made as in my reflection-on-action (point 16) and the preparation of the critical report I identified the design of the guided observation sheet as having had a pivotal role in what followed.

It should also be added that the process of making ethnographic notes was explained to the TLs during a seminar class, using research artifacts: photos of materials used in the lesson, including the board, the teacher's lesson plan, an excerpt from a written transcript of the lesson, a set of ethnographic notes made by a trained teacher-observer during the lesson. By way of introduction, the TLs looked at the reading text from the coursebook and discussed in pairs how they would incorporate it in a lesson, before presenting their ideas to the group. These were discussed, with questions for focus and clarification asked by the teacher educator (TEd, myself). Next they saw an excerpt from a transcript of the audio recording of the lesson and discussed it. Finally, they read the ethnographic notes produced by the observer. At the end of the class, I briefly explained the procedure of how the 2012 observation research had been conducted, mentioning that each lesson had been seen by two

observers, one of whom had produced the ethnographic notes. The reason for having two observers I told them, was to reduce subjectivity and increase the reliability of the data. The TLs were made aware of data protection legislation and warned not to include children or the teacher in any of the photos, to explain the procedure to the teacher before the lesson and to be discreet about taking the pictures.

4.7 Analysis

Within the reflective stage of the action Research cycle I use Farrell's (2016, in Farrell & Kennedy, 2019) reflective framework designed for the TESOL teacher. This comprises 5 levels: "philosophy, principles, theory, practice and beyond practice" (p. 4), where the first three levels focus on the person-in-context of the educator, considering their personal theories, belief system (both personal and professional), and the choices they make about how to implement these in a congruent way in their work. The practice level adopts the reflection-in-action stance during the lesson, followed by a reflection-on-action Schön (1983, 1987) stance post hoc. The final level, beyond practice, interpreted for the setting of the LTE course, concerns the wider implications and outcomes for the TLs as they work with their own learners. I chose this framework as allowing for the complexity of the process of LTE within a complex dynamic system.

   In analysis of the research data (described below) I used Tripp's (1993) notion of critical incidents. A critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and on the basis of that judgement comes the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident (p. 8). I looked for evidence in the data that showed critical thinking about the process of early L2 reading was taking place. The interpretation of whether this was in fact the case is mine alone, which is a limitation of this study. This is not a design flaw, however, but the result of the TL participants exercising agency and declining to take part in interviews, during which I had planned to investigate the critical incidents from the perspective of the individual TL concerned. As mentioned above, none of them gave consent and so the verification process is limited to tracing individual responses between oral narratives and written accounts made by the same person.

5   Results

I would like to evaluate the functioning of the Guided Observation Sheet according to two of the purposes identified above. As a prompt for the production of detailed ethnographic notes it worked extremely well. The lesson descriptions produced provide clear and detailed accounts of the observations, as can be seen in the following example:

Extract 1: Lesson description

10.57 – The teacher speaks in English and asks the students to open their student books (English Class A1) on page 56. Then, she tells them to look at the comic story at the top of the page: "Look at the pictures. What is the story about? What do you think?" A boy at the back yells: "O super bohaterach! [Polish: heroes]" "Yes, about superheroes!" the teacher confirms and asks him to speak English next time. She asks the students to copy the title of the story into their notebooks as the topic of the lesson. Next she instructs them to look at the page again and listen carefully to the recording of the story. (TL1)

A fact which emerged when the TLs presented their lesson descriptions in class was that 8 of the 10 participants had visited the school in a pair. This re-emerged in the process of writing my critical report. I could find nothing in my notes to explain this and realized (from the transcript) that I had omitted to ask them why. I realized on reflection I may have inadvertently made an impression on the TLs during the introduction to the ethnographic procedure. Reflecting-in-action, this indicates the profound potential of undertaking such rigorous introspection of one's work. Some of the TLs exercised agency and carried out the task with a partner. However, each of them produced their own notes, which when they were compared subsequently, are qualitatively different. Interestingly, the two TLs who observed on their own produced the briefest written descriptions, seeming to indicate that collaborating on the task produced a thicker description.

