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## Pre-Service Teachers' Progressive Reflective Practices Using Weekly Journals in an Action Research Project

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### Introduction

Developing teachers who can critically reflect on their teaching practice is one of the goals of many teacher education programs (David, 2005). However, current teacher training programmes do not allow pre-service teachers sufficient time for reflection and do not exploit fully the opportunities offered. As a result, they focus mainly on surface level reflection such as knowledge of the subject matter, pedagogic skills, and classroom management, to the neglect of pedagogical and critical levels of reflection such as the connections between theoretical principles and practice, and the ethical implications and consequences of their instructions on students (Larrivee, 2008).

One of the best ways to encourage teachers' reflection is through the keeping of a teaching journal (Thornbury, 2006). When teachers reflect on their teaching practices, they can understand them better, and take steps to improve them. However, the majority of journal studies are carried out with in-service teachers and with pre-service teachers over the teaching practicum (Lee, 2007). There is no reason why learning to reflect should wait until the practicum for pre-service teachers. Teacher educators need to help pre-service teachers develop reflective thinking as soon as their learning process starts, so that they can experience success in the classroom both as teacher candidates and later as teachers. Thus, the current study focuses on the development of reflective practices in a supervisory project carried out by the pre-service teachers of English at a national university in Malaysia. This report aims at providing an account of how pre-service teachers progressed along a continuum of three levels of reflective practice (surface reflection, pedagogical reflection, and critical reflection) to be critically reflective through the experience of keeping reflective journals in an action research project.

### Literature Review

In general, action research refers to any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how teachers teach and how well their students learn (Mills, 2011). By being involved in action research, teachers can experience the opportunities for reflection to observe, evaluate, and reflect systematically on their classroom practices in order to promote understanding and self-awareness and to make changes when necessary (McDonough, 2006). In this sense, reflection is a strategic activity and is believed to support teachers' understandings of pedagogy as well as their ability to think flexibly and objectively about problems and

learn from their own teaching actions (Risko, Roskos, & Vukelich, 2002).

Over these last several decades researchers have made significant contributions to our understanding of the levels of reflection (e.g., Hatton & Smith, 1995; Larrivee, 2008; Minott, 2008). Hatton and Smith (1995) point to four levels of reflective activity, starting from descriptive writing through descriptive and dialogic reflection to critical reflection, the ultimate stage of reflection. A common finding that runs like a thread through most studies of teachers' reflection is that prospective teachers' reflection fell mostly at the factual level. Their results were supported by previous studies which examined prospective teachers' levels of reflective thinking (Minott, 2008) and generally concluded that these teachers used low levels of reflective thinking. This aspect does not come as a surprise since lots of research on journal keeping of students also suggested that the majority of them included only descriptive accounts of events or activities without significant reflection on deeper aspects (Wessel & Larin, 2006).

Notably, Larrivee (2008) proposes a continuum of three levels of reflection along which critical reflection represents the ultimate aim. Larrivee suggests that teachers should pose the important questions of pedagogical practices to become critically reflective teachers while progressing along the continuum of reflective practice. If they don't recognize the presence of different levels of reflection, teachers are placed at the surface level of reflection. If they are ready to engage in the level of pedagogical reflection, teachers reflect on educational goals and underlying theories, and the connections between pedagogical principles and practice. Likewise, they can move to the level of critical reflection where they reflect on the ethical implications and consequences of their classroom practices in a wider society. It is worthy to note, however, that critical reflection involves examination of both personal and professional belief systems. Hence, self-reflection is an embedded dimension of critical reflection. It focuses on examining how one's beliefs and values, and cultural conditioning impact students and their learning. This embedded dimension of self-reflection serves as a metacognitive bridge between reflective practices and personal emotions of teachers.

A significant benefit of journal keeping for students is that it enhances metacognition or reflection about action. In this sense, reflective practices can be referred to as metacognitive activities, not least because reflective tasks primarily have connotations of intertwining knowledge and practice, linking thinking and action (Karm, 2010). The concept of metacognition has gradually been extended to include anything psychological, to say nothing of anything cognitive. Having knowledge about one's own or someone else's emotions can be considered metacognitive. The recent literature on metacognition has extended its parameters by adding the emotional domain to the cognitive one in its representation (Papaleontiou-Louca, 2003). Even Flavell (1979), a major proponent of metacognition, defines the concept of metacognition as "any conscious cognitive or affective experiences that accompany and pertain to any intellectual enterprise" (p. 906).

