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SCAFFOLDING LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: CRITERIA-BASED EVALUATION OF LANGUAGE PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

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Abstract. This paper addresses the development of a key teacher competence—activity evaluation, as well as adaptation and design—to cater for mixed-ability classes. In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education, the question is how early, within what framework, and under what procedures students should be taught this competence. Practicum teaching at university has been found to lack in validity, learner-centeredness, and heterogeneity, be it at the level of an activity, a series of activities, a lesson, or a series of lessons. Action research was conducted to address this issue, basing a part of an introductory English Language Teaching (ELT) methods course on developing students' awareness and putting into practice Ur's seven principles of activity conceptualisation, with a particular focus on validity, volume, and heterogeneity. The students were asked to apply these principles in teaching mock-up lessons to their peers and to analyse to what extent the principles qualified their peers' lessons and the practice of in-service teachers they observed in primary and secondary schools. The content analysis of the students' reports shows the majority both comprehended and consistently applied most of the principles, while a small number demonstrated a proper and thorough understanding of all the criteria, consistently and correctly applying them in their observation reports and in designing and teaching their mock-up lessons. Very few students consistently adopted some of the concepts incorrectly or non-specifically. No comprehensive analysis is offered of how the students' mock-up lessons were guided by the activity evaluation criteria explored. It remains to be seen if and to what extent students apply the principles in the final-year practicum, after criteria-based activity evaluation, adaptation, and design are integrated in their second ELT methods course, which focuses on developing skill teaching.

Introduction

Most human activity, including education, is appraised for its purposefulness; training future language educators is no exception. Hopefully, not many teacher training courses continue to envisage student teachers as working one day with compact groups of learners that concede convenient categorisations, since teaching set-ups and scenarios are becoming less predictable, not only in the sense of learners being mixed-ability. This makes it a must for training courses—including those at university—to place a strong focus on so-called global or transition skills, e.g., communication and collaboration, or self-leadership (Fürstenberg et al., 2024). While these are the skills needed to transition from university to the world of work, it is the same skill set, closely bound with, especially, English language proficiency, that language student teachers will need to pass on to their learners in the future.

The European Profile for Language Teacher Education: A Reference Framework (Kelly et al., 2004, p. 60) highlights the importance of student teachers being trained to be responsive to the educational context and learners' individual needs, their reasons for learning the language, and their different abilities to learn, attitudes, and cultural perspectives. Adaptive teaching is understood as one's being competent at classroom management, at varying and adapting learning activities, and at using resources and materials in a sensitive and suitable manner. Understanding the theory and methodology behind materials and resources is vital to their critical usage. The ability to design or adapt a technique or resource to use it effectively with learners in specific circumstances remains at the core of these competencies and is the focus of this paper.

This paper presents action research conducted with junior students of English in their first English Language Teaching (ELT) methods course at the University of Banja Luka. The senior year curriculum includes two more ELT methods courses and a practicum. In teaching the practicum to fellow university students, academics, and general citizens at proficiency levels A1—C1, student teachers can work alone or in pairs and use any materials to tailor-make the courses. Insight into the practicum has shown how concepts such as volume, validity, and heterogeneity

of language practice activities characterise their procedures, materials use, and activity conceptualisation, revealing different levels of appropriateness regarding activity duration, learner-centredness, level adequacy, and embeddedness in the wider context of the lesson and course. Another important concern is student teachers using their language ability indiscriminately, making the classroom very teacher-centered or using materials well above their course-goers' i+1 (Krashen, 1982, pp. 20–22), or their procedures lacking validity even when the selected materials and activities are at the learners' proficiency level.

Teachers' ability to engage learners in purposeful practice may be developed by building awareness of what makes an activity well designed. This essentially concerns issues of validity or contextual purposefulness, and learner-centeredness as opposed to teacher-centeredness (learner activation and expression), also understood in terms of as procedural heterogeneity. The results of the action research presented in this paper stem from a training procedure used with student teachers centered around the characteristics of optimal language practice as proposed by Ur (1991).

The goal of the research was to establish if teaching students about measurable qualities of language activity design and tasking them with purpose-building activities for mock-up lessons could help them develop an awareness of how to appraise, design, and adapt activities to meet their learners' needs and expectations and ensure contextual purposefulness. It was hypothesed that by scaffolding language teacher education through classroom observation and activity design tasks students could become aware of and build more successfully this competence, which—pre-service—is mostly vicarious.