Evaluating the second main purpose for which the observation sheet was prepared, that is that it would serve as material for critical reflection on how early reading is conducted in primary classrooms, my feelings are more reserved. The data from which evidence can be drawn are the transcript of the class when presentations were made and the reflective questions responded to at the end of the process by the TLs. On studying the transcript, I was struck by critical incidents I identified as "missed opportunities to mediate," of which one example follows, with the critical moment in italics:

Extract 2: Presentation of lesson descriptions. Critical moment 1

TL3: First of all the teacher organized them into 4 groups of 3 students, so she divided them into 4 groups and she selected how they would be divided and then each group got a different book* and then they couldn't open it, they had to predict what it's going to be about, just from the cover and the title…

[*note: *Don't call me sweet*!; *Alan's Big Scary Teeth*; *Where the Wild Things are*; *Dinosaurs love Underpants*, authentic children's picture story books]

…and so they were brainstorming for about 3-5 minutes and then the teacher asked them to open the books and read one by one in those small groups the text and she didn't translate anything or explain, *there wasn't in fact any pre-reading just this guessing*… (a description of the next activity follows).

Looking at this extract I am filled with frustration that I did not intervene at this point and mediate. I would like to have asked the question: "What do you think the purpose of the guessing was?" with the aim of scaffolding the teacher towards discovering the idea that predicting the content of a text before reading helps children to create a schema for the story which they are going to read and so supports their

understanding. I remained silent and missed an opportunity to guide that TL to a potentially vivid understanding of the abstract concept of schemata. Yet this is not a failing of the observation sheet in itself, but a failing of the pedagogy-in-action, at a moment which "reflecting-on-action" indicates as a time for mediation. The sheet had successfully elicited potential material for reflection, but the educator let it slip by.

Here is a second critical incident, from the same description, which followed shortly after the one above:

Extract 3: Presentation of Lesson descriptions. Critical moment 2

TL3: And when they were reading it they were sometimes simultaneously translating- if they read a sentence, they were like, they translated it to their peers and sometimes [giggles] it was completely, it was quite funny sometimes

TEd: Was there any conversation going on about what they thought it meant between members of the group?

TL3: Yes, there was a word *rude* and they translated it as "rudy" [Polish], so red-haired, and they thought it was the rudy dinosaur, the red-haired dinosaur, or something like this [TEd: Ah!] so there were a lot, maybe not a lot, but there were some situations like this [TEd: *so creative!*]

Reading my comment (in italics) in the transcript I was very cross with myself at yet another wasted opportunity. Why, I asked myself, did I not help the TL to unpack where the "rudy" problem was coming from? They had been reading about decoding presenting problems for young learners in English because of the differences in orthographies and writing a summary of a text from Grabe (2014) in the academic writing class and here was a real-life example witnessed by this TL in action, which she interpreted as an issue with "translation." The learners had in fact applied decoding from their L1 Polish and appeared unaware of the rules of English orthography for u-e combinations. They had sounded each letter individually, producing a two-syllable from /'ru:de/, which they then approximated to the Polish word *rudy*, rather than applying the "silent e" rule for English and saying /ru:d/. With hindsight, however, I recalled a reflection-in-action decision made during the class that I would not intervene, as I wanted to remain neutral as far as was possible, so as not to inhibit the presenters. I consciously limited myself to asking factual questions, aimed to help the TLs present their descriptions as coherently as possible.

Towards the end of the transcript, after all the presentations had been completed, I asked the question "Any learners that are having trouble with reading aloud?" which elicited the following exchange:

Extract 4: Presentation of Lesson descriptions. Critical moment 3

TL4: I think I noticed they had problems with pronouncing *our* because like *o-ur* [approximately /ɒ/u:ə/]

TEd: that's because they're looking at it and they're doing it from- they're sounding the letters, so they're doing /ɒ/ /u:/ /ʀ/ [sounding as they would be in Polish].

TL4: Oh yes! [intonation indicates this has reminded her of something]

Rather than mediate, I switched into transmission mode. On the basis of the response by the TL, she appears to be recognizing something. In short, there is evidence that the observation sheet has the potential to serve its purpose of prompting critical reflection on how early reading is conducted in primary classrooms, but in these excerpts from the transcript it is clear that in order to achieve this, additional mediational support is needed, which in these critical incidents is sadly lacking.

Let us turn then to the Reflective Questions to see if any evidence can be found there which might be attributed to the guided observation sheet. The following extract is taken from responses to the second question.

Extract 5: Response to one of the reflective questions

Q2. What in your opinion was the greatest challenge in reading for the learners you saw? Explain your answer with reference to what you observed.

TL5: In my opinion, the greatest challenge that the learners had to face was reading in a foreign language and dealing with unknown vocabulary. I am afraid that some learners may have difficulty reading in their mother tongue so reading in English is much more challenging for them. Another problem is that spelling and pronunciation are not consistent with one another in English. For this reason many learners may struggle to remember the correct pronunciation of different words in spite of the fact that their teacher pronounces them several times in class. Finally, some students are too shy to ask about the meaning of a particular word even when the teacher asks: "Is there any word you don't understand?"