A holistic concept of metacognition does a great service to all educators and students in the world by putting the dimension of personal emotions in the rightful place in the educational arena. Even Gardner's (1983) "Theory of Multiple Intelligence" has not been able to do so. Although it points toward the affective domain by including interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence, its emphasis is still on cognitions *about* feeling (i.e., how we *understand* others and ourselves), not specifically on emotion (Goleman, 1995). That's why the term "Emotional Intelligence" (EQ) proves so meaningful since its definition refers to the ability to use the information of emotions to guide one's thinking and actions. Thus, the metacognitive dimension of EQ is an essential element in reflective practices recognized as having the potential to be greatly emotional. While many educators might not recognize that emotions are present in critical reflection mediated by reflective journals, emotional experiences can be a positive aspect of the journal writing process (O'Connell & Dyment, 2011). This argument has been supported by a stream of research which indicate that journal keeping may benefit the writers in healthy and therapeutic ways, promoting constructive attitudinal change and behavioural growth (Moon, 2006; Sutton, Townend, & Wright, 2007).

## Method

### Participants

25 pre-service teachers of English participated in the current study. In an undergraduate course of “Teaching English to Young Learners” at a national university of Malaysia, they took a course entitled “Action Research in TESL” in which a seminar on action research was provided to help them carry out an action research project during one fourteen-week semester.

### Instruments

The instruments are three-dimensional: An open-ended questionnaire, weekly journal entries, and a final reflection paper. First, students were given an open-ended questionnaire in the first and last sessions with eight questions on action research in order to investigate the role of action research within critical teacher education. Secondly, they were asked to write their thoughts about the action research seminar, the action research project, and English classroom experiences on a weekly basis. With support for journaling such as examples of journals and prompts available, each student was encouraged to complete two journal entries each week over the 12 weeks except for the first and last week. Finally, students were asked to articulate why the course had been a significant learning experience for them in a final reflection paper, which was collected during the last week.

### Data Analysis

A qualitative methodology (Howitt & Cramer, 2011) was employed to analyze data collected from the three sources. Five broad themes of reflection emerged from the data: reflections on the reflective practices, reflections on the experiences of action research, reflections on the action research seminar, reflections on a teaching career, and reflections on personal emotions. Each of the five broad themes was made up of several sub-themes related to each other. After identifying these themes and sub-themes, the researcher read each data source again to categorize them into surface reflection, pedagogical reflection, and critical reflection respectively proposed by Larrivee (2008).

## Results

### Surface Reflection

The bulk of the student reflective journals did not focus on real reflective activities. Rather, these parts seemed to belong to descriptive writing and descriptive reflection in the four levels of reflective activities proposed by Hatton and Smith (1995). In other words, many journal entries were recognized as unreflective description of the activity they experienced in their action research seminar or interactions with their partners and classroom teachers, with no attempt at an explanation or justification. If some reflections were drawn out, they were not more or less than simple reflections on an event or activity, with an attempt to provide a possible explanation or justification for a cursory solution.

### Pedagogical Reflection

Most of the significant reflections of pre-service teachers were closely involved with the three themes, i.e. reflections on the reflective practices, reflections on the experiences of action research, and reflections on the action research seminar. They had much to do with the pedagogical reflection which considers the theories underlying approaches, and the connections between theoretical principles and practice. There

were several sub-themes under each theme, but only reflections on four prominent sub-themes are introduced here: benefits of reflection; benefits of journaling; positive experiences from action research; and the benefits of classroom discussion.

### **Benefits of reflection**

Pre-service teachers pointed out many benefits of reflection in their journals and final reflection papers. Although it was a daunting task, they began to savour the value of their own reflective practices regarding the action research seminar, action research project, and real experiences of teaching in the classroom on a regular basis. The most prominent benefits noted by them are as follows:

- Identifying the areas in which they have improved or are still weak.
- Promoting curiosity in many things related to language teaching and learning.
- Strengthening self-esteem.
- Keeping them stronger in terms of self-management.
- Inspiring them to see what things could give meaning and significance to their work or lives.
- Exploring alternative ways to solve problems by hearing their own voice alone.

### **Benefits of journaling**

Aforementioned benefits of reflection are a fruit of journal keeping practices. Pre-service teachers discovered other benefits of keeping weekly journals. First, they evaluated and improved themselves by reflecting on what they had done. Secondly, keeping journals fitted that purpose well by helping them recollect past experiences. Thirdly, some students regarded keeping journals as a “cool” job of talking to themselves. They wrote about their feeling as well as what they had learnt in the process of action research. Thus, journal writing served as a channel through which they could vent their emotions and express some ideas about someone or the behaviours of other students. Lastly, they found that the weekly journals were really helpful in acting as a guideline for action research to follow them through the last stage of writing their final reports.

### **Positive experiences from action research**

Initially the students did not have a clear view of what action research was. At the end of the seminar, however, most of them upgraded their own understanding of it. They understood that it is a reflective and evaluative process that gives deep insights and different perspectives to teachers so that they may figure out innovative solutions to the problems which happen in schools as well as improve their skills in teaching English.

As one student teacher indicated, if they had only learned the theories or various aspects of action research in a seminar class, they might not have had a clear vision on how the action research could be done in a real school setting. Many students believed that all the information pertaining to action research needs to be applied and demonstrated in real action research. The process of this action research was like their first practicum to teach their students the subject of English whereby they could get a clear view on real teaching situations and how they needed to manage the classroom.

Some pre-service teachers acknowledged the value of gaining knowledge about themselves in the process. They started off action research with the intention of understanding their students better and encouraging them to participate in the lesson, believing they could ensure successful language learning in the classroom so long as they are full of interest and actively participating in learning activities. In the process of teaching students, however, action research had great potential for gaining knowledge about the pre-service teachers themselves. A typical response of pre-service teachers to the action research process is as follows:

Before this, when I heard that I need to learn AR course this semester, I felt like “Oh, my! Why do I need to learn this? I didn’t like to learn this and I didn’t want to do research any more. It’s enough already. I have done research last semester. I don’t want to involve with this anymore.” All those thoughts came to my mind when I knew that I have to take AR course

Fortunately, after learning this course, I can say that I’m in the right path of achieving my goal I already conducted a research together with my friends and I have gained a lot of experiences that can help me and motivate me to be a teacher. The most valuable knowledge that I have gained is now I already know how to conduct a research as I got all the details about this from this course. Therefore, I can say that my goals have been achieved throughout this course (NA).

### **Benefits of classroom discussion**

It was the job of the researcher to help pre-service teachers get the knowledge of key aspects of action research such as various techniques in data collection and analysis procedures, and facilitate them in carrying out an action research project through to completion. The lecturer’s enthusiasm, beliefs, and word choices, in class may have had a great effect on pre-service teachers. Some remarked that the lecturer had inspired them to have a yearning for knowledge and to progress in their studies and research through lectures and consultations. Many students were also appreciative of the value of the action research seminar and classroom discussion. The information on the stages that they needed to consider in the process of action research gave them a clear view of what they needed to do and helped them better prepare to carry out the research.

### **Critical Reflection**

Under the section of critical reflection, two prominent sub-themes are introduced briefly: Significance of becoming a reflective teacher and reflections on personal emotions.

#### **Significance of becoming a reflective teacher**

There were several pre-service teachers who indicated the significance of becoming a reflective teacher. One pre-service teacher mentioned that she could get a new paradigm of her teaching career through the process of action research, highlighting her duty as a teacher researcher. Two memorable statements about this issue are introduced here:

Teaching is really about how a teacher put their soul into the teaching profession rather than looking at it as a burden or workload and source for monthly income (ES).

For me, good teachers are after all, themselves students, and often look for ways to expand upon their existing knowledge. A teacher must have a say in what they change their own practices (NY).

One pre-service teacher commented on the need to consistently motivate themselves. While she did research in a rural school, some teachers explained their difficulties as English teachers in a village school. They did not mention any satisfaction in teaching, but pointed out the issue of insufficient numbers of teachers in rural schools, which compelled them to carry out more tasks and have a heavier workload. She wondered what made them unenthusiastic after so many years of teaching, and she became rather alarmed by the teachers’ explanation. She hoped she would not end up like that in the years to come. That occasion was a foretaste of becoming a teacher to her and provided her with food for thought about the significant preparation of becoming a reflective teacher.

Some pre-service teachers were lucky to find exemplary teachers who could become their role models while engaged in action research. They never gave up and tried their best to ensure the students were able to acquire the language. They used approaches such as helping their students understand what they were

learning rather than forcing them to learn the language without understanding anything. All these teachers made them realize what types of teacher they should be.

### **Reflections on personal emotions**

Many pre-service teachers revealed their own emotional responses to different situations which happened during the action research. They seemed to rely on journal keeping as a major channel through which they felt free to express not only their hurt feelings or frustrations, but their renewed sense of the positive aspects of reflective practices which leads to a more mature and well-rounded character. In another stream of comments, pre-service teachers unburdened themselves of their pent-up emotions experienced in relation to feedback from seminar classes, the administration of a new curriculum, rejection from school administrators, or difficulty in finding schools. A tense atmosphere was occasionally detected in seminar classes when negative comments were made on the presentation of action research, but the pre-service teachers came to learn to give and accept feedback among themselves as a healthy practice to help to develop one another. In spite of frustrating experiences in finding schools for their action research project, they monitored their feelings of disappointment and frustration and turned them into positive ones.

