

TEACHERS' REFLECTION ON TEACHING ENGLISH AS THE REQUIRED COURSE

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Abstract

Teaching English in university setting for non-English department is many times considered to be a frustrating experience, with the teachers' complaining of the difficulties in managing the class, both because of the many classes to teach and the big number of the students in the class. This article is aimed at taking a look at how teachers are able to reflect on their own teaching in a way that they are searching within their experiences of what could be best taken by their students in learning English. This article will be focused on 18 English teachers who are asked to fill in questionnaires about their own teaching practice, the reasons behind the practice, the problems they encounter, and their goals in teaching, as well as their expectations. The results of the study show the fact that the teachers are teaching grammar as the main material though they are aware of its being ineffective, and yet they seem to be unable or unwilling to explore other options. There are also certain issues that the teachers address such as the goals of targeted competence and the abundance of available source in internet. All of the teachers share the same expectations of the possibility in teaching the English skill independently, including speaking and writing skills. However, they reluctantly think of ways to realize such expectations as they felt that they are being restricted with the design of English classes.

Keywords: teachers' reflection, teachers' exploration, teachers' expectation

Introduction

Many times, English teachers are faced with the difficulties in teaching. When asked on their difficulties in teaching English, teachers usually can come up with various answers spontaneously, among which are the students are not very clever, the teachers have many classes to teach, the departments do not give enough support for the teaching and so on. When the questions go further in details, teachers can continue without being hesitates, and many of the focus relies on things other than the teachers, or things that were felt heavier by the teachers, and such feeling mostly is in general terms.

Many teachers feel the difficulties in teaching due to factors other than themselves. By that, I do not mean to say that teachers are unqualified to teach, on the contrary, I think today we have many excellent English teachers who are trained not only to be able to communicate well in English, but also to be able to teach well, by utilizing the many sources available, such as internet and other computerized sources. What I mean by stating that it is perhaps the teachers who contribute to the difficulties in teaching is not that the teachers are not the good teachers. Rather, I would like to emphasize that perhaps teachers are not aware that they can actually improve their teaching methods. It might also be the fact that teachers are not willing to explore more on finding solutions on their problems due to the fact that they are overwhelmed with the classes that they have to teach or that it is just too confusing to start at fixing, thinking that the problems may connect in ways that it is difficult to pin point each stage.

One of the reasons for the difficulties experienced by the teachers relies on the lack of teachers' reflection on their teachings. Most of the teachers do not take steps to evaluate their teaching practice carefully, nor evaluate the impact of their teaching methods. I should emphasize on the word carefully, because I believe that many teachers have evaluated their teaching either voluntarily or designed by the school systems. Yet, when the evaluation is targeted for noting in detail of what they have done in class and recording in detail on the impact of their teaching practice, as can be referred to as teachers' reflection (Zhu, 2014), maybe not many have been done.

This research is conducted in trying to see, that when the teachers are given a chance to evaluate their own teaching practice, will it be possible for the teachers to pin point their main difficulties in teaching? Will it be possible for them to acknowledge their strength and weaknesses? Will it be possible for the teachers to see the impact of their own teaching? Will it be also possible for the teachers to picture out an ideal teaching method or to provide more appropriate materials for the students in the future?

By conducting this research, it is hoped that not only are the questions above answered, but it is also hoped that the research' result will give a better insight of what can be done by the teachers to ease their difficulties in teaching.

Defining Teachers' Reflection

Reflection as a word suggests a meaning of looking back at our own picture in a way that we will be able to see the good and the bad things we have. In the context of language learning, reflection in general is meant as a process to see, to digest every thing that has been in learning and be used in language (Brown, 2000). Reflection can be used as an effort to recognize the success of the learning and at the same time can be used to improve the learning process. Lam (2011) quoted the philosophical ideas of Dewey in progressive learning, one of which emphasizes the importance of authentic thinking. By doing authentic thinking, learners are asked to think of what they are learning (Pring, 2007). If this concept is applied on teachers, it is also possible for teachers to conduct the authentic thinking, in a way that they are asked to think of what they are teaching.

In doing "thinking of what they are teaching" teachers are prompted with the idea to see how their ways of teaching may influence their students' reaction in learning. By looking at their ways of thinking, teachers will be able to achieve the four points proposed as the benefit of doing reflective thinking: those are to name a problem, to analyze the problem, to find solution to the problem, and to put the solution into practice (Lam, 2011).

