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## Active Professionalism of Teacher Educators

Active professionalism is a modern notion in the discussion on teacher professionalism, which imposes on teachers the need to research the educational context in which they work and engage in their own professional development. Teachers are expected to inquire into their practice and reflect on their own experience, to actively direct their professional learning and deliberately go beyond their current abilities. The paper presents research conducted among 14 language teacher educators with the use of semi-structured interviews together with a study of their mind-maps and scientific and didactic publications. The target group was selected by snowball sampling. The author describes the research findings in which she finds two strategies of active learning performed by the teacher educators (remedial strategy and exploratory strategy). The first aims at improving the learning outcomes, and the latter focuses on self-improvement.

**Keywords:** pedeutology, active learning, professional development, qualitative research, teacher educator

### Czynny profesjonalizm nauczycieli akademickich

Aktywny profesjonalizm to pojęcie rozwijane we współczesnej literaturze pedeutologicznej, które jako zadanie nauczyciela określa badanie kontekstu edukacyjnego w miejscu pracy oraz aktywne zaangażowanie we własny rozwój zawodowy. Od nauczycieli oczekuje się prowadzenia badań nad własną praktyką dydaktyczną i dokonywania refleksji nad nią oraz aktywnego kierowania własnym rozwojem. Artykuł przedstawia badania przeprowadzone wśród 14 nauczycieli akademickich specjalizujących się w kształceniu przyszłych nauczycieli języków obcych. W badaniu wykorzystano wywiady niestandardyzowane oraz techniki pomocnicze – mapy myśli i analizę zawartości publikacji naukowych i dydaktycznych. Doboru grupy dokonano metodą kuli śnieżnej. Autorka opisuje wyniki badań, w których odnajduje dwie strategie aktywnego uczenia się przejawiane przez nauczycieli. Są to: strategia naprawcza i strategia

poszukiwawcza. Pierwsza z nich przynosi poprawę efektów kształcenia, druga zaś jest przejawem aktywnego samodoskonalenia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pedeutologia, aktywne uczenie się, badania jakościowe, nauczyciel akademicki, rozwój profesjonalny

## Introduction

The modern model of education provides a variety of requirements and expectations concerning the image of a teacher. They are expected to be people that are actively involved in the community and professional organisations outside of their schools and engage in innovations and, at the same time, develop and change their own practice. There are a lot of examples of such teachers described in literature (Meister & Ahrens, 2011; Collinson, 2012). There is also a great call for a teacher to be an agent of change, not only in the classroom, but also in the wider school environment (Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, 2012). The professional development of teachers is also considered a stimulus for social change, where education is a driving force. Such notions as professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), transformative professionalism (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) or even an activist teacher professionalism (Sachs, 2003) emphasise the great need for a deeper relationship with society and the educators' commitment to building it. The expectations result in the transformation of educational processes and practices, and a vast number of training programmes on teachers' roles as agents of change have been arranged (e.g. Guceri, 2014). The concept of "extended professionalism" imposes additional tasks on a teacher for improving practice through reading and engaging in continuous professional development and places teaching practice in a larger social framework (Forde, McMahan, 2019).

Teachers are also considered to be active agents directing their own development (Czerniawski, 2013). Teachers' active attitude towards their practice and work is emphasised in a great number of papers and books. Many researchers show the relationships between active learning and professional learning outcomes or teacher competences (e.g. Niemi & Nevgi, 2014). The European Commission (2007) emphasises that teachers should be active professionals, as their own activity also promotes student learning. It is undeniable that one highly significant responsibility of teachers is "to continually inquire into their practice to learn how improve it" (Huxtable & Whitehead, 2017). No matter which direction of professional development is addressed, the discussion about the nature of teacher professionalism leads to the need for self-regulated continuous improvement. Educators are always expected to actively look for ways of updating their

skill and knowledge base. Thus, a discussion on active professionalism demands focusing on teacher's intentional and self-regulated learning.

