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Reflections on a Simulated Micro-Teaching Sequence

Introducing a Book by its Cover

This paper is about the simulated micro-teaching (MT) sequence which I conducted in 2018 in the context of "The Way Teachers Talk: Developing Classroom Discourse Competence" – a TEFL course at Augsburg University taught by Dr. Katrin Thomson in the advanced module. I will first describe the assignment and then present the sequence's original 'lesson' plan. This is followed by an in-depth reflection on my 'classroom' performance and the method's potential to foster classroom discourse competence (CDC).

1 Introduction

For many TEFL students, possibilities to gain practical classroom experience at pre-service stage are rather scare. Consequently, those small 'windows' to classroom practice often put considerable pressure on student teachers as they want to perform well but at the same time barely feel prepared for the overwhelmingly large amount of teacher tasks and roles they have to fulfill simultaneously while teaching. Unlike authentic MT sequences (i.e. those taking place in schools and with actual EFL learners), simulated MT sequences are conducted within the 'safe' context of a university course and in collaboration with one's fellow students. MT of this type offer valuable opportunities not only for those with little or no teaching experience but especially for those who wish to work on and improve specific teaching skills. Such an opportunity presented itself to me in Dr. Thomson's TEFL class "The Way Teachers Talk", a course on classroom discourse taught in the summer term of 2018 at the University of Augsburg.

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2 Planning the Micro-Teaching Sequence

The assignment required me to plan, conduct and reflect upon a short sequence which would be part of a hypothetical lesson in 12th grade. While the lesson phase and overall context were pre-defined by the course instructor, I was free to decide on the material and structure of the sequence. I was supposed to simulate the beginning of a lesson which at the same time was also assumed to be the introduction to a new teaching unit in which students would read and work with a novel. The book was to be introduced in the simulated sequence, using its cover as the main resource and material. Considering both Bavaria's curricular guidelines and the fact that racism is still among the most pressing social and political issues within the U.S. American context, I chose Claudia Rankine's book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). Although I was aware of the book's sensitive topic and complexity, I still decided to use it because the focus in my MT sequence would only be on the book's cover and not on the actual text. The cover shows a picture of David Hammon's "In the Hood", which is a play on words because Hammon actually does not depict a neighborhood of some kind, but a hood cut off or ripped off a hoodie. The dark green hood is depicted in front of a white background (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Book Cover of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*.

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Planning my MT sequence, I divided it into several parts: In a first step, I only wanted to reveal the title of the book, and the questions I prepared for the whole-class discussion in this part were primarily supposed to activate students' knowledge (*What is a citizen?, Can everybody be a citizen?, Or is this somehow problematic?*) and focus on students' associations and speculations (*What was the first thing that came to your mind when you read the title of the book?, What do you think could the book be about?, Where does the story of the book most likely take place?*). In a second step, I planned to show the rest of the cover which would allow students to see the hood. One set of questions would aim for a description of the cover (*What do you see?*) and an exchange of first impressions and connotations (*What connotations does the black hoodie carry for you?, What was your first reaction when you saw the cover? What do you think is the topic of the book?*). As I also wanted to draw students' attention to the play on words concerning the word 'hood', I planned to provide information on Hammon's picture "In the Hood", which would be linked to the question: *Does this match your idea about the topic of the book?* Not knowing whether the cover picture would evoke thoughts linked to the actual topic of the book, I tried to think of ways that would nudge students into the intended direction. These 'measures', then, included questions like *Why is the hoodie cut off?* and the presentation of a quote by Zora Neal Hurston which is also included in Rankine's book: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (Rankine 2014: 53). Assuming that Hurston's quote would trigger associations linked to the topic, I wanted to repeat the previous question: *Why is the hoodie cut off?* In a third step, I wanted to focus on the term 'racism' once the topic was established, and ask students to work in groups of 3 to 4 and to come up with a definition (*What is racism?*), before I would make them think about how racism might actually develop (*Where does racism come from?, How does it develop?*). After students shared their thoughts and ideas, a transition to reading the first parts of the text would have followed. This, however, was not intended to be a part of the MT sequence anymore.