Teachers' reflection can be conducted in various ways. Teachers may be asked to write journal diary to note on any necessary information on their teaching practice within the classroom discourse (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007). In doing so, teachers are welcome to write any notion, without thinking of whether such information is considered to be important or not. Later on when all of the information has been compiled, it will be easier for the teachers to make use any information which relates directly or indirectly with the problems they encounter in teaching. Another way in doing reflective thinking, teachers may also be given or create notes as the guidelines of their reflection in teaching practice (Laboskey, 1993). This note serves as the tool for the teachers to be aware of what they are doing in class, to help them see that there could be many factors – including the teachers themselves – causing problems in teaching.

Research Methods

The research is conducted by asking 18 English teachers to participate. The teachers are teachers in English Department, Diponegoro University (UNDIP), whose main tasks are teaching English Department's students. However, they also teach classes in other departments, in non-English Departments. It is the setting of teaching English for non-English Department that is used as the setting for taking the data in this research. The teachers are 5 male and 13 female teachers. However, the number is only to acknowledge that the teachers are both males and females, but in the analysis, I do not put any distinction because I find that gender is not factor contributing to the unwillingness to practice reflective thinking, given that all of the materials needed for reflective are given.

The data are taken from the questionnaire which must be filled by the teachers throughout the semester. The questionnaire is targeted to collect information for describing the teachers' teaching practice. It will cover the questions on whether teachers encounter difficulties in teaching and they will be led to see what could be the main factor causing such difficulties. In finding the difficulties, the teachers are directed toward their own teaching practice, hence they will also be able to see that perhaps the problems are not only caused by their students. For examples, if the teachers find that the students are not motivated to learn, the teachers are asked to see whether it is their teaching method or their materials that may contribute in creating unmotivated environment. Besides asking to describe the teachers' teaching practice, the questionnaire also asks the teachers to describe the teachers' reasons behind choosing certain methods and materials for their teaching. The teachers are also asked about their expectations and goals in teaching and what can be the hindrance in achieving those expectations and goals.

Teaching English in non-English Department at UNDIP

Since there are three minors in English Department, UNDIP, linguistics, literature, and American Cultural Studies, these teachers are also specialized in teaching subjects within each of those minors. Therefore, in English Department only, they do have responsibilities in teaching and conducting research and community service. The classes taught by each teacher in English Department range from 3 to 4 classes of once a week meeting of 100 minutes for each class. Furthermore, the teachers are also actively involved in department activities, such as holding seminar or workshop, and attending them as well, and also other works designed by the department.

In addition, the teachers are also asked to teach English for non-English Department students. In each semester, the department receives nearly 70 classes of English for non-English Department, therefore, each

teacher may be asked to teach 2 or 3 classes in average, extra classes, of English for non-English Departments' students. However, the number of classes taught by the teachers is not distributed evenly. Some teachers teach only 1 extra class, but some others may teach more than 3 classes. In such condition, some teachers may have more than 8 classes to teach each semester. Along with other works in the department, some teachers indeed feel overwhelmed with the many works that must be accomplished.

Description of the English Teaching

a. The teaching materials

In teaching in non-English Department, most of the time teachers are free to design their own course outlines. There is usually very little communication between the department and the teachers in setting up for the goals of the class (only 18% of the whole departments communicate their goals in offering English class to English teacher). In other words, the departments may have no exact expectations of what should be achieved in offering English course, except that the course is one of the basic general required courses that must be offered to all students regardless of their major.

Because teachers do not have to fulfill any goals demanded by the department, teachers may decide their own course outline based on what they considers important or based on what makes it easy for them. 95% of the teachers consider that they need to make more appropriate course outline because the existing course outline, the one that comes along with the English for University Teaching handbook, is considered not suitable for the students. The same percentage, 95% of the teachers also considered that teaching English is difficult because they do not find easy materials that are suitable with what they want. Because of that difficulty, they tend to rely on what is easily available for them, some teachers use the English for University Teaching, the handbook written by some teachers from English Department Undip and has been used to teach English for many years, and some others, for the convenience, use the materials that they have used earlier for other classes.

English for University Teaching handbook is quite complete, actually. It consists of exercises in reading, grammar, and writing. However, the reading topic is in general, and most of the exercises in grammar and writing are more focused on sentence patterns and tend to be simpler for university level. Most teachers claim that they are bored in using that same book again and again every year. Even so, some teachers still use it again.

