

SELF-REFLECTION: A POINT OF AN UPHILL DEPARTURE

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Abstract

Most reflective teaching studies were conducted in English Language Teaching (ELT) background, the reference was addressed to pre-service teachers at the preparatory stage or teachers in schools. Little is known about the same practice among English educators in tertiary level setting, particularly refers to novice English lecturers in polytechnic's context. Hence, this exploratory case study was purposely conducted in identifying the issues and concerns of self-reflection among 2 novice lecturers in a specific polytechnic in order to promote the reflective language teaching culture in their ELT teaching and learning process. The instruments like teaching journal and researcher's field note were used to get the insight of the participants' stories. Content analysis was employed in order to generate the required information. As a result, the frequent concerns on students have become the main influence to the participants' self-reflective practice.

Keywords: language teaching, self-reflection, polytechnics, Malaysia's context

1 INTRODUCTION

Reflection is no longer a 'buzzword' in teaching field or among teachers. It is a widely known an alternative to sustain teacher professional development. In English Language Teaching (ELT) background, most reflective teaching studies address the pre-service teachers' practice; to a point that the effectiveness of reflective practice found in this group has been broadly assumed to be similarly workable to the in-service teachers (Moon, 1999).

One of the common assumptions is keeping reflective journal as a practical means to explore teaching practice as well as increase teachers' awareness towards their professional growth (e.g. Bailey, 2001; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell, 1998; Laksmi, 2012; Suhaily & Faizah, 2014a, 2014b). It can bridge a gap between a teacher's beliefs and classroom practice (Farrell, 2006). This is because the written responses are considered as permanent data records that include teachers' private voice and entries that are thoughtful in nature as they are written at teachers' personal space and time (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Sidhu & Kaur, 2010). These features are beneficial to act as an aid to "internal dialogue" (Siti Katijah, 2004, p.104). It could vents an exploration into teachers' self-conscious related to their teaching practice (Suhaily & Faizah, 2014b). Hence, teachers' awareness towards their belief and classroom practice benefit them by revealing a bottom-up solution to address any issues arisen (Suhaily & Faizah, 2014a).

In addition, the self-regulated learning element could be instilled upon teachers' willingness to reflect. This empowers professional identity of practising teachers because self-regulation is seen as teacher workplace learning. It derives from "an experience whereby knowledge, skills, new attitudes related to work are acquired and recognized by the teachers themselves" (Eekelen, Boshuizen, & Vermunt, 2005:449). So, the awareness towards their own performance in teaching is being monitored from time to time. Subsequently, it is viewed as teachers' self-reflection effort to sustain their growths on becoming language educators (Faizah, 2007).

In relation to the abovementioned points, investigations into novice teachers' experience in writing a journal would yield a range of unique findings. At this stage, there are visible struggles faced by newly-servicing teachers since it is considered as a transmission level for them to form a meaning on truly workable teaching to their immediate students. This is because what has been theoretically learnt and obtained during their preparatory trainings would practically result into unexpected real-life experience. This is where the 'gaps' that most language teaching researchers or teacher-educators often highlight appeared (Bailey et al., 2001; Faizah, 2007; Moon, 1999; Siti Katijah, 2004; Yesilbursa, 2011). So, it would be beneficial to probe into the novice teachers' provisional period to gain the origin of sources of their teaching issues from their current practices.

2 THE STUDY

This study, as a part of on-going postgraduate research, is initially meant to explore the use of teaching journal among two novice English lecturers in order to promote the reflective language teaching culture as a result of teachers' self-reflection effort. Keeping a teaching journal is viewed as a stimulant to arouse participants' awareness about their own practice which can lead to their professional growth. Through these written entries; it is also hoped to get information on the common issues and concerns related to participants' current teaching practice. Thus, the findings of this study are expected to answer (a)What do participants write in their teaching journals? (b)Are participants' entries descriptive or critical?

2.1.1 Participants

Both of the research participants were purposely selected due to their willingness. Besides that, the access to this institution was easily approved by its Director as a 'gate-keeper' to this site. As this study employed a case study design, it is more practical to involve the individuals or sites that are accessible and willing to provide information, show potential prolong rapport, and represent the distinctive features related to researcher's study (Creswell, 2007). In the end, the obtained data would serve the purposes to the intended objectives of the study.