## Teacher educators as active participants in their own learning

One of the most important conditions for successful teacher professional learning is deliberate practice, understood as prolonged engagement in practice that is specially designed and “the explicit goal of which is to improve performance” (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer, 1993, p. 368). Ericsson and Staszewski (1989, p. 239) earlier defined deliberate practice as voluntary and intentional engagement in specific practical activities, at an appropriate level of difficulty, as opposed to merely repeating tasks, mindless remembering or automatism. Bronkhorst and others (2014, p. 19), after studies of literature on deliberate practice, distinguished four characteristics:

1. It is designed for self – improvement – as teachers engage in challenging activities leading them to master their abilities and increase their teaching performance,
2. The practice is repeated to enable successive refinement, as the rate of expertise development is linked to the amount of deliberate practice,
3. It is followed by feedback that is immediate and informative,
4. It requires significant effort, concentration and motivation.

Teachers' concentration on active attempts to go beyond their current abilities also has a few limitations (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer, 1993, pp. 370–372): resource, motivation and effort constraints. Deliberate practice requires some time and energy from the individual, as well as access to resources. It is instrumental for achieving further improvements in performance and is not “inherently enjoyable” (p. 368); thus, educators need to believe the performed activities will improve teaching effectiveness. Deliberate practice is an effortful activity that can be sustained only for a limited period of time, as its extension leads to exhaustion. Thus, teachers deliberately practise only if they anticipate the positive effects of their actions.

Zimmerman (2006, p. 705) claims that the properties of deliberate practice are exactly the same as the key components of self-regulation. These are task analysis, goal setting, strategy choice, self-monitoring, self-evaluation and adaptations to reality. What is more, Zimmerman (2000, pp. 13–39) emphasises that active learning is based on deliberate engagement in a set of cyclic phases of self-regulated learning. He mentions three steps that are described below, with references to the process of teacher educators' self-directed learning. These are:

1. Forethought phase, in which teachers set their personal goals and strategic plans for learning. This precedes actual performance and includes various behavioural and cognitive processes, such as task analysis and self-motivation.
2. Performance phase, i.e. implementation of the plan and experimentation during the exact moment of learning. Teachers' learning occurs in teaching, and its effects are the qualitative changes in practice, as well as in the way practice is understood.
3. Self-reflection phase, in which teachers engage in self-reflection over own performance and teaching outcome.

As it is shown above, many authors combine deliberate practice with self-regulated (or self-directed) learning. All the terms are appropriate for the description of the active attitude of teachers towards their own learning and practice improvement. The concepts have several commonalities; however, some researchers differentiate them on the basis of the outcomes. Thus, self-regulated learning involves mental activities that provide changes in knowledge development, but deliberate practice leads to increased performance. This differentiation does not seem logical in the case of learning and the professional development of teacher educators. The research described below suggests that the mental activities of teacher educators tend to result in both knowledge development and improved performance. The activities the teachers carry out lead to their greater awareness of the learning process and deliberate changes of practice.

### **Strategies of deliberate practice of teacher educators – research findings**

The qualitative research (Szplit, 2019) was carried out in 2018 among 14 university teachers preparing students to work as a foreign language teacher, with the use of semi-structured interviews. The group was chosen by snowball sampling, and the main criteria of selection were the setting (university, college or academy teaching) and fields of “double” specialisation (teacher education and foreign language teaching). The target group includes 3 men and 11 women, with teaching experience from 12 to 30 years, with master (1), doctor (11) and post-doctor degrees (2): teachers of English (8), German (4), English and German (1) and French (1).

All the interviews took 1.5-2.5 hours and were held face-to-face in the natural surroundings of the educators or via Skype. They all were typed and double-validated by the respondents (transcript validation and interpretation validation were carried out). The interviews were carefully analysed, and the coded

and categorised fragments were compared with each other in order to search for common threads, complements, elaborations, exemplifications or oppositions and counterarguments. In addition to the direct statements of the interviewees, some research data was derived from mind maps drawn by the teacher educators and supported by an analysis of the scientific and didactic publications of the interviewees and their materials for students. Finally, an image of the described reality was reconstructed through the interviewees' interpretations, in accordance with the constructivist approach.

As Niemi, Nevgi and Aksit (201, p. 472) emphasise, the core elements of active learning are inquiry and knowledge construction skills, as well as the ability to manage learning individually. However, educators differ on the basis of their own approach to their own learning. Joyce and Showers (1995, p. 134) name four kinds of teachers, and two among them describe active participants: the "gourmet omnivores", who are people enthusiastically seeking out opportunities for development, and the "active consumers", who look for professional development opportunities, though with less energy<sup>1</sup>.