Criteria-Based Evaluation, Design, and Execution of Language Practice Activities

Ur (1991, pp. 19–20) likens language learning to the learning of other skills. She defines it as a three-step process, which includes presentation, practice (automatisation), and autonomous skill use, which she proposes should be considered a "more advanced form of practice." Language ability requires lifelong refinement, initially tied to learning grammatical niceties, and later to overcoming barriers at the level of alignment with one's psychology, emotions, self-image, and mental faculties on the one hand, and sociolinguistic and pragmatic appropriateness on the other. By expanding on what practice subsumes, Ur opens up space for formulating seven criteria applicable to language learning activities at large.

Ur (1991, pp. 21–22) lists validity—activating learners in the skill or material the activity purports to practice—as the first characteristic of effective language practice. While this does not imply replication of real-life communication, she argues that even when the focus is on lower-order skills, this principle is surprisingly

often violated: teachers believe they are asking their learners to practice one thing when, in fact, the activity or exercise effectively leads to a different kind of activation. The next is pre-learning, meaning a good preliminary grasp of the language learners are asked to practice. The principle of volume maximises the amount of language learners engage in during an activity (as opposed to time wasted on, e.g., classroom organisation, distraction, or digressions). The fourth is success-orientation, whereby teachers should seek to avoid fossilisation of mistakes and learner discouragement—whatever is practised, successful performance is likely to result in effective automatisation and reinforced learner self-image.

The fifth characteristic, heterogeneity, concerns conceptualising an activity in a way which allows answers to be offered at multiple levels of proficiency. The sixth is teacher assistance, such as giving learners enough time to think, making answers easier by giving hints, asking guiding questions, or possibly confirming the beginning of a response. The final, seventh, is interest, which commands that teachers prevent boredom in students, e.g., by not offering too little challenge because of the focus on success-orientation, and also by not having too much repetition as a tool for ensuring volume. Interest is achieved through engrossing topics, appealing to learners' emotions, challenging their intellect, creating a need for them to convey meaningful information, etc.

In specifying the principles, Ur draws attention to how things can go astray in class. She refers to "Hangman" in both her books cited in this paper (Ur, 1991, pp. 24–25, 30; Ur & Wright, 1992, p. xi) to illustrate the violation of the principles. She maintains that while this activity purports to practice spelling, it is extremely low on validity and volume—a mere "'fun' time-killer." Instead, she proposes, e.g., spelling revision with words on the board, their progressive deletion, and reconstruction by learners.

The same principles are adopted in *Five-Minute Activities*, with the authors claiming all the activities included have learning value, are suitable for various levels, and are brief yet flexible in terms of time management (Ur & Wright, 1992, pp. x–xii). In a randomly selected activity titled "Adjectives and Nouns" (pp. 1–2), the teacher is instructed to elicit adjective-noun phrases from learners, contribute some themselves, and organise them into two columns on the board. Next, learners are asked to volunteer different combinations and to explain any unusual or strange ones. The instructions suggest trying adverb-adjective combinations with advanced learners.

This activity draws on learners' knowledge of the language; also, eliciting phrases from learners and the competitive element in creating new combinations as a group is certain to arouse interest. It is teacher-supported and meant to ensure volume, with most of the language coming from learners. It rehearses vocabulary and consolidates learners' awareness of the basic noun phrase word order, which makes it valid. As learners can contribute any combinations, this will be specific to their proficiency, adhering to the heterogeneity principle.

The Constructivist Value of Scaffolding Language Teacher Education

A number of key competencies defined in the "Lesson Planning" and "Conducting a Lesson" sections of *The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (*EPOSTLE*) (Newby et al., 2007, pp. 34–40) overlap with Ur's principles; e.g., setting objectives in view of learners' differing levels of ability and special educational needs; structuring lesson plans as coherent and varied sequences of activities; designing varied and balanced activities to respond to learners' learning styles and to enhance and sustain their motivation and interest; relating one's teaching to learners' knowledge and previous language learning experience. A training scenario that takes into account such specific principles as Ur's has potential to relate to many more of the competencies defined in the *EPOSTLE*.

