Reflective backwash:
investigating the benefits of reflection assessments in an additional language teacher education programme

Nicola Daly and Dorothy Spiller
University of Waikato
Introduction

This paper is about the redesigning of a university paper concerning additional language teaching: embedding reflection in assignments and throughout paper.
Methodology

- Lecturer kept a journal during delivery of course
- A written questionnaire was completed by 4 of the 16 course participants after completion of the course
Outline

- The assessments
- The backwash
- The evaluations
Assessments

Four assessments worth 25% each

- Assignment 1: a 1,000 word essay based on students experience
- Assignments 2 and 3: 2,000 word reports concerning the planning and delivery of 2 language lessons
- Assignment 4: a set of 10 reflections and a 1,000 word essay tracing themes
The Backwash

*a mini overview*

- Reflection in the course design process
- Reflection in the course as a whole
  - Course research question
  - Repeat of topics
  - Lecture delivery
Reflection in the course design process

- Weekly 60-90 minute conversations over a 16 week period
- Participants kept a reflective journal
Reflection in the course structure

Course research question
A single research question visited each week in light of the weekly topic and reading was a way in which reflection was made central to the structure of the ALTE course.

“What makes an effective language teacher? What characteristics and skills do they have, and what strategies do they use?”
Reflection in the course structure

Topics repeated

Topics covered in the first six weeks of the course were revisited in the second six weeks, but with the addition of theoretical readings.
Reflection in the course structure

Lecturer Delivery

Each week you will find a document titled ‘ND Reflection’ for you to read in conjunction with the reading for the week. This reflection is my reaction to the topic and the reading. It will be in a much less formal register than in a formal lecture, and another person may reflect quite differently. These are the kind of thoughts I use as I move towards more formal writing, for example developing a journal article. They are the kind of things I might say between PowerPoint slides in a face-to-face lecture. These thoughts and reflections are not usually written down, and so should not be quoted as you might do with other formal written material in assignments and the like.
Findings-lecturer

overall I feel a sense of awe and responsibility for the amazing students I have. They all have such a range and wealth of experiences relating to language learning and teaching, and having the first few weeks of postings [journal entries] really focussed on these has been excellent. I feel it is a way of getting to know the students a bit more deeply, but I can also see in practice my [previous] gut feeling that these students know a lot already and the best way to work with them is to focus on and value what they come into the paper with. (Journal entry 3 March 2008)
Findings-students

When asked with respect to Assignment 1 ‘How did you find doing an assignment relating exclusively to your own experiences?’, Participant 1 replied:

This was a great way to begin the paper. I had the opportunity to reflect on my own teaching/learning language experience and my early ideas about what makes an effective language teacher. This was a great lead in to the early readings we did, and helped me to remember what I didn’t want to do as a language teacher. (Participant 1, Question 4a)
Findings-students

When asked about the fourth assignment which asked students to summarise their weekly journals and relate back to the first assignment, Participant 1 said:

*I personally had not found much of a shift in my thinking from assignment one to assignment four, so I found this assignment a little repetitive. I think either assessing the weekly journals or structuring assignment one and four like this would have been better than doing both.* (Participant 1, Question 4b)

Whereas Participant 2 said:

*This assignment was a good ending as it chrystalised the important aspects of being an effective language teacher, it made us reflect on the paper as a whole and our own learning.* (Participant 2, Question 4b)
Findings-students

When asked about the journaling practice which fed in to Assignment 4: ‘Each week in this paper you were asked to write a journal about what you had learnt from the week’s topic with relation to the central course research question. How did you find this?’, Participant 1 replied:

*I think writing a journal each week did help me bring together each week’s readings, tasks and my ideas about what makes an effective language teacher. However, I felt that the assignments, journals and research question were too closely inter-linked so it seemed that I was constantly repeating myself.*

(Participant 1, Question 3)
Findings-students

Thus for Participant 1, the use of a central research question which was revisited in the weekly journaling was too repetitive. By contrast, Participant 2 answered:

*This is useful for summarizing each week’s learnings and readings, and it meant we did not lose track of what we were doing, building up towards the last assignment. We could go back to each week and make sure we were not repeating ourselves or check for things we could expand on in the journals’* (Participant 2, Question 3)
Implications-course design

- Refining the course research question
- Inviting students into initiative
Conclusions

The lecturer’s perception of the reflective practices employed were that it helped to establish strong learning relationships between lecturer and students which in turn enhanced the conversations between lecturer and student around the required weekly reflections which were integral to all four assignments.

The students perceptions of the use of reflections particularly in Assignments 1 and 4, were mostly positive in terms of consolidating learning, but comment was made by one participant that this could be rather repetitive.
Conclusions

While there is general recognition that assessment tasks should align clearly with course learning outcomes, there is less discussion about the importance of congruence between the style, structure and spirit of the course as a whole and assessments.

This course attempted this harmony, but will need further iterations and more evaluative evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness.