



Exploring Pre-service English Teachers' Critical Reflection on Their Teaching Practicum Experience

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Introduction

Engaging pre-service teachers in self-reflection is one of the ways to build their professional identity in initial teacher education (ITE) programs. Through self-reflection, pre-service teachers could see the connection between theory and practice and become creators and generators of knowledge as they reflect on their teaching (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019). Previous studies show that pre-service teachers who participate in self-reflective practice and engage in self-assessment have the opportunity to shape their professional growth, self-improvement, and professional identity (Ross & Bruce, 2007). Reflection acts as a catalyst for supporting teachers in making new meanings of their prior experience and for providing them with a dialogic space for discussing and assimilating new knowledge (Davis, 2006). In education, teachers use reflective practice to reframe their understanding of a problem, a situation, or a concern they identify in educational policy and practice (Widodo & Ferdiansyah, 2018).

In the last five years, studies on self-reflection in the contexts of teacher development program, teacher professional development, and teacher education have shown consistent results. Farrell and Kennedy (2019) reported that English-medium instruction (EMI) teachers' critical reflection on their bilingual class has directed them to be effective language teachers. In the context of teacher professional development (TPD) for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers, a study by Hajar, Honan and Moni (2019) recounted that self-reflection made them more familiar with an action research process. In Vietnam, Nguyen and Bui (2016) who explored six EFL teachers' reflections on their experiences of English language learning and teaching between early 1980s and late 1990s pinpoint the negative and positive aspects of language teaching at that time informing their teaching. By adopting a phenomenological case study, Widodo and Ferdiansyah (2018) found that with the support of a more competent individual, video-mediated self-reflection produced by pre-service teachers can be a medium for their personal growth and professional development. At a US Mid-Western University, a study reported by Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman (2017) also found that reflective journals could foster teaching awareness, enhance teaching performance, and facilitate in-service teachers to be reflective teachers. Even though self-reflection has been widely used in the context of teacher professional development and teacher learning, studies on self-reflection in the context of teaching practicums were scarcely reported in Indonesia as well as in Asian contexts. To fill the gap, the present study explores what pre-service English teachers reflect on their teaching practicum and to know to which extent their critical reflections showcase their beliefs about the notion of good teaching.

Literature Review

Framed as teacher development, a teaching practicum becomes a crucial experience for pre-service teachers in developing their future teaching careers. Therefore, it is required to include a practicum or other similar terms, such as practice teaching or field experience in the curriculum of teacher education. As a school-based experience, "practicum usually involves supervised teaching, experience with the systematic observation, and gaining familiarity with a particular teaching context" (Gebhard, 2009). Teaching serves as the core of a practicum activity because it not only gives pre-service teachers direct experience of interacting with students, but also trigger other activities, such as self-observation, peer observation, and discussion. These are useful for them to acquire new understanding of themselves as teachers, their teaching philosophy and behaviors (Gebhard, 1996). In addition, classroom teaching serves as a catalyst to apply pedagogical theories learned in college of education into real teaching practice in the school context (Graham & Thornley, 2000). As argued by Cishe, Mantlana, and Nyembezi (2015, p. 163) that "[t]heory and practice are not only related, but also essential to education and teacher practice as the best theory is informed by practice and the best practice should be grounded in theory".

To examine what pre-service teachers reflect on their practicum experience, analyzing their teaching beliefs is necessary. As Richards and Lockhart (1996) theorize, "what a teacher does in the classroom is a reflection of what she/ he knows and believes, and that teacher knowledge and "teacher thinking" provide the underlying framework or schema which guides the teacher's classroom actions". Pre-service teachers' beliefs are built up gradually over time and consist of both subjective and objective dimensions. Kindsvatter, Willen, and Ishler (1988) claim that beliefs may derive from experience as language learners, best practice, personality factors, research-based and methodological-based principles. Teachers' beliefs about learning may be based on their training, their teaching experience, or may go back to their own experience as language learners (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992).

