

Sylwia Kossakowska-Pisarek
Uniwersytet Warszawski
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4340-1221>
s.pisarek@uw.edu.pl

Developing reflective practice as part of teacher training with the use of critical incidents

Abstract

Preparing thoughtful reflective practitioners has become a common concept in the teacher education literature. Prior educational experiences offer excellent opportunity for students to reflect on authentic teaching examples and provide constructive ways to engage in reflective practice. This study examines critical incidents as a tool for developing reflective thinking skills among teacher trainees (N=11). The research on use of critical incidents for training comprised a questionnaire and group discussions. The instrument used for analyzing critical incidents included personal details, factual information and open-ended questions concerning reasons for and consequences of the incident, associated emotions, reflections connected with it, lessons from this incident and its implications for the future. Overall, although some crucial issues arose, the technique proved useful for training, and was assessed as positive and valuable by the teacher trainees. Some pedagogical implications were formulated regarding problems with understanding the notion of critical incident, previous training of the teacher trainees and the need for a supportive environment.

Keywords: critical incident, reflective practice, teacher education, teacher development, critical reflection

Słowa kluczowe: zdarzenie krytyczne, refleksyjna praktyka, kształcenie nauczycieli, rozwój nauczycieli, refleksja krytyczna

1. Introduction

Reflection as a tool for teachers' professional growth is recognized by teachers, educators, and researchers. Recent developments in teacher education have heightened the need for effective models and tools to improve professional practice and develop reflection. The problem, however, lies in applying theories about reflective practice efficaciously to research and practice. This article focuses on the use of critical incidents both in training of trainee teachers and in research as a method for developing reflection which is a key professional skill. Critical incidents enable analysis of personal understanding about teaching and learning by drawing on the complexity of dilemmas and viewing problems from various perspectives. As Tripp (1993: 12) emphasizes, reflection is always partial because perception and thought are contextualized and therefore limited. The ability to identify and analyze problems from different perspectives is crucial and requires reflection strategies and skills. Critical incidents provide opportunities, support reflection and enable us "to move beyond our everyday 'working' way of looking at things" (Tripp, 1993: 13), thus they enable effective reflective practice in the education of trainee teachers. This paper is organized as follows: the second section gives a brief overview of reflective practice; the third section examines the use of critical incidents in trainee teacher education and its usefulness in developing professional skills; Critical Incident Technique is then outlined in the fourth section; the next section presents a small-scale study and is followed by the research findings and discussions of results, and finally conclusions.

2. Reflective practice

In recent years reflective practice has been gaining much attention in teacher education where the goal is to prepare thoughtful reflective practitioners. Reflective practice facilitates the ability to learn from experience and is regarded as key to professional growth and development (Harris et al., 2010: 3). It has its origin in Dewey's (1933) notion of 'reflective thought'. For Dewey acquiring habits of reflection is a fundamental purpose of education, as only then can teachers engage in intelligent action. It was Dewey (1933) who pointed out that both logical and analytical reflection can happen only when there is a real problem to be resolved. In order for the reflective practice to take place a real problem needs to be dealt with in a rational matter. For the teacher this problem can be considered to be of differing intensity, from mildly uneasy to intensely shocking, and it should be addressed in three steps: (1) the problem has to be defined, (2) it has to be analyzed, and (3) it needs generalizing. The

focus of the problem can be narrowed to a problem statement, which signals readiness to commence studying its features (Babione, 2015: 87). Formalizing problem-solving may be perceived as daunting by teachers (ibid.) and that is why training in effective ways of dealing with the problem is of paramount importance. Generalizing is connected with suspending judgement which, in turn, leads to diagnosing the situation accurately.

Reflection has become a vital tool for professional development of teachers to help them examine and transform their practice. It enables teachers to become creative and innovative, aware of and responsible for the outcomes of their work (Zawadzka-Bartnik, 2014: 9). Farrell (2015: 153) defines reflective practice as

A cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and while engaging in dialogue with others use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom.