The seven characteristics by Ur are modular and translate into a logical and practicable template that can be retrieved in structuring language practice. They can help students adopt a view and approach teaching as a process that should be dialectic and conducted "constructively" to affect all participants, thus transforming the "natural" process of language learning. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) social interactionism relying on Engels' notion of tools as used by humans for transforming reaction to nature (pp. 61, 74–75). Yet, misgivings have been expressed by practitioners and researchers alike about scaffolding—understood as teacher–learner and learner–teacher interaction occurring in the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978) resulting in learning—adult foreign language teaching in particular.

Hamidi and Bagherzadeh (2018) argue that the original conception of scaffolding does not support its implication in mainstream second language acquisition contexts, and that the range of variation in its conceptual meaning makes it logically and methodologically problematic (p. 1). According to them, no empirical studies have confirmed the impact of scaffolding on L2 learners' interlanguage development, as the process essentially does not conform to predictability and is characterised by agent and recipient variability. They view it as non-conducive to knowledge restructuring and claim that it does not allow for mediation, or rather pre-mediation, either (Hamidi & Bagherzadeh, 2018, pp. 3–4). Similarly, Dunn and Lantolf (1998, cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 118) differentiate between ZDP, where knowledge is co-constructed, and adult language teaching/learning, where the sources of input essentially, if not exclusively, come from outside the learner.

If restructuring (a learner-situated process) and rescaffolding (a teacher-governed process) essentially cannot be synchronous, can their cummulative effects still lead to acquistion, if asynchronously? Where this criticism might miss the mark is in its failure to understand Vygotsky's social interactionism as organicist and dialectical. In formulating his approach to the analyisis of higher

psychological functions, Vygotsky (1978, p. 61) criticised analysing psychological phenomena as objects, insisting on "the analysis of processes" requiring "a dynamic display of the main points making up the processes' history." The developmental viewpoint means that analysis must return "to the source" and reconstruct "all the points in the development of a given structure" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65). In this author's opinion, Ur's concept of heterogeneity aligns with Krashen's (1982, pp. 20–22) input hypothesis, which in turn is consistent with Vygotsky's views.

Van Lier (2004, p. 147), heavily referenced by Hamidi and Bagherzadeh (2018), defines scaffolding "as a structure that allows the movement of pedagogical activity, that permits efficient and quick access to pedagogical goals, and that is temporary." His interpretation is dialectic and organicist; he attributes two key characteristics to successful scaffolding. The first is structural and concerns planning, setting up, and maintaining task sequences, projects, recurring classroom rituals, activities, and interaction. The second is interactional and implies being "on the lookout for learners' readiness to move outside the scaffold, and to quickly relax the rigging when that happens (to promote handover/takeover)" (van Lier, 2004, p. 149).

Regarding scaffolding language teacher education, Vygotsky hypothesised that learning, as a higher psychological function, allows humans to "grow into the intellectual life of those around them," positing that it should be understood as "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." He also claimed that this is different for everyone and that one can *imitate* only that which is within one's developmental level (1978, pp. 86–88). Imitation and creativity, understood in constructivist terms, may be seen as two sides of a coin: if learners can imitate something, it is within their developmental zone; ideally, they can (then) use this knowledge constructively (creatively).

However, human thinking and dealings are affected by cognitive discrepancy and dissonance (Jean Tsang, 2017). Students' previous learning experience may pose an obstacle to scaffolding the process, and consequently, to acquisition as well. A very rough parallel can be drawn between Vygotsky's phylogenetic category of fossilised behaviour (1978, pp. 63–65), often the final stage or point of a development process, and students' entrenched ideas about teaching and learning. Additionally, validity issues in the classroom may be caused by knowledge overload, a type of cognitive bias "that occurs when an individual, communicating with other individuals, unknowingly assumes that the others have the background to understand" (UserTesting, 2019). The body of evidence confirming the ubiquity of cognitive bias is constantly growing. Because individual knowledge is the ultimate unknown, determining whether someone's learning needs require being taught the concept, the notion, both, or none will contunue to weigh heavily on the educational agenda.

A potentially relevant study by Majid (2010) reports benefits from applying the heterogeneity principle in teaching a course to graduates with BAs in various fields who were retraining as English teachers for Malaysia's formal schooling system. Placed in communities of practice based on their prior teaching experience, Majid's students reported benefiting from their differential experiences (heterogeneity) (Majid, 2010, pp. 237–238). Although students' reactions and contributions suggest a case of collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994, cited in van Lier, 2004, p. 148), it is unclear whether Majid intentionally aimed for such outcomes, and her students' consensual response could partly be attributed to the local community's ecology and interactional conventions. Additionally, Majid does not specify the goals or assessment criteria of her ELT methodology course, which also makes her conclusions tangentially relevant to this action research.

Methodology

The training intervention central to this action research was conducted during the ELT Methods 1 course with junior students (N = 25) in the 2023–2024 academic year. There is insistance that teacher training should strive for equal status of academic study of pedagogy and teaching practice, and that student teachers can only engage in informed reflective practice after they have gained sufficient teaching experience during their initial training (Kelly et al., 2004, pp. 24, 66). At the University of Banja Luka, where the research was conducted, three theoretical ELT methods courses in Years 3 and 4 incorporate progressively demanding elements of practice, helping students develop competencies that are expected to work in synergy in the practicum.

In ELT Methods 1, students teach a 20-minute micro-lesson individually, in pairs (40 minutes), or in groups of three (60 minutes), on a topic of their choice. They are given free rein regarding technique or method selection, but they must produce a lesson plan and specify the goal/aims, outcomes, and procedure, and also comment on the execution ex post facto. While this is somewhat different in ELT Methods 2, students also teach mock-up lessons to their peers. In both courses, they learn how to specify not only the lesson aims and outcomes but also the objective of each indivdual technique or activity, as part of its description. Another element of the plan involves specifying mechanisms (activities, procedures) that ensure the measurability of learner progress for that lesson.

In all three ELT methods courses, students use templates or write essayistic reports to review the lessons they observe in a variety of educational settings. Thus, a range of instruments and procedures are utilised to make students aware of the need to make language activities purposeful. This aligns with the recommendation in *The European Profile for Language Teacher Education: A Frame of Reference* (Kelly et al., 2004, p. 75) that different teaching modes—micro

and team-teaching, in combination with classroom and peer observation—be used with students for them to see different teaching techniques in action. This intervention aimed to determine whether the cumulative effects of practice as conceptualised at the University of Banja Luka's English Department can be enhanced.

In the intervention, Ur's seven principles were first introduced to students, and each was explained and illustrated. Next, sample activities lacking in individual criteria were analysed with the class and suggestions elicited on how they could be improved. To help the reader of her book understand, acquire, and use the principles, Ur (1991, pp. 24–31) presents four practice scenarios as deficient in terms of activity design, teacher conduct and interaction, or the target language text used. Students were asked to define the intended goals of the activities, assess whether these goals could be achieved with the activities, identify factors that would make the activities effective or ineffective, and suggest ways to improve them.

In the same lesson, students were asked to work in pairs or groups to design and describe a set of activities on grammar and vocabulary topics (at a pre-intermediate/intermediate level, e.g., on the topics of past simple continuous/comparison of adjectives; or at an upper-intermediate/advanced level, e.g., based on a list of character traits) provided by the instructor. They were instructed to apply Ur's principles in their design. Since the majority of students failed to complete the task during the session, they were asked to finish it at home, upload the activities to their portfolio, and present them in the following lesson. However, very few complied, and those who did, demonstrated a lack of understanding and failed to apply some or most of the principles.

Next, the instructor decided to emphasise the principles by making them central to the students' lesson observation tasks, integrating them into the existing pre-exam requirements. This included reporting on public school observations (4) and peer mock-up lessons (4), and writing a mock-up lesson plan with materials and execution comments. Specifically, for observation reports, students were instructed to choose a single practice activity from each observed lesson and analyse it according to Ur's criteria. The intervention, which included completing these tasks, was extended until the end of the 15-week semester.

Content analysis was used to examine the students' reports, focusing on evidence of an overlap or deviation between the instructor's and students' understanding of activity characteristics. This analysis looked for evidence of early awareness and its reinforcement in products where the application of Ur's principles was explicitly required, such as classroom and peer observation reports. It also considered how this awareness might have influenced students' work in contexts without specific instruction, including references to criteria in lesson plans, students' comments on their own lessons, and other elements of their portfolios.

Results and Discussion

The results of the content analysis show how students differently understood Ur's principles and articulated their understanding. Most students' (20 out of 25) reports show consistent comprehension and adoption of the criteria, with most or all of the criteria correctly understood and applied in all the tasks. The lesson reviews of the remaining students (5 out of 25) reveal a discrepancy in the use and application of the criteria, with the full list adopted (if incorrectly) in commenting on classmates' lessons, and primary and secondary school reports limited to very general evaluations of the teacher conduct and procedure descriptions. These five students may have been unaware of the task instructions for school observation, which required that they analyse a single activity according to the seven criteria. Additionally, for one of these five students, there is a possibility that the peer mock-up reports were translated, generated, or proofread by AI.

The content analysis revealed which of the principles were easier to comprehend and adopt, and which posed a challenge. Interest and pre-learning were seemingly the easiest. Commenting on how engaging the lessons were, the students certainly described how they felt, as well as the level of interest they saw in those around them; in schools, interest often translates into observable student participation. The students commented insightfully on pre-learning, a principle evidently applied in both the schools and the mock-up lessons. Their comments typically took account of the activities leading up to those analysed, with groups of activities perceived as sequential and coherent.

Success-orientation and teacher assistance were slightly more difficult to analyse. Success-orientation is inextricably linked to pre-learning and heterogeneity. Thus, in his comments on success-orientation, a student wrote: "In this activity, learners were likely to succeed because there weren't true or false answers." Nonetheless, students predominantly routinely equated success-orientation with teacher praise; e.g., "the presenter approved correct answers," "the presenter encouraged and praised students' creative ideas," "the presenter praised students," or "the teacher checked the answers with learners and approved their answers." This makes sense since teacher praise is interpretable as the teacher's intentions and expectations coinciding with students' achievement. Equally, however, learners can be presumed to connect success-orientation with their own sense of accomplishment, as insightfully noted by a student: "Some students appeared to be smiling and happy after giving the correct translation, so it's reasonable to assume they felt like they were improving."

Much of the student commentary regarding teacher assistance referred to teachers simply being communicative, interacting with the class, and moving around the classroom to monitor students' work from close range. Very few students provided qualitative analysis of the help given by teachers, i.e., if it was conducive to learning, and very few also took account of the value of the teacher

designing purposeful and varied step-by-step procedures, giving clear instructions, and managing the class accordingly. Thus, a student wrote: "Whenever the students needed assistance, the presenter provided it thoroughly," referring to perceivably helpful teacher behaviour in a very general sense. In contrast, another student provided a detailed description of the teacher's assistance:

> "The teacher explained the activity in detail and gave clear instructions. When the groups were first handed the texts she walked around the room and asked if there were any unfamiliar words or sentences. She was really nice, patient, and ready to help. She helped them throughout their presentation, in the sense that if they couldn't find a word in English, she provided it for them. Some grammar mistakes she did correct, some she didn't."

Most students' reviews indicate an apparent intuitive understanding of the principle of validity. Yet, the majority did not take into consideration the effectiveness of practice as such, which ideally should have informed their appraisal of purposefulness. The three comments on validity below refer to the same teaching situation:

> "The students were expected to understand the read text and to comment on it. The teacher asked them various different questions which required personal opinion ("Do you speak any other foreign language besides English?", "Which countries have you visited?" etc.). The required skills were: listening and speaking."

By comparison, the following is a much more critical evaluation of the validity of the procedure used:

> "This activity activated only a few students in the material the teacher presented. It didn't have any meaningful or valuable outcome because the students answered questions which were pretty obviously stated in the text the teacher read beforehand. The vocabulary of the lesson was already known by the students."

The latter opinion accords with another student's report: "Validity was poor, the students weren't activated, their answers were very brief so there wasn't enough room for any vocabulary practice, corrections, repetitions." Apparently, when students claim an activity is valid, they collapse validity with their sense of pleasure and safety because the content presented is not cognitively challenging, has been acquired, or is within their zone of proximal development.

The principles of volume and heterogeneity were the most misunderstood ones. Quite surprisingly, for instance, one student understood volume as aim: "The primary goal of this activity was to improve public speaking and perfect working in groups." Volume was also taken to mean comprehensible input:

> "While the words used in the exercise fell into the scope of the lesson at hand, in the group activity, the students were able to express their ways of finding solutions to various problem by using words that aren't mentioned beforehand, thus exponentially improving the quality of the class."

For some students, an activity or lesson ensuring volume meant that "the teacher spoke in English the whole time, so everything that students learned was presented in L2." Volume was also equated with the variety of learning materials, etc.

Heterogeneity was sometimes wrongly understood as practice accommodating the learning needs of the perceived average language ability of a class. It was also misunderstood as an opportunity for extensive and varied student engagement unrelated to the use of the target language; e.g., "The discussion was interesting and diverse," or "While participating in the act of discovering an invention, we as a group, as well as others, had full creative freedom of expression with how we were able to come up with our very own stories and taking turns explaining our thought process behind said stories." Many students understood this characteristic to refer to the variety of topics, materials or teaching procedures. A student thus commented that the principle of heterogeneity wasn't fulfilled because the main aim of the activity was to "focus on one thing[,] and that is a simulation of a traffic situation."

One reason for students' initial and/or subsequent failure to engage with and apply Ur's criteria fully may lie in instructional blunders, such as not referring them to Ur's original text and having them rely on their memory of the lesson and the verbal explanations provided by the instructor. An additional reason may be the cognitive-experiential load of the principles and intervention. Being mostly in the language learner role, students may find it difficult to consider activities from the perspective of someone adapting or designing them to carry them out. As well as that, there is a degree of abstractness, especially considerable when it comes to validity, volume, and heterogeneity, which puts this competence well outside students' developmental zone. Lastly, the stakes are low: students do not see themselves as teachers and do not feel accountable for anyone's learning successes or failures, possibly resulting in limited cognitive effort on their part.

Excerpts from students' reports below illustrate different levels of comprehension and application of the criteria. Excerpt 1 (peer mock-up lesson report) shows a correct understanding of both the report writing task and criteria (as interpreted by the instructor/author), which the student applied validly and consistently across the assignments:

> "Goal of the lesson: To engage the students in the topic of introversion versus extroversion in education, to provoke thought and debate, improve critical thinking skills.

> Exercise Evaluation: The class was split into two groups (in a way that made sure people weren't grouped with the person they usually sit next to, in order to pair them up with students they might not usually work in groups with), and were given a topic for debate. One group had to defend the idea that extroverted teachers are more successful, while the other had to defend the introverted teachers. The groups were given some time to discuss amongst themselves, and then the students who wanted to share their opinion had a debate.
> Validity: The exercise was valid, it achieved the aim of the lesson, which was to engage students in conversation regarding introversion and extroversion in teachers.
> Success-orientation: The exercise was not really aiming to generate right or wrong responses, but rather to provoke critical thinking, which was done well.
> Volume: There was a good amount of language used among all the students who engaged in the debate. However, the majority did not talk with their group or during the debate.
> Interest: The exercise was interesting, as most debates are. It is always a challenge to be part of a debate, but it is entertaining.
> Teacher assistance: There was adequate teacher assistance during this: they approached each group to check up on their progress and ideas before the debate had begun, and encouraged the students to talk during the debate.
> Heterogeneity: The debate was potentially a bit too demanding for most students, thus very few participated. Those who did participate, however, showed excellent skills.
> Pre-learning: The pre-learning was done prior to the debate, when the teachers discussed introversion and extroversion with the class." (Excerpt 1, peer mock-up lesson observation report illustrating consistent correct recognition of Ur's principles)

Table 1 contains another report by this student (Student 1), presented alongside reviews of the same lesson by two more students (Students 2 & 3) for comparison. Similar to the first student, the reports authored by the second (Student 2) show how good understanding and application of the criteria can result in substantive and convincing articulation, with details added to clarify what exactly was perceived and how the perceived exemplifies Ur's seven practice characteristics. Unlike Student 1, Student 2 failed to limit her observations to individual activities, frequently commenting on complete lessons.

Student 3 adopted correctly all but one criterion. However, also at variance with contributions by Students 1 and 2, hers are the most succinct of all the students' reviews. In the primary school report presented in Table 1, Student 3 defines the main lesson aim and summarises the procedure, implicitly addressing all the criteria except for volume and possibly heterogeneity. A comparison of all her contributions shows the same succinctness and a possible misunderstanding

of volume, which she equates with the amount of verbal and/or written text used in class.

Table 1. Primary school observation reports illustrating consistent adoption of activity evaluation criteria and articulation variance.