Methodology

The present study is designed as a narrative case study exploring pre-service teachers' reflections on their practicum experience and how they are connected with their beliefs about good teaching. To understand the data generated in this case study, a narrative approach was adopted because the life stories that the pre-service teachers share serves as a means of understanding their professional decisions in the classroom (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The teaching practicum program in the present study is a required course in the Department of English Education, a state university in East Java. This four-credit hour course is intended to help pre-service teachers gain English teaching skills in some partner schools. Three public schools (i.e., one vocational high school, one Islamic high school, and one middle school) were selected as social sites for data collection. In these collaborating schools, pre-service teachers are given opportunities to teach English under the supervision of a collaborating teacher and a university supervisor.

In recruiting the participants of the study, I determined two of six student teachers who voluntarily returned the consent form. Two student teachers were selected as the study participants because of their completeness of data to be analyzed. They were a male student teacher (called MST) and a female student teacher (called FST). Both of them had no experience of teaching English in school context. To gain a model of good teaching, they were assigned to observe some English classes taught by a collaborating teacher in the first week. Following it, the cooperating teacher mentored the student teachers to prepare a lesson plan and materials. For three months, student teachers had the opportunity to teach English in the real classroom minimally four times. Each meeting for English class in senior high school is equal to 2 x 45 minutes.

Data of the present study were gathered from the teaching videos, student teachers' self- reflections, their teaching beliefs, and in-depth interview. Each student teacher was required to videotape his/ her

teaching performance every time he/she was assigned to teach. Totally, there were 8 teaching videos that were recorded by MST and FST. Then, they had to carefully watch every moment in the videos to write their critical self-reflections. Their beliefs about teaching were revealed from their preferences and views about the philosophy of teaching they wrote on pieces of paper. Some of the missing points stated in the teaching beliefs and critical self-reflections were, then, followed up by conducting in-depth interviews. All the interview sessions were audio recorded, transcribed, and communicated to the research participants for gaining data credibility (Widodo, 2014).

Data about what aspects of teaching student teachers reflect on and their beliefs about teaching were analyzed using critical thematic analysis, systemic functional linguistics (SFL), and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The critical thematic analysis was used to critically identify emergent or recurring patterns or themes of findings. The outcomes of critical thematic analysis provided the basis for closer examination of the data. Both SFL and CDA are seen as both living theories and methods because both provide conceptual and analytical foundations of language in use or language in action (Widodo, 2015). In addition, both recognize what people do with language and how this action represents who they are and how they should behave.

Finding and Discussion

The results of critical thematic analysis showed that there are three categories of themes emerging from the student teachers' critical self-reflections: teachers as the facilitators of learning, ways to cope with classroom management, and role of technology in language teaching and learning (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Emerging Themes on “the Aspects of Teaching”

Emergent themes	Student teacher Sub-themes	
Teachers as the facilitators of learning	MST	Building students' motivation through language games
	FST	Creating problem-solving tasks
Ways to cope with classroom management	MST	Coping with ineffective collaborative work
	FST	Coping with more activities than available time allocation
Role of technology in language teaching and learning	MST	Using power point presentations
	FST	Using audio-visual materials from YouTube channel

Teachers as the Facilitators of Learning

Becoming the facilitators of learning is one of the crucial roles that teachers can play in teaching and learning process. In the context of English language teaching (ELT), teacher roles must be adjusted with the notion of learner-centered classroom which is conceptualized by Nunan (2004) as “one in which learners are actively involved in their own learning processes” (p. 8). Due to this, as the learning facilitators, ELT teachers must be in a position of guiding and assisting their students to learn English rather than positioning themselves as the transferrers of knowledge. With regard to the diverse needs of students, teachers have to provide multimodal learning resources, design multimodal learning tasks, and create comfortable learning atmosphere.

In the following quotes MST and FST try to facilitate students' engagement with the materials by building their motivation through language games and problem-solving tasks. MST decides to add relevant games that are not available in the textbook to create the joy of learning, whereas FST critically selects some activities due to the allotted time limit and creates activities promoting learner autonomy. The following excerpt illustrates MST's reasons for including games in his teaching.

Observing students' low motivation in the learning process that runs monotonously through textbook exercises, I am trying to give additional activity through a language game, that is guessing game when teaching a topic on descriptive text. In this guessing game, I encourage a student in each group to tell other group members in English. When a student tries to tell others about physical and personality descriptions of a famous person, others try to guess the intended person to be told using English only.