Reflection leads to autonomy which in turn engages a teacher in the continuous quest to find answers to many issues arising in learning and teaching situations (Michońska-Stadnik, 2009: 102). Valli (1997) points to the fact that professionals who are unreflective are limited in their ability to make changes, and are guided by impulse, tradition and authority. Werbińska (2017: 68) emphasizes that "reflectivity upon who and what have contributed to being a certain kind of teacher, queries about changing roles, the perception of contradictions, potentials, and constraints seem to be what is required in a contemporary, changing world". Farrell (2018) advocates reflective language teaching due to the fact that systematic reflection on teaching experiences can improve teachers' understanding of their own teaching. However, as noted by Finlay (2008: 15), reflection "is hard to do and equally hard to teach." Many researchers emphasize that teacher educators need to provide adequate support, tools and methods for reflection. Practitioners need to draw upon theoretical knowledge, experience and knowledge of the current situation (Harris et al., 2010: 3). A reflective teacher learns from the situation, modifies and reteaches a lesson after reflecting.

To date, various approaches to reflection have been proposed. Harris et al. view reflection as comprising *implicit reflection* and *explicit reflection* (2010: 4). The former refers to the way teachers think and resolve problems and how they interpret them based on their previous experience. The latter concerns metacognitive thinking about their actions, experiences and beliefs, thus involves more critical analysis of the given situation. Both kinds of reflection

concern actions, prior experiences and personal beliefs. By contrast, Schön (1983) distinguished between *reflection-in-action*, *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-for-action*. *Reflection-in-action* is spontaneous and calls for immediate decisions. This type of reflection is demanding for novices as it requires prior experience. *Reflection-on-action* is focused on the context of the event and careful examination of all the information. *Reflection-for-action* is the desired outcome of the first two types of reflection and guides future actions. Ross (1990: 98), however, perceives the reflective process as composed of: (a) recognizing dilemmas, (b) responding to a dilemma by recognizing similarities and unique patterns, (c) framing and reframing the dilemma, (d) experimenting with the dilemma to investigate the implications of various solutions and (e) examining the consequences of a solution and evaluating it by assessing its consequences.

Reflective exercises have been investigated in various disciplines and many advantages of their application are highlighted in literature. Griffin and Scherr (2010) emphasize that in, inter alia, medicine, family therapy and education careful structuring of reflexive exercises combined with feedback have resulted in positive change in students' critical thinking. Engaging in reflective practice increases teachers' confidence and makes them proactive. However, it is not easy and it cannot be done in a mechanical fashion. Moreover, it should proceed with sensitivity as it may have a profound impact on the person undertaking reflection and can lead to an unduly negative frame of mind (Finlay, 2008). Both teacher trainees and educators require support in managing ethical challenges that may arise. Finlay (ibid.) highlights the importance of the appropriate use of reflection, which should be carried out in such a way that it does not reinforce prejudices and bad practice. Furthermore, it is vital that teacher-learners are developmentally ready to engage in critical reflection as some of them may not be yet capable of doing so. Recently, Mann and Walsh (2017:12) have criticized the dominance of written reflection and highlight the importance of oral dialogical reflection as experiential knowledge is "supported by collaborative discussion where thoughts and ideas about classroom practice are first articulated and then reformulated in a progression toward enhanced understanding".

Various models of reflection have been advanced in different areas of professional practice, most of which recognize various levels of reflection. Finlay (2008) emphasizes that it is important to engage in various forms of reflection and distinguishes such variants as *introspection*, *intersubjective reflection*, *mutual collaboration*, *social critique* and *ironic deconstruction*. *Introspection* involves solitary self-dialogue concerning personal meanings and emotions. *Intersubjective reflection* is focused on the relational context and the negotiated nature of practice. *Mutual collaboration* is connected with a dialogical