The research shows a domination of gourmet omnivores among the interviewees. All the interviewees tend to search for possibilities to improve their knowledge and skills. They described a variety of activities that might be recognised as examples of deliberate practice or active and self-regulatory learning.

Bronkhorst and others (2011, p. 1124) conceptualised deliberate practice as having two forms: enactment deliberate practice, which is intended for improvement of the learning outcomes of students, and regulatory deliberate practice, which is intended for self-improvement. Both modes are also visible in the research findings. The teacher educators describe their deliberate practice as self-directed application of a specific action strategy ensuring adaptation to the existing conditions.

There are several strategies that can be described, and two represent Bronkhorst's forms of deliberate practice: remedial strategy and exploratory strategy.

## **Remedial strategy as improvement of learning outcomes**

A remedial strategy is adopted by the teacher educators in the case of low teaching effectiveness and is an evidence-based analysis of teaching content and methods. If the university teachers believe that the poor outcomes are caused

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<sup>1</sup> The remaining two are: the "passive consumers" who wait for schools to provide the opportunities to develop and only benefit from them, and the "reticent consumers" who actively resist any engagement in professional development.

by too little effort or a wrong choice of teaching method, they consider what they should change and are ready to undertake some activities to improve their practice.

The strategy is based on self-reflection and evaluation of own actions and mistakes and aims at (1) understanding own teaching and behaviour and interpreting them and (2) making decisions on possibilities of improving practice. Active teachers' learning is meaning-directed and application-directed (Vermunt & Donche, 2017, p. 272). The teacher educators say:

I had to survive the first failure [...] And then [...] I thought it over and over and finally referred to my experiences, to the mistakes I made. I am not afraid to say that I made mistakes as a young teacher. (Teacher 3)

When I see that something does not work, I'm trying to find a solution. It can't get out of my head [...]. I do not try to adapt my learners to my way of teaching, but rather I try to "tune" my abilities. Improve what I can. (Teacher 5)

The description of the remedy strategy is done with some reference to the phases of deliberate practice (Zimmerman, 2000, pp. 13–39). The first phase is based on careful observation of students and assessment of the learning outcomes. The teacher educators analyse the problem that appears, set their own purpose and plan the remedy. The active search for evidence of the teaching quality is visible in the findings of the research on teacher educators. The interviewees mention several kinds of evidence that become their "private teaching quality indicators", e.g.:

- level of students' engagement during classes and students' talking time, learners' interest shown during lessons, as well as students' understanding of the teaching content.

If it was loud, the students discussed and were curious, I know that the lesson was successful, and if it was quiet, sluggish, I feel that I should not have used the methods that I applied. (Teacher 8)

- students' reaction that is different than expected, *negative stir in a group* (Teacher 3) and expressions of disinterest in a task.

The teacher educators use "private indicators" as stimuli for critical reflection and remedial actions aiming at improvement of their teaching. Hence, in the performance phase of deliberate practice, they view their own errors as opportunities to learn and master their expertise. The performance phase of active learning, in the case of teacher educators, is based mainly on designing methods of practice improvement. The teachers decide what they need to succeed, what to focus on and what to put more effort into.

The strategy in the vast majority of cases is based on academic reflection (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 51), focused on the analysis of content and teaching methods. For the teacher educators, it is important to adapt their teaching to students needs and to vary their instructional strategies; and so they make some modification to the syllabus of a course:

I had to change the syllabus as it did not fully fulfil students' needs. [...] It did not give them a sense of success and the fact that everything goes along a good track, in a good rhythm. (Teacher 2)

I immediately felt that there is too much theory that I have to pass on to students. I felt that I had to limit it a little. (Teacher 8)

The university teachers tried to broaden their repertoire of instructional strategies to master the way of explaining concepts to their students. Thus, they change the way the content is presented:

When it comes to the way of preparing slides, I used to have the tendency to insert scans of various materials [...], and now I never do it. (Teacher 5)

The university teachers also tried to tap into the learning process of their students by updating teaching techniques:

Mainly technical changes, too long presentation, too long exercises, incorrectly selected reading passages or recordings to listen. I know what to improve. (Teacher 8)

Many teacher educators' actions prove the regular application of the remedy strategy. One of the teacher educators said:

Reflection practically does not leave me alone. I constantly modify the classes, as every year a new group of people comes. After some time, I notice all weaknesses of my classes and improve them [...] I have always learnt from my reflections and experience and made changes on the basis of them. (Teacher 6)

The interviewees characterised the strategy as dynamic and spontaneous and its effects as long-term and enriching for their practice. The following exemplifications of reflection indicate the self-reflection phase of deliberate practice:

It is not a systematic way, but I have a habit of taking notes on my own handouts. [...] For example, I use curly brackets and write "no". If I use the same handout again, I am really trying to get rid of this hopeless part. I try to replace

it with something else or find something more attractive for students. (Teacher 10)

I sometimes take notes during classes [...] mainly some ideas or questions from students. Not my reflections on these classes, but just some ideas to enrich these classes [...]), those that suddenly come to my mind. (Teacher 2)

I improve materials if they do not work, on a regular basis, immediately in the class. (Teacher 12)

Some teacher educators, however, mention static and prolonged reflection on their practice. They give examples of so-called “composted” reflexion understood as reflecting on their own reflections (Cowan, 2015, p. 23).

I write them [reflections] down in my own handbook for students, so I regularly look at them. I run classes and look at the notes from previous years [...] I add more. These class materials are often used, and I value them very much, because they are rich, they contain my additional thoughts and my subsequent notes. (Teacher 2)

I throw all these handouts to a special box. I usually don't have time to make changes immediately after a class, so that these corrected materials wait for the next year, for the next group. But I have a set that I carry home when I start teaching the same subject. Then I look at the notes again, always some other ideas come to my mind after some time. I will think over my own comments, too. (Teacher 13)

The above quotations explain how the teachers develop their own scheme of reacting and reflecting, which results in learning from their own mistakes and in improving practice.

The remedy strategy shows the three phases of deliberate practice described by Zimmerman (2000, pp. 13–39): firstly – the analysis of experience that stimulates teachers to set their own developmental goals; secondly – practice improvements that show the process of learning; and finally – development of self-reflection. This form of deliberate practice aims at improvement of teaching outcomes due to practice modifications and adaptations. Another kind of strategy (exploratory) proves that teacher educators are actively intent on self-improvement.

### **The exploratory strategy as active self-improvement**

The exploratory strategy helps teachers obtain information about their own work, the effectiveness of the didactic process or the level of students' satisfaction.



The teacher educators are intrinsically motivated to improve their practice and pursue self-improvement, so they look for areas in which they might develop. They regulate their own learning by self-evaluation and self-observed performance and compare this to a kind of *absolute standard performance* (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 68). The absolute standard might be set by their own knowledge of teaching methodology and their expertise in it. They also actively seek external feedback related to their personal goals and reflectively interpret it. The actions taken by teachers aim at careful planning of teaching in advance, but they do not serve as a remedy for poor teaching quality.

The teacher educators show great interest in their own performance and search for consequences of own actions. There are several tools of researching own practice described by the interviewees: surveys among students, written feedback or a *feedback-based conversation* (T7). The teacher educators usually prepare their own tools, as the surveys offered by university professional development centres are not highly valued by them. The university surveys do not motivate the educators to modify the teaching process, as the questions are too general or *not pertinent and not accurate* (T13).

The majority of the educators are gourmet omnivores (Joyce & Showers, 1995, p. 134) and actively search for information that help them plan how to improve their performance. They design their own questionnaires prepared in accordance with the methodology of pedagogical research, with closed and open questions. The questionnaires are usually conducted at the end of the course to provide a reliable evaluation of teachers' skills and after a few classes (Teacher 7 talks about three meetings) *to catch if we are going in the right direction*. The educators also study their students' posts and comments on blogs or social networking sites (T10).

During the interviews, some of the educators also mentioned their own *self-invented tools*. Teacher 4 introduced *the feedback-cards* – she asked her students for a short note on her teaching immediately after the class. This is how the teacher describes the situation:

I introduced a kind of “feedback card”. Everyone wrote what they liked and what they didn't, pros and cons. There were no specific questions. (Teacher 4)

Another teacher mentions *micro-questionnaires*, in which students assess three teaching skills using a scale of 1-5 (T2). Some teachers collect information regularly, after class, in the form of short feedback-based conversations with students. They emphasise the importance of formative feedback loops. The most common subjects of feedback are teacher educators' class management skills, clarity of

presentation, assessment skills, selection of teaching materials and interpersonal relationship between a student and a lecturer. In some cases, the teachers carry out their students' need analysis to design a syllabus tailored to students' learning preferences and wishes.