The participants are considered as novice English lecturers since their teaching service is less than 3 years. Coincidentally, both of them are female, Malays, age between 21-25 years old, and TESL graduates from local universities. Yet, one participant is a single lecturer whereas another one is a newly-married. Current polytechnic is considered their first working institution. Their teaching assignments were also alike as they taught lower semester engineering students (i.e. semester 1 to semester 3 polytechnic students).

A consent form was given upon their agreement to join this study. It is meant to protect their confidentiality as a part of research ethic (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, to conceal their identity, codes were created to label each participant throughout this study. Besides that, a nickname was assigned to address them during the discussion later. The first participant (P1) was called Anis and the second one (P2) as Irrah.

2.1.2 Data collection

Teaching journal was used as a primary data source to capture participants' responses related to their language teaching practices in polytechnic. They were asked to write their daily entries. It was meant for them jot down the recollections of their daily activity, thought, feeling, aspiration or expectation which were related the teaching activities of the day. No specific rules or templates were enforced or recommended as researchers intended to let participant frankly recorded the written responses in a natural setting as possible. This is because writing diary enables to permit one to freely express what they feel by using their own preferences in term of words and phase (Sidhu & Kaur, 2010).

With that in mind, only constant 'reminders' as a friendly 'poke' to encourage participants wrote their entries were carried out. The writing up phase was done within 9 consecutive weeks before the researchers put stop to it. It was due to their entries' narration or description. The entries were no longer display any new topics or any other potential themes. At this stage, the write-up was considered reaching its 'saturation' point (Eekelen et al., 2005).

The second data source is the researcher's field note. It is meant to support the findings from the primary source to serve the triangulation purposes. It consisted of the written recollections of what researcher saw, heard, and experienced throughout the data collection term. It was written on weekly basis and were recorded in different writing organizations like point forms and short notes in which later were categorized in different emerging themes based on the analysis results of participants' teaching journal entries. It is in line with what Patton (1990 cited in Mckay, 2006, p. 82) suggested, "...field notes should contain the researcher's own feelings and reactions about what they observed...can aid researchers as they analyze all

the data they have collected”.

2.1.3 Data Analysis

Content analysis was applied. The reading, re-reading and coding process were carried out through m. The process is mostly similar to the basic qualitative analysis (refers to Figure 1) by Creswell (2009). With this tool, the data from both sources could be easily linked through the ‘code manager’ which included the highlighted phrases in which later could be edited or rework as the on-going process of the study before a finalized networking was created.