approach to reflective practice and engaging in a reflective conversation to solve problems collaboratively. *Social critique* concerns wider, discursive, social and political contexts. *Ironic deconstruction* is connected with the deconstruction of discursive practices and rhetoric of reflexive practice. *Introspection* is the dominant mode of reflective practice, yet it lacks mutual, reciprocal shared process (ibid.). By contrast, Jay and Johnson (2002: 77) identify three intertwined dimensions: *descriptive*, *comparative* and *critical reflection*. *Descriptive reflection* focuses on the point for reflection and concentrates on such guiding questions as: "What is happening?", "How am I feeling?" and "What do I not understand?" *Comparative dimension* is connected with alternative views, perspectives and research: "How do other people who are directly or indirectly involved describe and explain what is happening?" or "How can I improve what is not working?" *Critical dimension* is related to the new perspective: "What are the implications of the matter when viewed from these alternative perspectives?", "What does this matter reveal about the moral and political dimension of schooling?", "How does this reflective process inform and renew my perspective?" Cirocki and Farrell (2017) emphasize that critical reflection is required as through it teachers compare theory and practice, ask questions about the teaching-learning process, analyse relationships between teaching and learning, and find optimal solutions for their classroom dilemmas.

Finlay (2008: 16) draws our attention to the fact that student-teachers should be offered an array of models and tools to trigger broader reflection. As various models engage different levels of complexity students should be familiarized gradually with models which demand more analysis and critical, reflexive evaluation as their confidence grows. Mann and Walsh (2017) claim that there is a lack of appropriate reflective tools and that the tools which are used may be not sufficiently orientated towards specific contextual needs. The most commonly utilized instruments include critical incidents, case studies, reflective journals/diaries, reflective dialogical exercises, role-plays and practical exercises. As critical incidents have proved to be effective in multiple contexts and are recommended by many researchers, they are the focus of this article.

3. Critical incidents

Critical incidents are widely used in various contexts, inter alia nursing education, management and social work. In social work education and practice they have been used as a method of supervision in student placements (Davies, Kinloch, 2000). The use of critical incidents enables students to investigate the nuances of human interaction within the educational setting, uncover practices and reveal layers of meaning (Rossmann, Rallis, 2014). Learning and teaching

are complex and multilayered processes and as such require sophisticated methods for knowledge construction which involve selecting, representing, analyzing and interpreting. Schön (1983) suggests that novice practitioners lack tacit knowledge, have a tendency to cling to rules and procedures which they tend to apply mechanically. Unfortunately, inexperienced teachers often suffer self-doubt when they face challenging teaching situations (Harris et al., 2010: 9). As teacher trainees often encounter episodes which are difficult to resolve these naturally become opportunities for critical reflection. Critical incidents may be associated with current or past experiences occurring in everyday professional practice. Brookfield (1990: 84) views critical incidents in teaching in terms of a "vividly remembered event which is unplanned and unanticipated". By dealing with real incidents reflection is nurtured naturally and it is easier for trainees to see a positive value of the process, to learn from experience and to deepen understanding of various dimensions of their profession. Thus, critical incidents enable effective learning based on reflection and facilitate integration of theory and practice.

Why does an incident become a critical one? Tripp (1993:8) emphasizes that

Incidents happen but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: 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 the basis of the judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident.

It is the teacher's interpretation that makes an event critical, so critical incidents are not merely observed, they are created. Harris et al. (2010) concur that the incident becomes critical because it causes an individual to pause and take note. Similarly, Bruster and Peterson (2013) offer that episodes become critical because they cause the teacher candidate to pause, think back, and consider outcomes. Tripp (ibid.) highlights that the majority of critical incidents are neither dramatic nor obvious and may even be insignificant, and that unnoticed situations can turn into critical incidents. Rendering them critical the underlying meaning and their significance is discovered, interpretation is given and further analysis is carried out. As argued by Babione (2015: 86) a critical incident is a form of storytelling and writing or recording it enables us to reflect on it in a critical manner.