Student 1 (full report)	The activity I'll describe is revision of the rooms in the house. Previously, the students had learned the names of rooms in the house: living room, bathroom, kitchen, and bedroom. Today, they started by revising them all together with the teacher, the[n] all of them individually. The teacher called out each student and pointed at the rooms illustrated in the book she was holding, and the students named the rooms accordingly. In terms of *validity*, the activity does what it aims to do, which is revision of vocabulary. The practice is *interesting* for every student since they all get the chance to participate, however this takes away from the *volume*, since it is time consuming and only engages one student at a time. It is *heterogeneous*, since even the less advanced students were able to complete with a bit of help, while the more advanced ones could show their skills. The activity is *success oriented*, most students were very successful, whereas the less successful ones were asked to repeat the activity until they got it right. The *pre-learning* was done at the start by the teacher, when she said aloud the names of all the rooms by herself. *Teacher assisted* and guided almost all the students, since they are very young learners.
Student 2 (excerpt)	Comments: In one of the activities, the teacher presented students with a drawing of the interior of a house, after which each of them named the four rooms depicted in the drawing until everyone had participated in the exercise. Validity—The activity achieved what it had intended, because students were able to verbally participate in the activity and practice and improve their pronunciation. Volume—Although the amount of time one student spent participating in this activity is short, students were engaging in similar activities for the remainder of the class and although not every student spent the same amount of time participating in the activities, overall, they spent most of the class engaging in the lesson. Heterogeneity—Although the activity was simple, it was beneficial for all students since it tested their pronunciation, something most if not all of them still struggle with. Interest—The students seemed interested in the activity and in the lesson in general, they were very enthusiastic and keen to share their answers; the activity was also meaningful for them as it incorporated a topic that they are familiar with.

Student 3 (full report)	One of the activities that the students did was describing a bedroom (based on an image from their textbook). The activity matched what they were supposed to learn, and they also used their prior knowledge. It was appropriate, not too hard, but not too easy. The students were actively participating in class, and the teacher was extremely patient and helped if needed. The textbook seemed a bit too simple, though.

Although these three students are regular attendees, they are very quiet in class and only contribute answers when asked explicitly. Nevertheless, the insightfulness of their answers invariably confirms their full attention and engagement. Despite having no prior teaching experience, their mock-up lessons were exemplary, meeting Ur's criteria throughout. Their teaching was characterised by optimal teacher talking time and maximum student talking time. This suggests that a good vicarious understanding of the teaching process can translate into high-quality performance, even without previous experience.

Table 2 juxtaposes reports by another two students (marked here as Students 4 and 5) to illustrate two distinct perspectives for a more profound insight. Reports by Student 4 illustrate a lack of understanding of some of Ur's criteria and are characterised by general, imprecise, or inaccurate articulation. At times, Student 4 amalgamates multiple criteria in evaluating the use of individual principles by the teachers and peers observed. This is evident in all her contributions, including the mock-up lesson plan, indicating the student's failure to also grasp other key concepts taught in the course, more specifically, those related to methods and techniques. The reports by Student 5 are also indicative of a limited understanding of the criteria and a degree of inarticulacy.

Table 2. Students 4 and 5, extracts from peer mock-up lesson report. Incoherent, incorrect, or inarticulate application of criteria.

Student 4	Student 5
CLASS ACTIVITY: Introduction, vocabulary exercise Validity—The class was very interestingly introduced to the topic. The presenters then provided students with hand-outs containing a crossword puzzle and a table for vocabulary exercise. Students were separated into groups of three. Pre-learning—The lesson was prepared for advanced students, and the students justified the expectations.	The aim of this lesson was to teach students a crime vocabulary. Activity—Finding words in the crossword puzzle and discovering their meanings. Volume—The whole class was prepared and presented in English language. Validity—Through this exercise, students were able to figure out the meaning of the words therefore validity is satisfied.

Student 4	Student 5
Volume—The primary goal of this activity was for students to obtain some basic criminology vocabulary, students' creativity to be tackled, and for students to have their public speech abilities enhanced Success-orientation—Both students and teachers used the target language only. Heterogeneity—Activities, laid back as this one, allows students to sink into the lesson and prepare themselves for the learning of new things. This activity, followed by dialogue-writing assignment, created a good atmosphere in class due to students' creative responses.	Success-orientation—Well this assignment was oriented to help the students understand meanings therefore to teach the students not to test them. Pre-learning—At the beginning of the class, teachers introduced the students with crime and some crime vocabulary. Based on that, students were able to do the task. Heterogeneity—Well, through this exercise students practiced their spelling, grammar and pronunciation. So this criteria is satisfactory.