3 Reflection-on-action: An Analysis and Evaluation of My Micro-Teaching Performance

After teaching this sequence, I quickly realised that the actual lesson slightly differed from my original plan. For one thing, it was almost twice as long as I had planned it to be, but immediately after the MT sequence I was not quite able

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to figure out why. When I studied the video-recording, I soon found one possible explanation though: instead of only asking the one question I had prepared for a specific aspect, I split it up into many. For instance, after having told my students what the title of the book was, I was interested to hear about their first thoughts. In a stretch of several questions, this was then realised in the following way:

[01:43–01:54]
T: So, what was the first thing that came to your mind when I told you (.) when I told you the title? What was the first thing (.) like what do you think the book could be about? [*Very quickly uttered.*] What what what were your thoughts (.) your first thoughts?

Instead of asking one question, I asked five, leaving students no time to develop their ideas as they are basically obliged to listen until I finish. My question turns, I noticed, were often too long and the amount of teacher tealking time was too high. Analysing scenarios like these in detail, I also realised that some of the questions within the same turn actually focused on different aspects, which was probably rather confusing for my students. In the example above, I am primarily interested in my students' first reactions to the book title, but my question about the book's possible topic had a completely different focus. Although I had originally planned to ask this question, I only noticed afterwards that I would often combine too many different questions, move on too fast and try to deal with too many aspects at once, instead of concentrating on one issue at a time.

In my 'extended question turns' I discovered yet another pattern: some of my questions were immediately followed by examples which I considered helpful for students to answer my question, like in the two extracts below:

[20:53–21:06]
T: And WHY so? WHY: do they hate everyone? like (2) usually they didn't do anything to them beforehand, or is it because there was like something in the media, or how does racism develop? How (.) where does it come from?

[21:46–22:08]
T: So, erm (2) we came up erm up with with a few quite good and accurate ideas (.) but come e:h let's come back to the one I just asked erm (.) why (.) does racism (.) develop? Like, whe:re does it really come from? What what do you think? Like, is it just (.) okay I just don't like these people because they don't look similar to me (.) or is it (2) because of other reasons?

Reconsidering these situations, I realised that my way of thinking might perhaps be too general or one-sided, because in a real classroom not all students might benefit from the examples I give. While for weaker learners such examples

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might indeed be helpful, they could have a demotivating effect on stronger learners as I basically already allude to those aspects which I (do not) want them to talk about. In my simulated MT sequence, it did not have these effects but the analysis of the lesson recording and transcript certainly raised my awareness of this particular habit in my teacher talk.

Apart from that, the two turns above show discourse features which I believe I used quite effectively during the MT sequence: sign-posting and backtracking. In the second turn above I used "So" to introduce my summary of what we had achieved so far, and with "let's come back to", which is an example of backtracking, I referred back to the question I had asked before to signal to my students that I wanted them to think of more aspects. I think that structuring the discourse with the help of such discourse markers is beneficial for most students because it enables them to follow the interaction.

With a similarly positive effect, I think that I managed to use back-channels quite well. Transcribing certain parts of the sequence made me realise that I used "Mmm" and "Yeah" very often not only to show that I was listening, but also to encourage the speaker to add further aspects, which in many cases they did. This, I think, also helped to create a positive atmosphere in class.

Actively listening to what my students were saying also enabled me to provide language help when they needed it. In one situation, for instance, I used conversational scaffolding when one student (of course only pretended that she) did not know or could not think of a particular word:

[17:28–21:06]

T: Erm (.) I want to know firstly about THIS group here on the windo:w. (2) What (.) came you up with?

S4: Erm (3) [*looking at the other group members, then laughter*] we thought that (.) racism is about (2) the lack of opportunities ↑ because of (.) the (3) [*touches the skin on her arm to show that she does not know the word for it*] e:rm (5) the color of you:r [*touches arm again, looking at T*]

T: the skin color ↑

S4: yes (.) thank you=

T: =mmh=

S4: e:rm (4) for example? (2) becau:se (.) we thought that (.) maybe black people don't have the same opportunities as white people (.) because (.) because of their skin color [*touches arms*]

T: Mmhh, yeah. (.) Very good ↑ (.) one point ↑ (2) The girls on on the left here in the back ↑ (4) what did YOU think?