The above quote reveals that students' interest in learning goes down because the sequences of teaching blindly follow textbook learning tasks. Therefore, he decides to add guessing-game activities to give students' more opportunities to interact and collaborate with others, to use English to discuss the learning materials and to increase students' learning motivation. In this context, the guessing game offered as a solution to overcome the monotonous activities is the appropriate technique to choose because games can accommodate the diverse needs of learners with different learning styles. Through guessing games, learners with different learning styles (linguistic, tactile, auditory, visual) are given a chance to practice their English to describe persons to other group members.

In a similar vein, FST just selects several activities in the coursebook and eliminates other activities that go beyond students' level of capabilities. Besides, she also adds an activity that can promote students' thinking skills and learner autonomy. The following quotation is an excerpt taken from the student teacher's reflection.

In the first teaching experience on the topic 'congratulating others', I entirely developed the learning activities in the lesson plan through coursebook. Because some activities appear to go beyond students' levels of difficulties, my students could not finish the assignments at the end of instruction. Therefore, in the next teaching assignment, I decided not to follow all activities in the coursebook but selecting some that are suitable for their instructional level. I also create tasks that could promote students' creative, critical and problem-solving skills.

The above quote suggests that not all activities in the coursebooks suit students' needs and interests. Students' inability to complete tasks in the textbook prove that those learning tasks are indeed beyond their instructional level. Having accomplished critical reflection, FST decides to take some learning tasks in the textbook that suit students' ability level.

Ways to Cope with Classroom Management

Classroom management is central to student learning and teacher success. With the diverse needs of students, pre-service teachers must be able to manage three basic means of organizing classroom activity that includes whole-class lessons, group work, or individual work (Frykedal & Chiriac, 2014). The design of classroom management has to follow a learner-centered approach believing that "learning is an active process in which learners are active sense-makers who seek to build coherent and organized knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning together with others" (Mayer, 2004, p. 14).

The issue of 'classroom management' is another important theme emerging in the reflective journals and the teaching philosophies of pre-service teachers. The following is an excerpt taken from MST who faced problems in managing group work in English teaching and learning process.

At the beginning of teaching practicum, it takes time for me to form group work because some students reject to stay in one group with some others for many reasons. When they are working in their group, seemingly they did not work seriously to complete the learning tasks assigned to them. Another problem found is that some groups did not care about the assignments, they talked about different things during the group work. Lastly, during group work, they used the Indonesian

language for the whole time even though I repeatedly ask them to use English as frequently as possible.

The above quote illustrates that MST had difficulties in managing group work, such as students' rejection to work with other group members, unwillingness to complete group tasks, and frequent use of mother tongue in a discussion. In educational literature, group work as a teaching strategy could promote academic achievement and socialization (Baines, Blatchford, & Chowne, 2007). Therefore, ways to form a group is also a determining factor in the success of groupwork.

To create an effective group, MST applied number head together (NHT) intending to avoid students' preferences in choosing group members as well as to guarantee heterogeneity of the group. Thus, some students' rejection to join in their group can be handled by sharing with them about the benefits of group heterogeneity. Second, the students' unwillingness to participate seriously in group discussion tasks is a big challenge for the student teacher to guide them engaged in a group process. In line with this, Frykedal and Chiriac (2014) claim that in group work students not only learn to inquire, share ideas, clarify differences, and construct new understandings but also gain experience useful for their future collaborative work in a real-life situation. In the group process, English should become a medium to negotiate meanings. If most of the time they communicate in the Indonesian language, as EFL learners they will lose opportunities to practice their English in the academic context.

Another problem concerning classroom management deals with time management skills. FST fails to predict the time spent to do learning activities designed in the lesson plan with the allocated time available for each meeting. The following quotation illustrates the problem of time management experienced by FST.

I have problems with time management. I could not finish the materials targeted in the lesson plan because there are too many activities I planned to do as written in the lesson plan. I need to predict the time allocated for individual tasks, whole-class lessons, or group work assignments more accurately. Due to this, my collaborating teacher always reminds me to think about the time duration available with the numbers of activities assigned to students in each meeting. In the learning process, she frequently gives me a signal to remind me of the time for learning allocation.