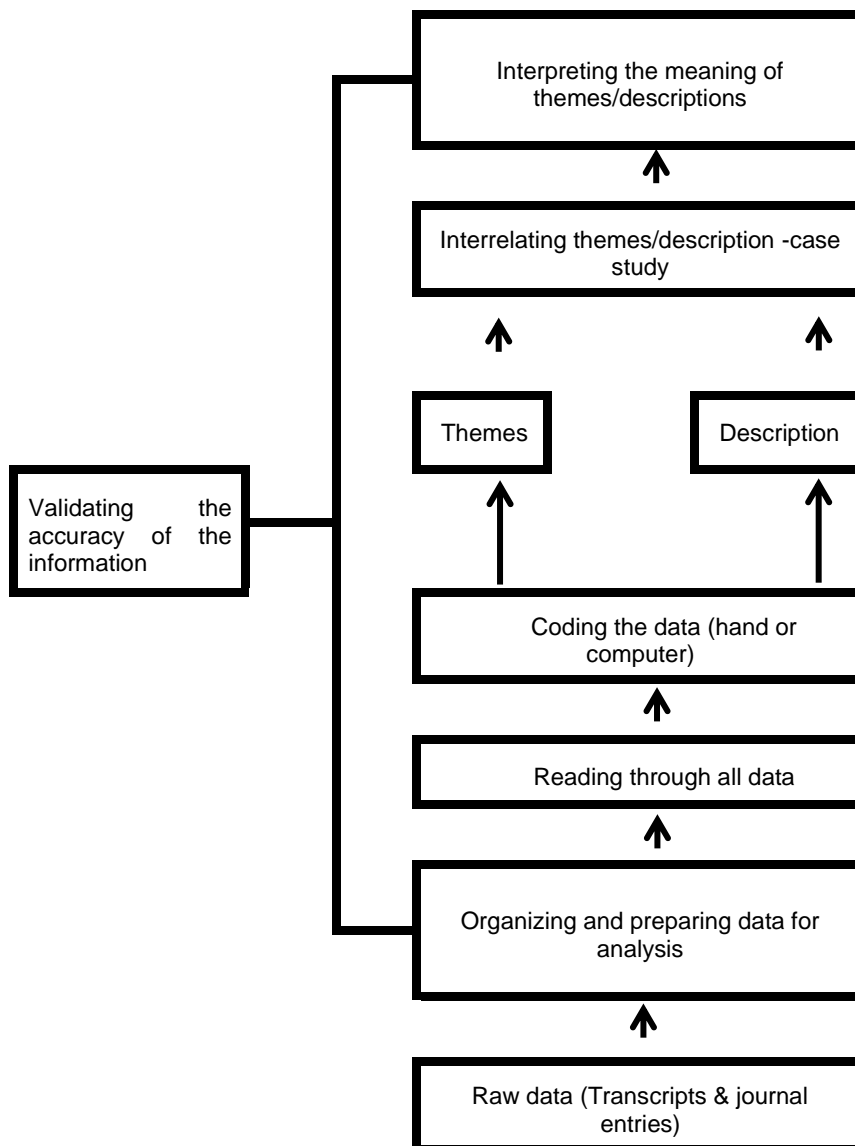


Fig. 1: Basic data analysis in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009)

The emerging themes were inductively decided after all the coded data were finalized and classified in a group of shared characteristics. Inter-raters were assigned to confirm the researchers' interpretation. The degree of agreement, or kappa value κ , for journal entries yielded at $\kappa = .713$. This reflected that the researcher's interpretation on the coding process is 'substantial' as Cohen suggested that the Kappa values $< 0.61-0.80$ as 'satisfactory' (based on term used in Burla et al., 2008).

The categorization process to classify participants' written entries as 'descriptive' or 'critical' lent the concepts applied by Ho and Richards (1993) in their two levels of reflection in the teacher's journal entries. The first level is considered as 'descriptive' and is known as mapping which describes the entries that explain what participants did as a teacher. The second level is illustrated as 'critical' whereby it compiles the entries which represent the evaluative sense (e.g. diagnosing classroom problems or providing immediate

alternatives to any matter arising) of participants' written forms towards their own teaching (i.e. direct into their specific teaching episodes or events) that had been narratively and descriptively written.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

All results from the content analysis have been organized based on the requirement of the following research questions (refer 3.1 & 3.2). The italic sentences, phrases, or words represent the exact excerpts taken from the teaching journals or the researcher's field notes. A code like this 'P1-W1D1' would constantly use to refer the excerpts taken from which entries. Meanwhile, any italic sentences, phrases, or words without this code reference remarks that the excerpts were derived from researcher's field notes. The discussion begins with the initial descriptive results of the entries as summarized Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive results of the entries

<i>f</i>	Written entries	Identified themes	Total subthemes	Total details
P1	33	5	19	74
P2	22	5	19	49

Based on this table, Anis (or P1) recorded 33 entries within the nine weeks, more entries written as compared to Irrah (P2) who succeeded to jot 22 entries all together. It was influenced by Irrah's state of health during the data collection term. She was *heavily pregnant*. So, she *missed quite a number of slots* to attentively write her reflection. Despite this, both of their written responses represented 5 emerging themes which were derived from 19 subthemes that had been determined by different number of total details provided by Anis and Irrah, which recorded in 74 and 49 details respectively. Thus, it connotes that, in certain extent, the written entries of these novice lecturers shared a commonality in term of their thought, feeling and, belief.

3.1 What do participants write in their teaching journal?

Five emerging themes derived from participants' written responses (Table 2). They are (1)concerns related to teaching and learning process, (2)concerns related to non-academic task, (3)concerns related to students, (4)concerns related to institutional culture/environment, and lastly (5)concerns related to self.