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The lexical support I provided enabled S4 to continue. In fact, the transcript of this passage made me realise the potential of scaffolding: with a little bit of help students are able to achieve so much more.

When I analysed the extract above, I also noticed another aspect: not only in this situation but in many others too, I did not really know how to react to students' contributions when those were actually quite valuable but did not fit to the ones I had in mind. I simply accepted them (e.g. "Mmhh, yeah. Very good.", "Perfect. Yeah." or "Exactly.") but did not really respond to the ideas as such. Instead, I would move on quickly, like in the example above when I asked another group of students to talk about their ideas without really reacting to what had been mentioned before. I can imagine that this was or could be rather disappointing for students and could perhaps demotivate them to further participate. With regard to students' contributions, closely watching the video-recording of my MT sequence also made me realise that I was only picking those students to answer my questions that I knew would provide good ideas. In retrospect, I was able to see that there were quite a few students who did not get to or were not asked to speak at all. Overall, I think this might have something to do with the fact that I wanted to move on quickly and stick to my lesson plan and the ideas I had prepared. In the future, I think I should try to include everyone, really respond to students' ideas and become a bit more flexible.

Finally, considering my use of question types, I think that most of them were chosen well. As I wanted to make this sequence, which was supposed to simulate the lead-in to a new unit, as communicative as possible, I mostly tried to use referential and divergent questions which would invite students to give complex answers and express their thoughts. It was only at the beginning of the sequence that I used the rather closed form of a display question (*What can you see?*). With the use of more open questions later on, I gradually increased the complexity of my questions in the course of this sequence (with referential questions such as *What connotations does the black hoodie carry for you?* and divergent questions like *How does racism develop?, Where does it come from?*) and gave my students plenty of opportunity to talk freely, as the focus in this lesson phase was supposed to be on 'fluency' and 'content'.

4 Reflections on Video-Recorded Micro-Teaching at University

Considering that there are not too many university courses which offer the possibility to conduct a MT sequence, it did not take me long to decide that I wanted

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to try it out. Although simulating a classroom situation and teaching university students certainly cannot be compared to teaching real high school students in a real classroom at school, I still profited a lot from this experience.

First and foremost, I think it was the aspect of practice and experimentation, as well as the fact that I would not have to be afraid of failure, that really made me feel more confident in my role as a teacher. In the 'safe' context of the seminar, I was able to concentrate more on what I was doing and pay more attention to how I interacted with my students than I would have been in a real classroom. Although the classroom situation was only simulated, I was able to quickly switch from 'student mode' into 'teacher mode', and I noticed that some of my fellow students also managed to make the transition from 'university student' to '12th grader'. Some intentionally changed their way of talking, used simpler grammar, spoke more slowly, made mistakes on purpose, pretended to lack knowledge of certain words (like S4 in the transcript above) or disturbed the lesson on purpose. In fact, they created situations quite similar to real classroom interactions which allowed me to (re)act in the same way as I probably would have done in a real classroom (e.g. provide lexical scaffolding, reprimand students).

Being video-recorded while teaching was also a new experience for me, and watching myself on tape felt quite strange at the beginning. However, rewatching the lesson recording several times enabled me to focus on my way of talking in class, my intonation and pronunciation, my use of gestures and facial expressions etc. Especially the detailed transcription of my MT sequence helped me notice certain aspects of my interactional behaviour which I probably would not have become aware of otherwise. This particular form of self-reflection is, at least as far as my personal experience is concerned, very different from what seems possible in school internships.

Finally, another aspect I learned to appreciate greatly was the variety of feedback I received – both from my fellow students and course instructor. Since they shared this experience with me and were able to relate to the MT sequence in (almost) the same way as I could, we were able to discuss and reflect upon certain aspects together (including, for instance, questioning techniques, feedback behaviour, classroom management and selection of material). These exchanges were very valuable for me because they provided further insights. They would not, however, have been possible in a real classroom with real students. Concluding, I can only highlight the great efficiency of the micro-teaching method.

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