Another sample of comments are related to the perception of pre-service teachers regarding the significant influence of a teacher on students. They occasionally encountered a teacher who made a lot of negative impressions on her students. As a result of her strictness and inappropriate emotional response to them, the students seemed to retain negative thoughts about their ability to learn the English language. But as time gradually wore on, they began to regain their confidence in learning the language and showed their progress. The pre-service teachers realized that their interaction with the students made significant contributions to the change manifested in their performance.

Notably, reflective practices had a great potential for building up pre-service teachers' self-esteem through the process of venting their negative emotions and putting certain situations into perspective. One student teacher mentions a unique feature of reflective practices:

For me, reflection built my self-esteem. It guides me on what is the best way when I encounter the same problems later in life. I know how to handle it in a better way of confident way. Generally keeping a journal or reflection makes me stronger day by day. I am never feeling alone in this world. It is like there is something that I can talk to. At some point, I always received thought from others saying that I'm not good enough. But I still believe in myself and only me the only one that can bring me down (KH).

### **Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

The level of reflective practices manifested by pre-service teachers in the current study is corroborated in previous studies which showed the lower levels of reflective thinking or detail or complexity (e.g., Minott, 2008). Most of their journal entries were full of unreflective description of the activity in their action research seminar or interactions with their partners and classroom teachers, with only a cursory touch of reflection. Given the value or function of reflective practice in teachers' lives, these cases do not bode well. As an essential skill of effective teachers, reflective practices enable pre-service or in-service teachers to articulate the components of their work that lead to successful outcomes, thus supporting their own professional development and their ability to develop students. It is also useful in enhancing an essential generic skill for lifelong learning (Bell, 2003).

Many pre-service teachers expressed their difficulty in the process of identifying researchable, clear and creative research questions. This situation was noted in other studies (Muschamp & Wikeley, 2002) which indicated the difficulties teachers have in identifying appropriate questions for their research. However, these difficulties were offset by the collaborative efforts of group members in the action

research process. If students work in pairs, mutually observing each other, this may encourage discussion that will help students identify, articulate and exchange ideas about their practice, and with help, devise strategies for change or development (Moran & Dallatt, 1995).

It is important for pre-service teachers to reflect on their professional identity and mission so that their optimal professional growth may occur (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). These reflections are intertwined with the target of critical reflection, the highest level of reflective practices. Critically reflective teaching happens when the paradigms or assumptions that undergird teaching and learning processes are identified and scrutinized. The most effective way to become aware of these paradigms or assumptions is to view teaching and learning practices from different perspectives: seeing how to think and work through different lenses is at the core process of reflective practice (Karm, 2010). In all of the descriptions of levels of reflection, critical reflection represents the ultimate aim (Larrivee, 2008).

Given the holistic metacognitive dimension, however, the emotional aspects of teachers and students should be another important discussion topic for critical reflection. Critical reflection not only includes observing and analyzing the ethical and social consequences of teaching, but deals with self-appraisal and self-management of cognition. The pre-service teachers regarded journal writing as a cool way of talking to themselves, and used journal entries as a channel to vent their emotional aspects and reflect on the feelings about the behaviours of other students. This cathartic experience of journal writing was also described by other researchers (Moon, 2006; Sutton, Townend, & Wright, 2007). Consequently, they could build up their self-esteem.

On the other hand, they recognized the emotional stress experienced in the process of interacting with other pre-service teachers and school teachers, but tried to figure out a way to handle these personal emotions. These elements of self-perception can serve as the foundation for actions and attitudes in the process of teaching and learning. This argument is keeping in line with one made by Goleman (1995) who spreads the concept of emotional intelligence wide among people. He claims that self-awareness of emotions, a different name for self-reflection, is the fundamental emotional competence on which others such as emotional self-control build. All the attitudinal change and behavioural growth start from the self-reflection of thoughts and feelings, the highest level of reflective practices. Teacher reflection proves pivotal to the development of a teacher as a human being as well as a professional knowledge worker. While undergoing different levels of deliberate reflection on internal thinking and emotional states as well as teaching processes, teachers get to grow in maturity in terms of becoming a professional and being a person.

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