In her reflection, she was aware that her desire to give more learning tasks to students was not successful because she could not finish the target materials at the end of the lesson. On account of this, most of the time the teacher reminds her to adjust some activities with the time allocation. However, for student teachers having little teaching experience, it is a big challenge to manage a successful teaching-learning process.

Role of Technology in Language Teaching and Learning

In this digital era, teachers must be skillful in using digital technologies. When variations of learning modalities are present in the learning process, students' diverse needs and learning strategies can be met. So, the key to effective teaching practice is the teachers' ability to bring together content, pedagogical, and technological knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

The role of technology in language learning is another theme appearing in reflective journals and in-depth interviews with pre-service teachers. This indicates that as professional English teachers in the future, they are aware of technological contributions in language learning. In teaching practicum context, MST considered a need to use power point transparency (PPT) to support the effectiveness of their instructional delivery when he taught a topic on "congratulating others". The target of teaching this topic is that "students of grade10th will be able to use different kinds of expressions of congratulations and how to give the appropriate responses". For example, they can appropriately express salutations for someone's

success, achievement, promotion, and anything else related to personal or group achievement. For effective delivery of the materials, he has prepared PPT containing a variety of expressions of congratulations and various ways to give responses. Having applied his presentations in the learning process, he argued that “[p]resentation through power points helps me a lot to deliver the materials chronologically”. This statement indicates his belief about the power of PPT that can help him present a chronological explanation of congratulating others.

The use of audio-visual materials is another kind of technology practiced by FST in English teaching. It is necessary for her to add video materials because students only learn the topic from the printed materials in an English textbook. By using video materials, FST expects that the students will learn various expressions of congratulations and use them appropriately in line with the context of use (in-depth interview with the FST). On YouTube websites, student teachers can select the video materials on the basis of materials authenticity, native and non-native English speakers, age appropriateness, and gender. The following is a quote taken from the journal written by FST.

When I ask my students to do a role play on a topic “congratulating others” for their job promotion, my students just use a single expression, i.e., “congratulations on your promotion”. They can add more expressions accompanying it, such as “congratulations on your promotion” and “you deserve it. That’s why I provided them with some expressions of how to congratulate other people through a video containing a conversation about congratulating others.

The above quote illustrates students' difficulties in extending the conversation in role play activity. In the role play, students were unable to use various expressions of congratulations. Consequently, they produced a monotonous expression in the role play (e.g., ‘congratulations on your promotion’). From this situation, FST had initiative to add video materials on the topic of how to congratulate other people's success as the expression model. The video materials can satisfy students' needs by providing a model of using expressions of congratulations through the recorded materials. Visualizations of the recorded materials can clarify the real context of use, while actors' voices in the recording can inspire students to produce correct pronunciations. Through the recorded materials, students are well informed with more variations of expressions of congratulations and some other expressions to extend the conversation (e.g., ‘you deserve it’).

To conclude, it appears that MST and FST care about the betterment of their teaching quality by trying to make use of their skill in using technology in teaching practicum. Their efforts to integrate technology in language learning indicate the beginning process of building professional growth as the English teachers in initial teacher education program. This confirms Mishra and Koehler (2006) claiming that “[t]eacher education programs are often seen as the key catalyst in the preparation of new teachers to integrate technology into their teaching practice” (pp. 83-84).

Conclusion

The findings indicate that critical self-reflection effectively serves as a bridge to transform theoretical knowledge acquired through coursework into practical knowledge gained through teaching practicum experience. In addition, critical self-reflection also serves as a foundation for shaping teacher professional identity. The implication is that critical self-reflection must be continually practiced by both pre-service teachers in the context of (international) teaching practicum and in-service teachers in the context of continuing professional development program. Critical self-reflection constitutes the door for initiating changes and teaching innovations grounded in personal experience. Future studies on critical reflections are recommended to be carried out in the contexts of continuing professional development program, practicum for profession education for teachers, and international practicum program. In addition, another

self-reflective tool (e.g., 'photovoice') which has been used widely in the areas of general education is also recommended to be extended in ELT research studies situated in many different EFL countries.

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