Other materials mostly use in English classes are reading material (33%) and grammar exercises (34%). The reasons behind the use of such materials are mostly due to its easiness; it is quite easy to find reading and grammar exercises compare to finding materials which focuses on other areas/skills. Some of the teachers are trying to use reading materials that are familiar with the students, as they are taken from the students' own major field, claiming that at least they are trying to teach English for Specific Purposes, although they understand that the real English for Specific Purposes needs a lot more materials to cover.

b. The teaching method

The method in teaching English still relies heavily on grammar translation methods by focusing on the teaching of subjugations or subject – verb agreements. There are many reasons behind the application of such method in teaching. One of the reasons is due to the fact that they use English for University teaching handbook, which focuses more grammar teaching, as the reference. Many teachers claims of the convenience in using only that book in the class, because the materials are already in the book, and students can have easy access to the book. Besides, with the many classes they have to teach, having handy book that they can use easily throughout the semester is surely helpful. Since the grammar is still become the focus of the materials, the teachers are also led to teach grammar.

The other reason in leading the teachers to teach in grammar translation method is related with the big number of the students in the class. 82% of the teachers say that they teach more than 50 students in a class. With such number of students, it is understandable that the chance to use other method is limited. For teaching with communicative method, for example, teachers need to make sure that the materials could involve all of the students, and with 50 students, and more, it will be difficult for the teachers to involve all of them.

37% of the teachers state that they encounter difficulties in teaching English for non-English department because the students have only little motivation to learn and that they have different level of English competence. Some teachers evaluate their students' reluctance to involve actively in the class as the sign of low motivation. Considering that English is the basic required course, and not the students' main targeted competence, the teachers may view that the students do not feel the need to master the skills taught in the class, and therefore feel less motivated, especially when the materials taught is not an easy one. It is difficult for teachers sometimes to find materials that will fit all of the students need and competence. Teachers many times are baffled with the facts that there are some very good students in a class, and yet there

are many others who only know English very little. With the various level of competence, teachers need to think of many ways to provide materials and ranges of activities that will be able to address the need of every student. Because of that fact, the teachers find themselves easy to teach in grammar translation method, because they may be able to deliver the lessons in a range suited with students' ability.

The competence targeted in English Teaching

Often times, in offering the course, the departments do not have particular goals aimed as the targeted competence, nor they communicate it with the teachers. Thus, teachers start teaching with the knowledge that it is up to them to decide the goals or the targeted competence. Because of that, the competence targeted in teaching English is also various, although the classes are set up as parallel classes.

Many teachers do not have clear goals in deciding the target of competence. In fact only 3% allocate time to design the course outline. The others state that they are just focusing on weekly materials, and mention that it is hard for them to think of the whole materials throughout the semester due to time constraint and the many class to prepare. The same percentage, that is only 3% of the teachers need to adjust the lessons with the main competence of the students' field; that is to teach English for Academic Purposes. With this goal of competence, teachers are directed to provide students with the exercises to use English for their academic activities, such as to read and write within the academic context or to listen and to take note (Master and Brinton, 1998). In that way, teachers need to learn as well the major of competence students learn, so that they can initiate the discussion and encourage students' involvement. Such materials are also considered difficult for the students; that is way not many teachers are willing to work more on that purpose.

Because teachers do not have certain goals of targeted competence, many teachers set their focus on teaching grammar with the purpose to correct students' sentences. As such, the model of their evaluation is also heavily relied on grammar. Many teachers complain of the difficulties experienced by the students in understanding correct English grammar. Their test scores mostly are not satisfying. In one way, teachers complain that the test questions are easy, targeted only on checking the subjugation in English, and yet students make a lot of mistakes in answering accurately. In another way, students may find it hard to answer accurately because the type of questions are focused entirely on grammar *per se* and not necessarily the ones used for the communication or reading comprehension – the types of 'English' they encounter more through the media they viewed or listened, or through their readings in their field.