Table 2: Frequency of emerging themes and subthemes recorded in participants' entries

Theme	Subthemes	Anis (P1)	Irrah (P2)
1)Concerns related to teaching & learning process	i-Teaching assignment	*13	*5
	ii-Material	2	2
	iii-Approach	1	1
	iv-Assessment	4	4
	v-Students	0	3
2)Concerns related to non-academic task	i-Clerical task	6	*2
	ii-Additional task	*9	0
3)Concerns related to students	i-Students' attitude	1	4
	ii-Students' ability/performance	3	*5
	iii-Students' welfare	1	3
	iv-Reaction displayed towards students' behavior/reaction	3	1
4)Concerns related to institutional culture/environment	i-Matters related to CPD	4	*5
	ii-Office culture	0	1
	iii-Policy requirement	4	1
	iv-Support	1	1
	v-Work procedure	*10	3
5)Concerns related to self	i-Personality	3	0
	ii-Working style	2	0
	iii-Competency/professional growth	2	1
	iv-Satisfaction	0	2
	vi-Reaction towards new/unfamiliar matters	*4	2
	vii-Personal vignettes	1	*3
	Total		74

Asterisk (*) indicates the most frequent occurrence categories (or subthemes) appeared

Based on the overall total of participants' journal entries, the most frequent details written about were

related to the concerns of their teaching and learning process (35 occurrences) followed by descriptions of their concerns about the institutional culture and environment (30 occurrences), concerns about students (21 occurrences), concerns about themselves (20 occurrences), and concerns about their non-academic task (18 occurrences).

Furthermore, in relation to what participants recorded under each theme, the following general remarks can be drawn:

a) Concerns related to teaching and learning process: The participants frequently shared about their teaching assignment. They also wrote about the types of assessment and material they employed during the lessons instead of sharing about their students' responses. Very limited information about the approach they employed during their teaching.

b) Concerns related to non-academic task: Entries under this theme depict participants' daily tasks that excluded their core business in teaching. Two common tasks that they had to carry out rest on their clerical tasks that related to their *Fail Rekod Pensyarah*, and additional tasks that formally assigned or promptly given by their superiors in which related to institutional requirement.

c) Concerns related to students: Most of the sharing by both participants is diverse in term of their acknowledgement towards elements that illustrated their students' characteristics such as attitude and ability/performance. The welfare matters concerning their students' wellbeing as language learners and their reaction towards students' behaviour/responses were also written to note their feelings and thoughts.

d) Concerns related to institutional culture/environment: There were quite numbers of entries written related to this theme as participants shared their matters related to continuous professional development (CPD), office culture, support received, policy requirement enforced, and work procedure conducted within their working environment's context.

e) Concerns related to self: Entries under this theme focused primarily on participants' personal remarks about their personality, working style, competency/professional growth, satisfaction, reaction towards new/unfamiliar matters, and a little bit on personal vignettes that are not related to their teaching practices at all.

Looking at the individual participant, it is noted that both participants shared considerable variations in term of the choice of details (or topics) they wrote about. The only similarity both of them shared rests on the most frequent appeared entry under the 1st theme (i.e. concerns related to teaching and learning process) reveals that both participants wrote more about their teaching assignment. For instance, Anis (P1) shared 13 entries about her occurred and planned lessons; meanwhile Irrah (P2) wrote 5 entries to describe similar notions.

Probing further into participants written entries, it is noted that majority of references appeared in their teaching journals seem to repetitively address 'students' as a main topic even the categorization of the entries do not fall under concerns related to students (Theme #3). For example, Anis's and Irrah's entries under 1st, 4th and 5th theme still visibly mentioned 'students' even though the phrases were coded into different subthemes:

- 1st theme a) *...need to plan for next week class because I got to attend OBE course. Meaning I would my students...(P1-W1D5)*
b) *...since the students have workshop for 3 hours before my class, they look quite tired. I finished the class earlier so that they can have their 'brunch' (P2-W2D2)*
- 4th theme a) *Today is my last class of the semester...reveals students' on-going marks as part of policy... (P1-W8D2)*
b) *...I'm looking for my students who would like to participate in our department's event... this is good for their learning exposure (P2-W6D1)*
- 5th theme a) *The course started well. We discussed a lot on how to combine our ideas to build a meaningful module for our students...(P1-W3D3)*
b) *I attended a meaningful course...presenter shared many inputs that I could apply in my teaching to encourage students' participation...(P2-W7D5)*

All in all, based on researchers' interpretation, Anis was always in a *good-humoured* mood during the class sessions, and even outside the class within her *collegial circle*. Her personality is *warm* in nature. On the other hand, Irrah had a *flexible* way to deal with her students' behaviour or attitude that did not influence the *rapport* she had with most of her students. She can be considered as a *lenient* lecturer.