TL5 has identified two problems: a problem with reading and a problem with language, lexis specifically. The TL suggests that the reading problem may have its source in poorly developed L1 reading skills, which amplifies the difficulty of L2 reading. Differences in L1 and L2 orthographies are highlighted as a second difficulty with reading and a reference is made to the teacher's response in the lesson, which is to repeatedly say written words aloud for the learners, a strategy the TL suggests is unsuccessful. The final point made is a socio-cultural reference, indicating that the teacher's request for learners to say which words they do not understand is inhibiting for some learners, also portraying it is not an effective, or inclusive, strategy. It is not clear whether this is based on the observation, or whether perhaps it is a response grounded in personal learning experience.

If we draw on this as evidence to evaluate the observation sheet, it would appear that when combined with this reflective question it has achieved its purpose. The TL is able to identify and analyze a variety of challenges occurring in an early reading activity. When read in conjunction with the lesson description and the relevant part of the transcript from the presentation, it can be seen that this TL has gone beyond simply re-writing extracts and shows evidence of deeper consideration. It would appear that reflection-on-action (here interpreted as the actions observed during the lesson) on the topic of early L2 reading is taking place.

6 Discussion

In this section, I discuss the research questions together, holistically. To return to the context of this study, we have a group of young people with varying experience of language teaching. The points they share in common are that they are all "products" of the state education system of which the schools they visited are part. They carry with them their own experiences and memories of learning English in similar classrooms, although their language learning did not necessarily exclusively take place in school. They have completed undergraduate LTE programs which included 120 hours of school experience in primary classes. Alongside the course, of which vignettes are described here, they are following the same program and attending the same classes. Beyond this they diverge. A key factor, I believe, is that three of the TLs are not currently engaged as teachers. In addition, the teaching experience which the others have and the contexts in which they work differ greatly. I draw attention to this, as it is through the prism of their "persons" that they observe, engage in and interpret the lesson they observed. Although they all used the same frame, set out in the guided observation sheet, this was simply an artifact with which they interacted, and it is clearly to be expected that each of those interactions will be different because of what the participant brings to it, their perceptions of it and of the task, and because of the nature of the school, the classroom, the teacher and the learners they encountered when using it.

The next point I would like to make is that, given the limited amount of teaching experience these TLs have, and the fact that the field experience using the guided observation sheet was restricted to a single lesson, I had high expectations of what I hoped they might manage to achieve. When I reflect that the notions of lower order processing skills in reading were new to them, and, in addition, that a few short weeks prior to the field task they had had no declarative knowledge of differences in depths of orthographies, this was new territory for them. However, when it comes to the differences between Polish L1 and English L2 in terms of decoding, they did have years of personal experience, although none of them, when asked, could actually remember how they learned to read in English. As with any skills which are highly automatized, intense introspection is needed to recall and unpack how that process came into being. In addition to all this, in what I expected from the lesson description presentation class, I had unconsciously compounded two aims: for the TLs to provide rich descriptions of reading lessons, and for them to be able to identify, analyze and theorize from critical incidents. I also expected that those incidents I perceived as critical, which with my personal agenda were related to problems learners had with decoding in L2 English reading, would be the same as the ones which the TLs would identify. On reflection, this was completely unrealistic.

I have taken a stance where I believe that the LTE course room is nested within a dynamic system, and that what happens within it is also dynamic, so it is important that in attempting to answer the research question I do not expect some causal relationship between the event of the field task and the response in the TLs. To be congruent, the question needs to be viewed in a dynamic systems frame. When a

dynamic system is in a state of flux, two of its characteristics are unpredictability and instability. It is from this apparent chaos that, over time, the component parts settle once again into a period of relative stability. If, therefore, the aim of the field task was to collect material which would build reflection on something which was new and relatively unfamiliar to the TLs, then the task itself had to potential to unsettle the system. When one's own system of assumptions, beliefs and prior learning is challenged, and in addition one is in an unfamiliar situation, one is part of a vortex of experience, comprised of a wealth of potentially confusing incoming data. "Creating order" out of such information is highly demanding. It would follow, therefore, that simply the process of taking detailed ethnographic notes and suspending judgement while doing so is a cognitively demanding task in itself. In setting the task, I had also failed to unpack my automatized skills as an experienced ethnographer and forgotten the effort such a task entailed for the beginner. Similarly, during the presentation lesson, I expected that the TLs would be listening critically to the presentations (critically in the sense that they would be analyzing them), where in the event I think, on reflection, that they were more likely trying to make sense in the vortex. This was partly exacerbated by the fact that most of the lesson descriptions were made as oral narratives, largely without visual support.