Every student, regardless their major, is required to have TOEFL test score. The scores range from 400 – 500 depending on students' major (Wulandari, 2015). Although every student must have TOEFL score, 55% of the teachers view the need to teach TOEFL type of exercises negatively. They consider that TOEFL score is not important to support the students' main competence since not all of them will continue pursuing higher education either here, in Indonesia, or in English speaking countries. There are better test scores needed by the students such as TOEIC. The negative view toward the need for TOEFL score leads the teachers to view that TOEFL score is not relevant with English subject. There are many reasons behind this view. Teachers feel reluctant to teach TOEFL type of exercises because TOEFL type of exercises is a difficult material to learn and that it is difficult to master it only within a semester. Besides, they argue that English class is designed for general English and it is not necessarily TOEFL based. The departments itself never ask the teachers to specifically teach TOEFL type of exercises; and this adds to reasons for teachers not to dwell more on such exercises.

Exploration, Problems and Expectation in Teaching English

Teaching English for non-English departments can be enjoyable as well. Many teachers have positive view in teaching English for non-English department, even in giving the materials which emphasize the skills other than grammar such as speaking and writing. Some teachers may enjoy teaching English for non-English departments due to several reasons. Teachers may experience a different type of teaching other than the subjects they taught in English department which mostly segmented on certain skill, such as writing, or speaking only for the whole semester. Because they have a chance to teach different type of exercises, teachers may respond the teaching practice more enthusiastically.

Another positive view stated by the teachers is the possibility for the teachers to arrange materials in accordance with what is consider important. 64% of the teachers state that it is possible to teach speaking in English classes, though only half of them really conduct the lessons. For those who indeed follow through with the plan to teach speaking find it enjoyable because students are enthusiastic as well. It is true that in speaking activities, especially when there is a big number of students in a class, it is very difficult to involve all students to speak, and mostly only those who are already good in English who dare to speak. However, the teachers argue that by teaching speaking they can get two benefits. First, it will give more motivation to the students because by giving speaking activities there will be variation in teaching method, and that mostly speaking activities are conducted in a more relaxed environment where students do not feel the tense to learn

English. Second, by giving speaking activities, the teachers give more challenging activities so that students can really apply what they have learnt so far.

73% of the teachers also consider it possible to teach writing in English for non-English department students. The teachers teach writing with the believe that although it is difficult for the teachers to provide equal feed back for the students, it is important to give students more challenging exercise, in which students are not only able to apply what they have learnt but also to help students to strengthen their understanding in using grammar rules (Harmer, 2001).

The main problem in teaching English for non-English department students is the big number of students in a class. All teachers state that such numbers are not ideal for teaching ideal English, in which the students can learn all different skills and have an equal chance to involve actively in the class. All teachers agree that with the number of the students it is really hard to teach speaking – to give equal chance for the students to involve, and to teach writing – to give equal feed back for all of the students. To resolve the problem teachers come up with many ideas, among others are to give a project task, in which the students are asked to write an essay in English in a group and to present them before the class. In that ways, students can have collaborative works with their peer, and teachers have less work in giving feedback. They also mention about giving the guided writing, in which students are asked to write sentence based exercises and gradually the level of difficulty is increased into paragraph based exercise.

The other problem in teaching English for non-English students is the time constraint - that is students are only offered the course for one semester only. In addition to the big number of the students in a class, many teachers think that only one semester of English is not ample for the teacher to design a course sufficient for the students to learn either English for Specific Purposes or English for Academic Purposes. However, with the abundance of internet sources available for the students to learn independently, such problems may be eased by giving access for the students to those sources.

In the future teachers expect that the main problems in teaching English will be solved. Almost all of the teachers mention that they want the class size to be reduced into the ideal numbers of 25 – 30 students in a class. They argue that such numbers are the ideal numbers for an English class; hence the teachers may be able to provide students with various materials focusing on all of the four skills and with various teaching methods.

Conclusion

Most teachers teaching English for non-English department in general experience difficulties in teaching English due to their reluctance to evaluate their teaching practice carefully and tend to blame factors other than themselves when the problems occur. However, when they are willing to take a look at their own teaching practice, they are able to explore their teaching practice and are able to pin point and evaluate their teaching materials, their teaching methods, and also their goals in achieving the targeted competence. By doing such evaluation, the teachers will be able to realize the actual problems they encountered. By acknowledging the actual problems they will be able to see that their teaching methods and materials may also contribute to the lack of motivation students have in learning. They are able to pin point that their focus of teaching so far has been driven by the fact that they need to prepare teaching materials which are easy and readily available, and in doing so they may ignore their student needs for better materials which would suit them better.

By doing the reflection, teachers are also able to explore on the situation which encourage them to teach better (Farrell, 2007), they will also be able to detect their main problems in teaching and think of solutions for those problems.

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