3.2 Are participants' entries descriptive or critical?

This question looks simple, on the contrary it is quite complex to answer. The rubrics of both level of reflection to depict 'descriptive' or 'critical' had been briefly explained in 2.1.3. Looking holistically at the result in Table 3, it can be concluded that 86% of the overall written responses are merely descriptive (106 out of 123 entries). The percentages of participants' critical reflection only represent 14% of the entries.

Table 3: Frequency of descriptive/critical traits appeared in participants' responses based on the themes

Theme	Traits	Anis (P1)	Irrah (P2)
1)Concerns related to teaching & learning process	a-Descriptive	17	13
	b-Critical	3	2
2)Concerns related to non-academic task	a-Descriptive	15	2
	b-Critical	0	0
3)Concerns related to students	a-Descriptive	6	9
	b-Critical	2	4
4)Concerns related to institutional culture/environment	a-Descriptive	18	10
	b-Critical	1	1
5)Concerns related to self	a-Descriptive	10	6
	b-Critical	2	2
Total		74	49

All descriptive written responses were either narratively or descriptively jotted down by participants to share what they did as English lecturers in polytechnic. Regardless of any themes concerned above, participants merely wrote on surface vignettes reflecting their daily routine as teachers. That is why it is notably stated that the teaching assignment became their most frequent written entries.

Still, both of participants displayed quite few entries that show sense of deeper reflection in their writing. Even though Anis (P1) wrote far more entries compared to Irrah (P2), they shared almost similar frequency of critical reflection under all themes. The only obvious difference is stated under the 3rd theme whereby Irrah critically diagnosed her students' problem and provided a solution to it (6 references). One of the excerpts is:

"The evaluation for role play is smooth. All groups are well-prepared. However, there are few students who read from the scripts and poorly prepared for the task. I would create an individual consultation in future for those who seem to need it...those who failed to prepare...giving excuses...I'm goin' to penalize them...should be fair to others..." (P2-W5D1)

On the other hand, Anis's thoughtful entries yield slightly more occurrences as compared to Irrah's under the 1st theme. She addressed polytechnic students' general proficiency level as her consideration to choose suitable materials for the module development effort that she worked on, together with her other colleague. It presents in the following excerpt:

"...continue surfing the internet to look for the information and materials for module...need to find something catchy and interesting...capture my students' interest and attention...mostly poor in their English language command...so they could learn English in enjoyable way. Struggling for this and trying best to accommodate them." (P1-W5D3)

3.3 Discussions

There are two points can be justified here based on these results. Firstly, the assumptions about keeping a reflective journal as a practical tool to explore the in-service language teachers' teaching practice concurs the earlier findings. It reveals some similar and common components in language teaching practice that appear in other studies such as nature of teaching assignments (Farrell, 2006; Siti Katijah, 2004; Suhaily & Faizah, 2014b), institutional roles in teachers' practice (Moon, 1999), and professional growth (Bailey et al., 2001; Bailey, 2001; Faizah, 2007; Moon, 1999). Secondly, the notions that novice teachers are relatively low in their clarity to probe deeper into their teaching practice (Farrell & Bennis, 2013) are found in both participants' reflection. Though their reflection is not critically focused on teaching principle (Laksmi, 2012) or beliefs (Ho & Richards, 1994), this procedure still initiates a positive result as it indirectly promotes the self-regulated learning (Eekelen et al., 2005) and gradually sparks the self-awareness (Farrell, 1998) among these novice English lecturers.

4 CONCLUSIONS

To deduce the overall results and discussions, the use of teaching journal as a self-reflection means in novice English lecturers in a Malaysian polytechnic is considered workable and practical. Though this procedure is not successful to reveal critical reflection, somehow in certain extent, it does provide the path for the beginning teachers to prolong the practice that they had acquired during their preparatory teaching training. Besides that, it contributes to reveal the fact that students mostly conquer novice lecturers' attention and decision making in several aspects of their teaching. In addition, the recurrent action of this practice influences their level of awareness towards their own teaching. As a result, they would be conscious and their inner drive would be able to ignite the self-regulated learning culture into their teaching services. This helps them to sustain their professional identity as certified English educators and self-monitor their professional growth. Yet, the limitation of the sampling selection and data profundity does not permit the generalization of what being practical in this study to other populations. All in all, self-reflection is still considered as an uphill departure in reflective language teaching culture as the clarity on how to conduct it relatively ambiguous (Yesilbursa, 2011).

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