What would seem more realistic under the circumstances for these teachers-in-a-process-of-becoming are signs of what Kubanioyova and Feryok (2015) describe as "emergent sense-making in action" (p. 436). Burns et al. (2015) talk of a process when "thinking becomes in relation to rather than about" (p. 597). Thus, if we return to the red-haired dinosaur episode (see Extract 2), we could interpret the TL's identifying this as "translation," as "sense-making" in progress. Out of the "chaos" of new data unsettling the system, the TL successfully identifies a significant moment, a moment which resonates with her in some way. She finds it amusing and memorable. It has made an impact and is disturbing the equilibrium. What she is not yet able to do is to understand what is happening, in terms of being able to theorize from it, but the fact that she has identified it is, in itself, an important event. Korthagen (2016) speaks of *phronesis*, "practical theory that helps teachers perceive important 'clues' in classrooms and offer them as a basis for their actions" (p. 320). If, as Farrell's (2016) fifth stage of reflection urges us to do, we look beyond the LTE course room, it is exactly identifying moments such as this in the classroom which are the first step in the teacher being able to intervene, mediate and scaffold his or her learners to develop their reading. At this stage of these TLs' development, *phronesis* is a more realistic goal than theorizing-from-action, because it is this skill in the particular context of difficulties with decoding written English that has the potential to cause the teacher to make the greatest difference with their learners for the future.

In the same vein, if we return again to the extract taken from the reflective questions and consider that what the TL writes has "gone beyond" what was written in their lesson description, or was contained in that TL's own presentation, we in fact have no way of knowing what it was which enabled the TL to take that step and reflect more deeply. Could these broader reflections not also have come from being a participant listening to the presentations of others, which included the red-headed dinosaur moment, or the mispronunciation of *our* described by another colleague,

accompanied by my own "teacherly" explanation? The guided observation sheet and the associated process of collecting data and writing it up appear to serve as a stimulus in a complex process, but there were many moments which could have been trigger points which caused a system shift. In this context then, it would appear more appropriate to consider the whole system of events described in the procedure as having provided affordances for teacher learning. Amongst these were what Johnson and Golombek (2018, p. 2, preprint) describe as "mediational spaces," where the teacher educator could (but in this case did not) have initiated a dialogic process of scaffolding the co-construction of "target" concepts or awareness.

Finally, returning to PLD critical moment 3 on the pronunciation of *our*, I considered again the "Oh yes!" response of the TL, which appeared to signal recognition of something. With any cognitive challenge there comes an enlightenment moment, a sudden realization of what is happening, a joining of the pieces of the puzzle. I have no evidence to prove that this was in fact what was happening and can only suggest this as a subjective interpretation. If this was in fact the case, then this captures a trigger moment as the TL becomes conscious of "something" which I hope led, or will lead, to *phronesis.*

7   Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest that it is the combination of the guided observation sheet, the field task associated with it, the requirement to produce a written description of the lesson and the opportunities afforded by the presentations class, in addition to the indirect input received from the texts on reading in the academic writing course, plus the many and varied interactions arising during the whole process that provided spaces within which teacher learning may have taken place. Given the chance, I would use this set of activities again, but incorporate the TL's collaborative version of the field task, if it were practically feasible, for the increased possibilities it affords.

I have endeavored throughout this paper to make my assumptions, theories and process explicit. Conducting this rigorous self-study has been a revealing process from which I have become aware of much which will be helpful in planning for further action, as is usual in action research. I hope that in this description I have indicated ways in which teacher educators might introspect in their own contexts on selected topics within their own programs. For the future, were I to undertake such a study again, I think I would try to collaborate with a "critical friend" to whom I could describe, or talk through what is happening, while it is in progress, rather mainly than reflecting-on-action, as has been the case here. It would add a more objective perspective. I regret that the TLs did not consent to be interviewed, which has left study open to charges of lack of triangulation, but had to abide by their decision. Despite this, I believe it has been possible, on the basis of extracts from the data, to capture signals which suggest that these events were causing ripples in the minds of the teacher learners, and, perhaps, even a moment when a pebble dropped into the pool and some understanding about early L2 reading began.

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