Many researchers emphasize the reflective aspects of critical incidents. Rossman and Rallis (2014: 75) highlight that a critical incident triggers reflection. Bruster and Peterson (2013) claim that critical incidents may be utilized as the framework for initiating the reflective process of the teacher candidates. Reflecting on crucial, personal episodes in professional practice as

a way of developing professional judgement is supported by, inter alia, Dewey, Schön and Tripp. As argued by Schön (1983, 1987) there is the mismatch between formal education and real life and the former does not prepare future teachers effectively for the latter, as real life problems tend to be unique, complex, contextualized and arise in 'indeterminate zones of practice', unknown novel situations where no solutions are obvious. These uncertain conditions are closely connected with the notion of critical incidents (Tripp, 1993). The usefulness of the process is widely recognized by many researchers, yet some limitations are also recognized.

The core problem is that it is not an easy task to encourage students to engage in reflection on critical incidents, which, according to Johnson and Golombek (2002: 2), is crucial: "Professional development emerges from a process of reshaping teacher's existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices rather than simply imposing new theories, methods, or materials on teachers". The use of critical incidents enables trainees to reflect upon unplanned and uncontrolled events in their professional practice which may be a source of frustration and negative feelings. Furthermore, critical incidents may be used effectively both for solitary reflection and for working in a dialogical team context. There are various uses of this technique. For example, Griffin (2003) suggests writing up the incident together with subsequent analysis. As some students may have difficulty in producing written material, the process can also be used effectively with audio-recordings (Davies, Kinloch, 2000). Moreover, a portfolio of critical incidents kept by students can be used for analysis in training.

It is worth noting that by engaging in various forms of reflection trainee teachers may learn what is the most appropriate or meaningful for them and what is relevant to their needs. Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011: 648) draws our attention to the fact that critical incidents and the ethical dilemmas involved in them may help trainee teachers deal better with critical incidents that they will encounter in the future. Thus, they will be better prepared for real life practice. Critical incidents are also used in Poland for developing reflective practice (for example, Kiliańska-Przybyło, 2009; Werbińska, 2009). Kiliańska-Przybyło (2009) emphasizes that critical incidents thanks to their clarity provoke reflection and increase the sharing of experience. One way of approaching this is the Critical Incident Technique, which is presented next.

4. Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

The CIT is a flexible, retrospective approach developed by Flanagan (1954) in order to understand effective and ineffective performance of pilots. It is a part of learner-centered and experiential model of education. Nowadays, it is used

as a reflective tool for teaching and learning and as a research method which enables the examination and transformation of practice in a range of different contexts. It is recognized as a qualitative method of data collection. Davies and Kinloch (2000) emphasize that reflecting on past experience is linked with anticipating future action which assists in the process of learning and develops limited knowledge and skill into informed and skillful action. It enables in-depth reflection and analysis of specific events and thus makes links between former experience and the transfer of new learning for the future. It also familiarizes teacher trainees with the idea of reflective practice and encourages them to use it in an organized, structured and effective way.

Tripp (1993) highlights the usefulness of some techniques to assist observation. He advises starting with a search for certain adjectives to describe the incident, such as: interesting, funny, sad, silly, witty, violent, unfortunate, boring, good or trivial (ibid.: 35). The last adjective is perceived as particularly beneficial by him, as the very fact of the situation being recalled suggests that there is something important about it, which makes it salient. Moreover, it is these unremarkable and everyday events that are often the best indicators of the patterns and values underpinning our practice. In his book Tripp considers both typical and atypical events worth recording and analyzing. For analyzing incidents Tripp recommends asking a series of questions, highlighting that this should be an ongoing process in which new links can constantly be made, as there is the possibility of some values being unrecognized at first. He draws our attention to the fact that a written account is vital, as having a record encourages us to analyze it in a deeper and more objective way (ibid.: 109). It is worth noting that through comparing others' experience with our own we may observe our own situation more carefully, revise our opinion and even change our behavior.

This view is supported by Farrell and Baecher (2017: 5) who emphasize the importance of discussing a critical incident, as both novice and in-service teachers may then define problems, clarify issues, weigh alternatives and reflect on cases while deciding on a particular course of action. In the same vein, Farrell (2007) advocates teacher development groups, as teachers in them complement others' strengths and compensate for others' limitations. Teachers working together may achieve better results than individuals as the group tends to generate more ideas about classroom issues and reflect more deeply.