I gave a questionnaire in which I proposed the scope of material to be implemented during this semester, during lectures. [...] I dictated some additional topics and asked the students to express their opinions on whether and how interested they were in these topics. I asked for indicating on the given scale. [...] And later, I tried to use the questionnaire results to prepare the framework of my lectures. (Teacher 2)

The interviewees presented various effects of their own exploratory strategy that might be grouped as (1) informational and evaluative and (2) developmental. The examples of the first type are described by the teachers as follows:

I had such a need or desire, or I was just curious how students received what I did. (Teacher 1)

You have to find out what suits them [students] and what does not, how to teach them. In order to make them interested, active in the class and satisfied with the way I organise time for them. (Teacher 13)

According to Teacher 11, “*a student advises a teacher how to improve his/her teaching*”. Teacher 9 also claimed that thanks to information from students, she strengthened her self-control and developed her teaching skills. The comments from students made her realise that she tended to effectively encourage students to speak in a foreign language by repeating a difficult or incomprehensible question. As a result of the survey, the teacher began to use this technique on purpose:

Several people wrote that they liked when I repeated the question I had asked in English. So, if they didn't understand it, for example, I gave them a second chance to comprehend and answer. For me, it was a surprise then, because I didn't know at the time that I was doing it. I started to pay attention to this. Such a comment gives food for thought, and one begins to control himself/herself. (Teacher 9)

The same teacher describes another situation in which she changed her opinion on learners and realised they prefer active learning to “*easy but boring lessons*”:

I was convinced that they [students] like when only those who are active work at the lesson and the rest sit and relax. And it turned out that this is not entirely

the case, that they are not happy having dominating activists who are ready to answer every question. (Teacher 9)

The driving force of the strategy, in comparison with the first strategy described, is not specific experience or teaching outcomes, but teachers' own inquiringness, personal concern and the need to explore their own teaching. The teacher educator as an active learner is internally motivated and independent in his/her search for evidence. The exploratory strategy is based on the same cyclic phases that Zimmerman (2000, pp. 13–39) describes for active learning: forethought, performance and self-reflection. However, it can be seen that all the actions are additionally repeated, thus making a double loop. The whole process of active learning starts with self-reflection and own attempts to get external feedback. In the forethought phase, the educators set their personal strategic plans for learning. They then design research and tools to gain varied feedback and collect it to help them generate ideas and compare possible solutions to the problems they have seen. All these actions lead them to the third phase – self-reflection, in which the teachers judge the effort and results of own learning and performed actions. Subsequently, they again set their own goals and plan modifications of own teaching, learn through action by transforming their practice and, finally, reflect upon the achievements again. In the case of the exploratory strategy, active learning takes the shape of double-loop learning – a repeated set of three steps, and both loops start with the self-reflection phase.

## Conclusions

According to various modern approaches to teacher professionalism, teachers are expected to be actively involved in their learning and develop their skills and improve their practice. Teachers, being agents of change, develop their commitment to “inquiry at stance” (Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 2009). They are ready to take actions and react according to the knowledge and information learnt from practice. They need to make “current arrangements problematic”, question the way “practice is constructed, evaluated and used” (p. 121). All of these become a natural part of teachers' work and build their professional expertise.

The research shows that the teacher educators design their own professional learning experience, and their knowledge is being built around this. Teacher learning is intentionally aimed at practice improvement and self-development. The educators develop an appropriate strategy, which is defined as a purposeful and targeted action undertaken in order to actively direct their professional learning. The educators describe two strategies: remedial and exploratory, which

result in a transformation of the teaching practice. They are exemplifications of deliberate practice and provide improvements in the learning outcomes of students (remedial) and teachers' self-improvement (exploratory).

Being active professionals, teacher educators are deliberately committed to continuous learning, widening knowledge and mastering their teaching skills. At the same time, they are able to evaluate their own capabilities and are keen to accept challenging tasks. They take conscious, self-controlled actions, thanks to which they can improve their own practice, which leads to multidirectional development of teachers and students.

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