

***TRAINEE TEACHERS' COGNITIONS ABOUT CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE
AND THEIR REFLECTIONS IN CLASSROOM PRACTICE***

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Abstract

This paper reflects on what 65 trainee teachers of English think, know, and believe about three classroom discipline problems- dealing with large classes, creating a positive environment, holding attention- and examines the relationship of these mental constructs to what trainees do in the language classroom. Within a framework suggested by more general mainstream educational research on teacher cognition, language teacher cognition in this paper is discussed with reference to *cognition* and *classroom practice*. The study concludes that the more teaching experience a trainee has the better teacher cognitions develop.

Key words: *teacher cognition, pre-service teacher education, language teaching, EFL, classroom discipline*

Introduction

Due to recent changes in English language teaching (ELT) policy in Turkish education system, English has been started to be taught from the fourth grade of primary education (age 10) until the final year of secondary education (age 17). This important focus of ELT calls for researching on the relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practice. The term 'teacher cognition' refers to "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching", that is, "what teachers know, believe,

and think" (Borg 2003, p. 81, p. 86). The term 'classroom practice' is used here to refer to trainees' teaching sessions at the placement school.

Teacher cognition and classroom practice

Several studies have investigated the relationship of teacher cognition and classroom practice in the field of language teaching (Bailey 1996; Bartels 1999; Breen 1991; Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver and Thwaite 2001; Burns 1996; Gatbonton 1999; Golombek 1998; Johnson 1992a; Nunan 1992; Richards 1996, 1998a, 1998b; Richards, Li and Tang 1998; Smith 1996; Ulichny 1996; Woods 1991, 1996). These studies collectively show that teachers' cognitions emerge consistently as a powerful influence on their practices. However, it is important to acknowledge that these studies draw on different research traditions. One derives from the educational literature on decision-making (Shavelson and Stern 1981) and the second from that on teachers' personal practical knowledge (Elbaz 1981; Clandinin and Connelly 1987). For the purpose of this study, the research tradition of decision-making is adopted here as it focuses on identifying the antecedents for teachers' interactive decisions and describing effective decision-making procedures.

One strand of studies of teacher cognition examines what second and foreign language teachers, at any stage of their careers, think, know, or believe in relation to various aspects of their work. Borg (2003, pp. 84-86) lists the studies on language teacher cognition focusing on two curricular areas (grammar teaching and literacy instruction) (e.g., Mitchell and Hooper 1992; Mitchell, Brumfit and Hooper 1994a, 1994b; Brumfit, Mitchell and Hooper 1996 for grammar teaching; Johnson 1992b and Meijer, Verloop and Beijaard 1999, 2001 for teaching reading; Burns 1992 and Tsui 1996 for teaching writing). Another strand of research on teacher cognition entails

the study of actual classroom practices and of the relationships between cognitions and classroom practices (e.g., Freeman 1993; Crookes and Arakaki 1999; MacDonald et al. 2001). The second type of research focuses rather on more general processes, such as knowledge growth during teacher education and decision-making, and illustrating these within a language teaching context. This study falls in the second category as it both examines decision-making procedures of senior trainee teachers of English on three topics relevant to classroom discipline and illustrates decision-making procedures within trainees' language teaching contexts.

The reference to discipline problems rarely seems to be an issue in the classrooms described in the literature on language teacher cognition (Borg 2003, p. 94). The term 'classroom discipline' is used in this study as "a state in which both teacher and learners accept and consistently observe a set of rules about behaviour in the classroom whose function is to facilitate smooth and efficient teaching and learning in the lesson" (Ur 1996, p. 270). The contribution of this study to the field is that it investigates trainee teachers' cognitions about the discipline problems they experience in their teaching contexts. Richards and Pennington (1998, pp. 187-188) examines the impact of large classes, unmotivated students, and students' resistance to new ways of learning in their research. Similar to those, this study examines the teacher cognition about dealing with large classes, creating a positive environment, and holding attention.

Two studies on teacher cognition have been carried out in Turkey. Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) works with 20 students on a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) secondary in Modern Languages at a British University. They examine the change in teachers' beliefs during a one-year postgraduate course and assert strong claims about the manner in which trainees' cognition do change during teacher

education. Tercanlioğlu (2001), on the other hand, works with 132 pre-service EFL teachers in Turkey and examines their views of themselves as readers and future reading teachers. She reports that pre-service EFL teachers were not very enthusiastic about teaching reading, though they accepted they would need to teach it as part of a language course. The study concludes that 51.51% of the pre-service teachers rated their teacher education program as satisfactory in this domain. This study is similar with these two studies in terms of the research's nature as a large scale survey and with the second study in terms of context. However, this study differs from them in terms of the research aim, which is to examine the decision-making procedures of trainees on three classroom discipline problems.

Context

The study takes place at Muğla University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language Teacher Training. The trainees are studying at the second semester of their third year in a 4-year undergraduate programme. By this time, they have been taking courses related to teaching methods and approaches and classroom management in addition to other courses. In the final year of their undergraduate study, they are required to attend the school placement in both terms.

The fall term in training module is characterized by both building relationships with the mentor and the placement school and foundational knowledge by writing weekly tasks, and establishing a critical perspective for exploring ways to overcome discipline problems in the language classroom. In addition to that, they are advised to teach at least once during a school term and comment on their teaching sessions by writing a tutor log. The spring term moves toward an increased role for trainees

within the professional development process. Trainees are required to conduct actual teaching during ten class hour (each lasts 45 minutes) at a school term.

The trainees are grouped in five's or six's and each group works with a volunteer mentor. 10 mentors, whose teaching experience ranges from 10 to 15 years, are participated in this study. The study involves a year and half collaboration among senior teacher trainees, mentors at the placement schools, and teacher trainers at the university. The cornerstone of the study is the practice of three teacher-centered, sustainable professional development strategies that are related to understanding discipline implementation at the classroom level.

School placement takes place in six different secondary schools within Muğla city centre. The schools are government-funded state schools and mix gender. They are selected randomly by the Faculty of Education. Borg (2003, p. 98) points out a research gap where “classrooms in state schools, taught by nonnative teachers, and where syllabuses are to various degrees prescribed. The setting of this research reflects these characteristics.

Description of classroom discipline problems

Dealing with large classes

The first discipline problem is how to deal with large classes. As the rate of young population is high in Turkey, large class size is one of the mostly encountered educational problem by in-service high school English language teachers. ‘Large’ is a relative term, and what a ‘large class’ is will vary country to country and even place to place in the same country. In some countries a group of twenty students at language classrooms may be considered large, in my own research context, 35 - 40; in some places numbers may even go up. A study done by the team of the Lancaster-

Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project (Project Report No. 4 of Coleman 1989) indicates that an average perception of the large class may be around 50 students. Probably, however, the exact number does not really matter: what matters is how the teacher sees the class size. Therefore, the definition of ‘a large class’ should be understood as relevant to any class perceived as large, regardless of the actual number of learners in it.

Creating a positive environment

Unmotivated learners is another classroom discipline problem that most of the teachers may experience. There are some studies which discuss both the importance of motivation in language learning (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Gardner 1980; Khan 1991) and the types of motivation (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Brown 1987). This study, however, focuses only on the teacher’s responsibility to motivate learners (Girard 1977) by creating a positive classroom environment.

Holding attention

Fluctuations in learner attention are the last discipline problem that will be described here. Some temporary lowering in learner interest can be caused by factors beyond the teacher’s control such as “the need of the learner to take a short break” (Ur 1996, p. 282) or external distractions. There are also certain teacher behaviours which can quickly catch learner interest such as “addressing the whole class rather than individuals”, “writing on the board”, “conducting pair and group work” (*ibid.*, p. 283). Apart from teacher behaviours, “an interesting topic, the need to convey meaningful information, a game-like fun task, attention-catching materials, appeal to learners’ feelings or a challenge to their intellect” are suggested in the literature (*ibid.*, p. 23).

Materials and methods

Qualitative research methods are used extensively in previous studies investigating the relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practice. Richards (1996) analyses data from a corpus of teacher narratives and interviews. Woods (1996) conducts a longitudinal study of planning and decision-making in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms in Canada. Drawing on interviews, observations, video-based stimulated recall, teachers' logs, and document analysis, this study tracks a group of teachers as they go through the process of planning and teaching their courses. Through observations and elicitation procedures, the study by Breen et al. (2001) investigates the relationships between cognition and practice in language teaching. Kagan's (1990) study in teacher cognition relies on questionnaire responses without examining the cognition in relation to practice. In this study the data is collected by means of:

- Questionnaires:

For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire is designed with some open-ended questions that allow trainees to reflect their views on three classroom discipline problems. There are no correct answers, no word limit, and no time limit in filling in the questionnaire. Each trainee is required to write their names on the questionnaire in order to track the changes in their views over the three academic semesters. However, these names are not used in this paper for ethical purposes.

- Tutor logs:

The notion of tutor log comes in different names and forms in the literature such as observation tasks by Wajnryb (1992) or student feedback sheet on teaching by Ur (1996, p. 324). The objective of having trainee teachers write tutor logs is though

the same; which is to get them to start taking responsibility for their own self-assessment (Ur 1996, p. 358).

- **Development sessions**

Various models of teacher learning have been suggested, one of the three main ones, which matches best with the research design is ‘the reflective model’ (Wallace 1993). In the reflective model of teacher learning, the trainee observes (first semester) or teaches (second semester) lessons; then reflects alone (e.g., writing tutor logs) or in discussion with others (e.g., discussing with the tutor and peers in development sessions), in order to work out theories about teaching; then tries these out again in practice (i.e., at the placement school). Such a cycle aims for continuous improvement and the development of personal theories of action (Schön 1983).

- **Classroom observations**

Classroom observations are carried out by peers, the mentor, and the tutor.

Questionnaire

The first phase of the data collection procedure involves the application of the questionnaire to the third year prospective English language teachers at the end of the spring semester of 2004-2005. The questionnaire (Appendix I) is first applied at that school time period in order to receive the participants’ views on three educational cases right before taking school placement module, in other words, while they have still ‘no experience’ in teaching at actual language classrooms. Answers in questionnaires are clustered under some headings and converted as tables. The range of answers are discussed with the light of comments on tutor logs.

Tutor logs

The second phase of data collection starts at the fall semester of the final (4th) year of undergraduate programme (2005-2006) while the participants are taking the school placement module. Each teacher trainee is grouped in five's or six's and assigned a placement school. One mentor (at the placement school) and one tutor (at the university) are responsible for a group of five or six trainee teachers. The attendance to the placement schools is 10 weeks (approxiamately one academic semester). Each trainee teacher attends three lesson hours (each 45 minutes) per week at the placement schools. The main task at placement schools is to observe the classroom teacher's teaching each week. The second task is to write weekly reports (10 in total) according to a set agenda of topics. The third task is to teach during one lesson hour at least once in 10 weeks. After the teaching experience, each teacher trainee is required to fill in the tutor log (Appendix II).

Development sessions

Development sessions are those when trainee teachers discuss their weekly written reports (in the first semester) and their teaching practices (in the second semester) with their tutors at the university. These sessions can be named as development sessions because they involve the three stages of teacher development (Ur 1996): Teaching practice, private reflection, sharing with colleagues (Edge 1991; Lansley 1994). Development sessions took place between a group of trainee teachers, who are assigned at the same high school, and the tutor of the group. They are designed particularly to discuss the problems of trainee teachers in their professional practice. The core aim of development sessions is to get across the message that 'first-time stress' is an entirely normal phenomenon and to suggest some ways of

dealing with it. Collaborative discussions about the lesson plans, teaching materials, reflections on teaching practices are highly encouraged in development sessions.

Classroom Observation

The third stage is also done in the 4th year but in the second semester. Each trainee teacher stays in the same trainee groups and placement schools assigned in the first semester. However, the language classroom, the mentor and the tutor are changed for the sake of experiencing different educational contexts and being in contact with different academics. The attendance to the placement schools is 10 weeks (approximately one academic semester). Each trainee teacher attends three lesson hours (each 45 minutes) per week at the placement schools. The main task at placement schools is to teach a lesson each week. What to teach each week is arranged with the mentor according to the ELT syllabus applied at the placement schools. The trainees are required but not limited to follow the coursebook. They are encouraged to produce their own teaching materials and create some classroom activities. Each teaching session of a trainee is observed by the peers, the mentor and the tutor. The trainees are required to fill in tutor logs after their teaching sessions. The mentor and the tutor together discuss and fill in a teaching evaluation form after each trainee's teaching session. Each trainee teacher interviews with the tutors for 30 minutes each week. During interviews not only tutor logs are collected and discussed but also teaching evaluation forms are distributed and discussed. By the end of the academic semester, each teacher trainee organises a teaching portfolio, in which there are weekly 10 lesson plans, 10 tutor logs, 10 teaching evaluation forms and the teaching materials used by the trainees.

Results

Questionnaire

Table (1) Dealing with large classes

Classroom Practice to Overcome the Discipline Problem	Trainee's Cognition
<i>Divide students into groups</i>	1-students ask questions to each other 2-a student tells what s/he understands to another student in the first language (Turkish) or the second language (English) 3-carry out peer evaluation 4-give responsibility to each group member 5-do groupwork (GW) and/or pairwork (PW)
<i>Use observation technique</i>	1-assess speaking 2-check facial expressions 3-Teacher makes a mistake to check whether students are listening
<i>Ask questions</i>	1-choose a student from the class list and ask a question 2-grade questions from easy to difficult 3-use different question types E.g., fill-in-the-blanks, open-ended 4-relate questions to students' daily lives
<i>Do classroom activities</i>	1-design interesting activities using Total Physical Response (TPR) Method 2-use different activity types E.g.; visual, auditory, kinesthetic 3-design story making activities 4- show pictures 5- choose interesting topics
<i>Evaluate</i>	1-make mini quizzes, pop-up quizzes, exams 2- record students' speech 3- ask students to write what they've learnt 4- do portfolio assessment 5- give feedback
<i>State the goal</i>	1-explain the importance before the lesson 2- make each student aware of the goals of an activity
<i>Improve physical conditions</i>	1-wander in the classroom 2- put desks into U or circle shape 3- have breaks

The fact that the teacher is very much less able to attend to every individual in the class means that in order for the class to function well, the students themselves

must help by teaching each other and working together (Ur 1996). The following is a similar account suggested by a trainee teacher who emphasises the use of peer-teaching and collaboration:

“In a large class, I try to make all pupils participate in the lesson by using an activity. For example, one student says a sentence and another contributes to it, then another adds something so they create a story. It requires listening and understanding.” (Trainee 1)

Table (2) Creating a positive environment

Classroom Practice to Overcome the Discipline Problem	Trainee's Cognition
<i>Use various activity types</i>	1-encourage GW,drama, role play,games, songs, stories, jokes, pictures, flashcards 2- focus on multiple intelligences 3- do TPR activities 4- use additional teaching materials 5- have a 10 minunte break after 20 minutes
<i>Choose appropriate tasks</i>	1-tasks must be not too demanding but not too easy 2- personalise the topic according to students' hobbies 3- topics should be familiar so that students can talk 4- use the first language (L1) 5- introduce the new item in a context
<i>Physchological aspects</i>	1-behave friendly 2- spend time with students in/outside of the classroom 3- help students with their learning problems 4- make students believe that they can achieve 5- make students feel relaxed by being a councellor rather than a controller 6- love your students
<i>Feedback</i>	1-use different types of feedback 2- ask volunteers to answer 3- carry out self-assessment tasks 4- provide peer correction 5- give rewards to winners
<i>Course syllabus</i>	1-give alternative course syllabus 2- involve students to select the syllabus
<i>Physical conditions</i>	1- U-shaped classrooms, heat, light, size 2- make the classroom colourful with pictures,

	posters, photos, play music in the lesson 3- put a message box 4- use name tags/labels
<i>Classroom management</i>	1- decide the classroom rules with students

In order to create a positive environment for learning in the language classroom, some trainees mention about story telling activities. Stories are mostly associated with young children (Brumfit et al. 1991; Kennedy and Jarvis 1991) but older learners can also benefit from the successful use of stories. Ur (1996, p. 113) states that “if the story is well-chosen, learners are likely to be motivated to attend and understand in order to enjoy it”. The following is an extract from a trainee teacher’s questionnaire:

“First of all, before the lesson starts, to motivate students, I would tell them a short story or refer to news or talk about the weather. Then, the lesson starts.”

(Trainee 2)

Involving the learners in choosing the content of the course may also increases the positive environment in language learning (Johnson 2000). The following is an extract about designing a course syllabus from a trainee’s questionnaire:

“Choosing the goal is very good issue at that point. First of all I would give a list that we would study during that term and I would give a list again as an alternative and let my students choose what they want. Since they like topics that they are good at.” (Trainee 3)

In principle, the teaching processes of presenting, practising, and testing correspond to strategies used by many good learners trying to acquire a foreign language on their own. They make sure they “perceive and understand” (O’Malley and Chamot 1990) new language. The following is a trainee’s extract on choosing appropriate task:

“I would prepare activities or tasks that are related to students’ interests and level. For example, boys like football very much. And one day, I would prepare an activity related to football. And girls, as to say, like astrology, for example. And the other day I would prepare an activity related to astrology. This activity is liked by girls. Or another option is an activity which is loved by both girls and boys. For example, both girls and boys love ‘love affairs’ and such an activity can be given to them. If they like the topic, they achieve most of the activities. And the more they achieve, the more they are motivated.” (Trainee 4)

Good learners make conscious efforts “learn it thoroughly” (O’Malley and Chamot 1990). The following is a trainee’s extract on maintaining psychological aspects:

“There were lessons I did not like in my school days. And the reason of this is the attitudes of my teacher toward me and my friends. In order to create a positive environment in class, firstly, I approach to my students in a positive way. I make them love not only me but also my lesson. If there is a student who doesn’t like me, I try to find what the problem is with him/her by meeting him/her out of the lesson. Because it is important that the student sees that the teacher concerns with him/her.” (Trainee 5)

Good learners “check themselves” (O’Malley and Chamot 1990). The following is a trainee’s extract on giving feedback:

“First of all, we should not have a judging attitude. A student being corrected by the teacher might be irritated or feel himself insufficient for the lesson. That is why we should provide peer correction in the classroom.” (Trainee 6)

Improving the physical conditions of a language classroom is another factor that some trainee teachers emphasise in creating a positive learning environment.

“First of all, we should create a good atmosphere in the classroom. In the class, the shape of desks, light, etc. are important in learning. I make a U-shape in the classroom. So students can see their faces and interaction between them can be increased. In order to motivate the students, I ask questions or I tell a short story. I try to make them relaxed. For example, lights are important. We should use the appropriate light in the classroom. And also heat and the size of class are important.”(Trainee 7)

Some classroom strategies to improve the physical conditions in language classrooms are also suggested:

“I put a message box to the class. Students can send and receive message to each other with the help of teacher. Teacher also can send messages to students. It improves their literacy skills.” (Trainee 8)

“Labels: Children’s names are written on the chair or classroom tools’ names like chair, board can be written. Posters: Children’s birthday dates, or the books that they have read can be written on the colourful poster. Messages: Classroom rules or the things that children shouldn’t forget should be written on message box. For example; do not forget to bring your crayons on Friday.”
(Trainee 9)

Table (3) Holding Attention

Classroom Practice to Overcome the Discipline Problem	Trainee’s Cognition
<i>Activity types</i>	1-add variety 2-tell memoirs 3-use Multiple Intelligence Theory (MIT) 4-keep students busy 5-design fun and interesting activities

	6-encourage GW, competition, reward 7-draw pictures
<i>Teacher-related issues</i>	1-adjust voice tone 2-make use of non-verbal communicaiton 3-pay attention to timing 4-raise curiosity 5-give breaks 6-apply questionnaires

In addition to the strategies suggested at the beginning of this paper to hold learners' attention, a trainee suggests talking about out-of-topic issues such as giving some personal information to learners:

“To hold bored and restive children’s attention, I would tell some stories or memoirs from my own life as students are always interested in teachers’ life (of course in a language in their level).”(Trainee 10)

Effective timing and appropriate use of teaching materials are also emphasised:

“The reason why they are getting bored is because of the same way of teaching during the whole-lesson time. Even a cartoon can be boring when it is shown more than it is necessary. Timing is important, for all kinds of activities, teaching and application time should be adjusted.” (Trainee 11)

Applying questionnaires to find out the reasons for learners' lack of attention is included is another suggested view:

“At first, I would try to make general picture (for myself) of what they dis/like, what they are interested in, what kind of learners they are, what kind of people they take as models, etc. By handing out questionnaires, for example. Then, I may apply these when I see that they have lost their attention to the lesson.” (Trainee 12)

Tutor logs

Table (4) Reflections from trainee teachers' tutor logs

Classroom Practice	Trainee's Cognition
<i>Placement School (Observation Stage) 4TH year, 1ST semester</i>	1-feel like neither student nor teacher 2-cannot familiarise himself/herself with the teaching context
<i>Placement School (Teaching Stage) 4TH year, 2ND semester</i>	“we planned before but in the class we couldn't apply” 1-feel like inexperienced in teaching 2-have negative psychological mood (i.e., feel excited, nervous) 3-have poor lesson planning

The points summarised in the first column of Table 4 reflect the trainee's ideas about the teaching which they did at least once in the first semester of their final year. From their views we may come to the conclusion that at the observation stage of the placement module, trainees find it difficult to fit themselves in the school atmosphere. They stated that they feel themselves neither students nor teachers in the language classroom. They are not students because they are both equipped with the necessary information about teaching and responsible for communicating with the academic staff at the placement school. They are not teachers because they own neither a degree nor a classroom of their own. Being at the placement schools just one day within a week for only three class hours make them feel unfamiliar with the educational context. That may be one of the reasons why trainees do not feel themselves as teachers.

In the second stage of the placement module, trainee teachers emphasise that due to being inexperienced in teaching at actual language classrooms, they cannot follow the time slots that they devote for each classroom activity. They also mention that before teaching, they prepare lesson plans, teaching materials, some activity types but on the spur of teaching they miss some points in their lesson plans. They

sometimes experience that what they have prepared and written in their lesson plans are below or above the learners' proficiency levels. Thus, they need to adjust themselves to the actual teaching context.

To compare the tutor logs written in the first and second stages of school placement, trainee teachers show similarities in expressing the nervousness in teaching. However, the nature of reflections written at the tutor logs towards the end of the second stage of school placement changes in a positive way. The trainee teachers feel more confident as they spend more time at the placement schools with the mentor and students and have more experience in teaching.

Discussion and conclusion

This study explores the cognitions of 65 trainee teachers of English on three classroom discipline problems over one and a half year time period. The evaluation of the data received from the questionnaires reveal that trainee teachers possess wide range cognitions about the three discipline problems. Development sessions enable trainees to further express their cognitions and the relationship between their cognitions and classroom practice. The categorisation of cognitions presented in the tutor logs implies that the senior trainee teachers transfer their reservations, which they have at the observation stage at the placement school, to the second semester – teaching stage at the placement school. However, it is important to note that the reservations start to fade away after a few weeks of teaching experience at the placement schools at the second semester. By the end of the second semester, most of the teacher trainees state that they feel themselves ready to start their teaching careers and overcome the difficulties they face at the beginning of the teaching experience. Similar result can also be seen at Borg's study "Cognition not only shapes what

teachers do but is in turn shaped by the experiences teachers accumulate" (2003, p. 95).

This study can be further expanded by comparing experienced and less experienced language teachers in order to shed light on transformations in teacher cognition which may occur over time. A longitudinal study can only deduce some of the possible processes language teachers go through in developing cognitions and skills more characteristic of experienced teachers.

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Appendix I: Questionnaire

1-Dealing with Large Classes:

How can you check that your pupils are listening and even more important, that they understand?

2-Creating a Positive Environment:

Remember your own school days. Did you like the subjects you were good at? And if you felt you were 'bad' at a subject, was that a turn-off, so that you didn't want to continue? How would you create a positive environment in which your students and you feel a sense of achievement?

3-Holding Attention:

You have a class of very lively students, who are always keen and well-behaved at the beginning of lessons, but, who soon get bored and restive. What can you do to keep them interested throughout a 45 minute lesson?

Appendix II: Tutor Log

Name:

Date:

Tutoring Location:

1. Lesson Plan

Objective:

Approach:

Materials:

Activities:

Plans for error correction:

2. Problems Encountered:

Plans for resolution of the problem:

3. Self Evaluation

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Comments:

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