Nevertheless, reflective exercises should be structured carefully and to facilitate the process an array of instruments may be used (see, for example, Griffin, 2003; MacLachlan, McAuliffe, 1993). One of the most discussed instruments is Critical Incident Report (CIR) prepared by Griffin (2003), an instructional tool which requires students to identify if the experience is typical or atypical and describe it in objective detail. It has been used successfully in the training of pre-

service teachers. The incident itself becomes the springboard for interpretation, in-depth examination of significance and the opportunity to move beyond the immediate context by finding generalizable aspects. It is also connected with identifying emotions and includes various perspectives of the participants. As the focus is on meaning, it facilitates a more profound level of reflection.

The instrument proposed by Griffin (*ibid.*) follows David Tripp's (1993) four steps: (a) describe and explain an incident; (b) find a general meaning and classification for the incident; (c) take a position regarding the general meaning; and (d) describe actions to be taken. The CIR form is divided into a description of an incident and the meaning of the incident, written as detailed reflection and analysis of the incident. It also includes an emotions section added in order to facilitate the understanding that what comes to our attention and emotions are inherently connected.

In order to be able to claim that using analysis of critical incidents is a useful approach in teaching and training foreign language teachers it should be verified in terms of its effectiveness in the language teacher training and development in various contexts. Based on the literature review described above, we can state that reflective practice needs to be developed with the use of a variety of tools in order to identify and analyze problems from various perspectives. Practitioners require effective tools and methods that can have a positive impact on students' critical thinking skills, and at the same time enable them to engage in broader reflection. Critical incident analysis is a flexible alternative which offers an array of advantages such as the opportunity to nurture natural reflection on meaningful incidents in order to deepen the understanding of multi-faceted dilemmas and, above all, the integration of theory and practice. The question arises whether such analysis is suitable in the context of foreign language learning and teaching and if it suits the needs of the trainee teachers in the given context. In order to assess the usefulness of this process for the needs of trainee teachers a study was conducted which is discussed in the next section.

5. Research

An exploratory small-scale study was performed with the use of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) as a data collecting tool. The eleven participants were all MA students (1M, 10F) in the English Department of the University of Social Sciences, Warsaw, in the teacher specialization, with between 1 and 10 years' experience teaching English as a Foreign Language. Most of them were Polish, one was Ukrainian and one Turkish. All the participants consented to participate in the study. This was a convenience sample. The aim of

the research was to investigate the usefulness of CIT for training the students to reflect on critical incidents and to assess its usability for research purposes. The research question was as follows:

Q: Is analysis of critical incidents useful in developing reflection among teacher trainees?

The study comprised varied forms of reflection with the use of such instruments as a questionnaire and focus group and supported a mixed-method, contextual approach to studying reflection from the emic perspective. Questionnaires were collected from all the second year MA students in the teacher specialization of the English department. The answers to the questions were coded and analyzed for themes. Categories were then created. Data was compared with the records of discussions from the focus group, which was also coded and analyzed to allow for triangulation of data.

The training included familiarizing the students with the idea of critical incidents by carrying out reflection over a critical incident entitled "Developing a Discipline Plan" (Farrell, Baecher, 2017: 65–68). The choice of critical incident was connected with the fact that for novice teachers discipline problems are quite frequent and a part of the case study was to develop a pre-planned approach to discipline in the classroom. The case was discussed in the group of student trainee teachers, after the notion of critical incident had been presented according to the proposals formulated by Tripp (1993). Students were encouraged to give examples from their experience and share their management techniques with other students. During the next meeting a Critical Incident Questionnaire was distributed and students were asked to complete it based on their experience. Then a focus group was held and students discussed their input and evaluated the instrument.