In conclusion, introducing Ur's principles to students to ensure substantive interpretation of language practice activities and help students design their mock-up lessons resulted in a program of activities that allowed re-engaging with the criteria reiteratively. As well as that, students had a chance to apply the principles creatively and test their soundness and validity (Kelly et al., 2004, p. 47). Several students organised their mock-up lessons around the task-cycle format (Willis, 1996) previously introduced in the course, apparently seeing in it potential for volume and heterogeneity.

Experiential training tasks and procedures based on principles such as Ur's require engagement and complex thinking processes which students must report on individually, with little opportunity to use AI, except possibly for text translation and refinement. Evaluating thus produced student reports aligns with recommendations to make assessment in higher education formative, with an emphasis on feedback and process orientation (Fürstenberg et al., 2024, p. 3). When this is applied through individualistic training tasks, students are more likely to take ownership of their learning, with their contributions—especially when these outline the development of a competence—representing valid evaluation material.

Conclusion

This study examined the possibility of developing the key language teacher competence of evaluating and designing effective practice activities. The study findings indicate mostly positive initial developmental outcomes. If students claimed an activity had provoked interest or if they recognised teacher assistance,

pre-learning, and to an extent success-orientation, this was apparently perceivable in the overt lesson interactions. The principles concerning structuring practice activities to respond to learners' different proficiency levels and needs, or the quantity and quality of teacher engagement—such as volume and heterogeneity—were less transparent. The reasons for students' failure to understand and/or adopt the criteria may lie in combinations of factors beyond the set-up of the ELT Methods 1 course. The same principles can be used in the next, skills teaching ELT course to help students further refine their ability to evaluate and adapt practice activities to best accommodate their learners' needs.

Further research will be needed to determine whether possessing this competence translates into valid and heterogeneous teaching. The practicum will offer an opportunity to triangulate insights from practicum mentors, student teachers, and learners to address this question. More broadly, even if students do not intend to work as teachers after graduation, the logic derived from effective, concrete, comprehensible, and imitable teaching practices—such as those aligned with Ur's principles—might help them develop an interest in the practice and profession. Ideally, this could lead them to view teaching as a skill that can be learnt, rather than a vocation one is destined for.

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Конструктивистичко образовање будућих наставника страних језика: принципијелно процењивање дидактичке вредности активности увежбавања страних језика

Резиме

Овај рад бави се образовањем једне од кључних компетенција наставника страних језика, способности да се процени дидактичка вредност језичке активности за потребе увежбавања ученика на различитим нивоима познавања страног језика. Поставља се питање када током образовања будућих наставника почети с грађењем ове способности и какве наставне поступке при томе користити. У склопу представљеног акционог истраживања студенти су упознати с критеријумима концептуализације активности увежбавања страних језика Пени Ур, након чега се радило на њиховом усвајању и примени. Критеријуми укључују: 1) сврсисходност (валидност) активности; 2) предзнање (поседовање предзнања из материје која се увежбава); 3) активно увежбавање страног језика (могућност

да се ученици равноправно количински што више служе изучаваним језиком током активности); 4) усмереност ка постигнућу циља (схваћено као давање одговора, учешће); 5) хетерогеност (структурно-исходишну флексибилност наставне активности), схваћену као могућност да ученици различитих нивоа знања учествују у активности,ураде вежбу или дају одговоре; 6) активну помоћ наставника; и 7) побуђивање и држање пажње код ученика. У истраживању је стављен нагласак на први, трећи и пети критеријум, због уверења ауторке да су управо они најпроблематичнији и да их је најтеже применити у пракси.

Студенти су добили задатак да приликом хоспитовања у школама и посматрања огледних часова колега анализирају појединачне активности увежбавања енглеског језика, по властитом избору, на основу представљених критеријума. Анализа садржаја извештаја већине студената (20 од 25) указује на адекватно и целовито разумевање већине или свих критеријума и њихову доследну и тачну примену, што је потврђено и у њиховим припремама и приликом извођења огледних часова. Петоро студената никако није применило критеријуме у анализи часова у основним и средњим школама, док то јесу учинили, мање или више успешно, у анализама часова колега. Потребно је даље испитивање дидактичког потенцијала наведених принципа за потребе јачања истраживане компетенције.

Кључне речи: образовање наставника страних језика; будући наставници; огледни час; наставна активност; сврсисходност; активно увежбавање језика; хетерогеност.