The instrument, the Critical Incident Questionnaire, consisted of three sections: personal details (age, gender, sector of education, experience), factual questions concerning a chosen critical incident including general instruction to students and a set of questions related (what it was about, who was involved, etc.). The third section involved open-ended questions concerning reasons for and consequences of the incident, associated emotions, reflections connected with it, lessons from this incident and its implications for the future. The written account of the incident provided more time for reflection on the incident and supported the selection of the most relevant incident. The instrument conformed to the recommendations given by Griffin (2003).

6. Research findings and discussion

All incidents which were chosen by this group of students were negative and trainees had played the role of an active participant in them. The incident categories included issues connected with class management, unsatisfactory preparation of students for examinations, negative experiences of teaching, differences in needs and preferences among students which were difficult for the teacher.

During the focus group some observations were made by students regarding the usefulness of the exercise. Dialogical reflection, as supported by Mann and Walsh (2017), was found to foster reflection and participation in a community of practice seemed to be beneficial for students. The discussion was lively and the students were generally interested in it. Two students were eager to discuss the critical incidents they had described further and sought feedback what to do in such situations. Many ideas were exchanged, examples of good practices were shared, and students showed their open-mindedness and offered support. Overall, based on the data collected the exercise proved to be useful for the trainee teachers in this context.

The following research findings could be formulated. There was a serious problem for some students to understand what a critical incident is, so training based on studying the examples is recommended before using this type of exercise. In some instances discussing cases was associated with negative emotions, so it is crucial that the atmosphere should be friendly and open. Both the teacher and other students need to offer a lot of support. Besides this some of the trainees had problems with presenting their incidents and emphasized that they did not know what to describe.

By contrast, some trainees expressed gratitude that they could discuss negative experiences and seek help related to challenging situations. The discussion of critical incidents seemed to deepen their understanding of their efficacy, their personal assumptions, beliefs and preferences and in some cases helped them to overcome their self-doubt. This finding supports Schön's arguments (1983, 1987) for including real life problems while developing reflection. Collaborative teacher development, including discourse with others and not only with oneself (Mann, Walsh, 2017), seems to offer opportunities to reflect more in depth as it involves discussion between students who may offer their various perspectives on issues specific to their own context. It was encouraging for students to see that many other trainee teachers have similar problems and also deal with difficult situations in their everyday practice. The discussion helped to create a community of practice, a supportive environment of teachers sharing experiences and discussing personal issues. This may be valuable in their future practice as it makes trainees realize that discussing

their professional problems with others is worthwhile. Overall, the exercise proved to be useful despite its limitations.

7. Conclusion

Analysis of critical incidents may be used both for training and research as it is an effective analytical tool in data analysis and the process of interpretation (Rossman, Rallis, 2014: 73). Analysis of critical incidents as a research method allows for an uncovering of practices, positionality and perspectives, and reveals layers of meaning in the research context (ibid.). Moreover, its use for training may change negative experiences into positive outcomes and prepare the trainee for future teaching practice. It is worth noting that in this way this approach helps develop students' self-efficacy and builds self-confidence. It may also be a good way to build a sharing community of trainees who offer valuable pieces of advice and support in demanding situations. Overall, it facilitates reflection and deepens understanding of the world around us and the teacher's role. As the consequence reflecting on critical incidents positively influences the way teachers think and act which can be a turning point in their professional practice. Furthermore, the choice of critical incidents by students may create an effective tool to learn about the beliefs system of the trainees, and their problems and it may become a tool for teacher trainer to identify crucial areas for further development. Based on the research conducted we can conclude that analysis of critical incidents is a useful tool both for teaching and researching reflection as it helps to uncover beliefs about teaching, and sharing the incidents enables trainees to discuss their experiences and solve dilemmas. It definitely supports reflection and it is a versatile approach worth using. However, its usefulness may be influenced by the readiness of both teachers and trainees to use this type of exercise. The major limitation of this study is the small sample size and the limited context which make the findings less generalizable. Further studies need to be carried out in various contexts to establish the effective use of analysis of critical incidents in the context of language learning and teaching.

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