

## FOSTERING PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' COGNITION IN EFL TEACHING PRACTICUM THROUGH REFLECTIVE TEACHING

Yenni Rozimela

Yuli Tiarina

Universitas Negeri Padang

y\_mela@yahoo.com

### Abstract

This article presents a partial result of a study conducted to look at the implementation of reflective teaching to improve the prospective teachers' teaching skill in teaching EFL. The focus reported here is their self-reflection which unveils their cognition of teaching English. Twelve prospective teachers taking teaching practicum subject at five junior high schools in Padang were involved. They were required to write the results of their reflection after each teaching presentation in their journals. A focus group interview was then conducted to find out the reasons behind their self-evaluation and their view about the interconnectedness between what they had learned about teaching and what they experienced in the field. The results of the analysis of these two sets of data revealed that the prospective teachers' reflection was dominated by their difficulties dealing with classroom management. Thus, they did not really give sufficient attention to other aspects of teaching of which they had strengths and weaknesses. In the interview it was found that they were aware of their strengths and weaknesses of other aspects of teaching, but they thought that their instructional plans were profoundly influenced by their classroom management. An essential conclusion to draw is that prospective teachers should be provided with theory, strategies, and tips with regards to classroom management.

**Key words:** prospective teachers, reflective teaching, cognition

### Introduction

Teaching practicum or field practice is a common program intended to facilitate prospective teachers to exercise their knowledge of teaching and some skills they have gained in methods- related subjects and Micro/Peer Teaching. This program gives the prospective teachers real experiences as they teach students at schools in a real context. Prospective teachers are guided by their supervisor and cooperating teachers.

At the site where this study is being conducted, the student-teachers have to take the teaching Practicum subject after they pass the Micro Teaching subject. They are placed at a junior or senior high school for a semester (around 4 months). At schools they are guided by cooperating teachers, and they are also encouraged to consult their lecturers who are also responsible to supervise their students teaching as many times as they can. With considerably sufficient prior knowledge and the guidance of the supervisor and the cooperating teacher, the student-teachers are expected to be able to teach well. In reality, however, for prospective and new teachers it is known that teaching at schools is a complex business- interesting, challenging, but also difficult. Some prospective teachers may look forward to trying their skills of teaching in the real context. Some others may feel nervous and think that they will face difficulties.

To help them learn from their weaknesses, prospective teachers should reflect upon their teaching properly. Hopkins (2008) emphasizes the importance of the ability to reflect upon one's teaching systematically and to learn a lesson from the reflection. Through reflection they are made to look back what they and their students have done in the process of teaching and learning, and then assess what worked and what did not and why. This leads to attempts to understanding and awareness of strengths and weaknesses of teaching. This practice is called as reflective teaching.

A number of studies reveal the benefits of reflective teaching. Cornford (2002) reported that trainee teachers and lecturers responded positively toward the use of self-reflection because it improved their teaching performance. Reflective teaching was also reported as an effective way to develop teachers' professionalism throughout their career by Cirocki et al.(2014) and Farrell (2007). The use portfolios in reflective teaching also provided benefits in developing student-teachers' critical learning, modes of inquiry, and knowledge and value sharing (Rearick in Ferraro, 2000). A study on implementing conducted by Rozimela and Tiarina (2014) revealed that reflective teaching in micro/peer teaching improve student-teachers' teaching skills and unveil their concerns in teaching EFL. However, Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (in Thomas et.al, 2015) state that reflective teaching does not get attention even though it is accepted internationally as part of professional competency of teachers.

This study looks at the implementation of reflective teaching by a number of prospective teachers teaching at junior high school. It is intended to help the prospective teachers improve their teaching skills in real context where adaptation is highly demanded. The result reported here as highlighted in the abstract above is partial since the study is still in progress.

#### Teacher Cognition and Reflective Teaching

Professional teachers are developed through schooling, trainings/workshops, and self-continuous attempts for improvement. These shape personal philosophies of teaching. According to Richards in Li (2015): "teachers have their personal philosophies or maxims of teaching. These maxims are composed of teachers' belief systems which involve "the information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions about teaching and learning over time" (p. 66). Teachers should have cognition on their belief system, so that they keep developing their competency of teaching.

Borg refers to teacher cognition to "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching- what teachers know, believe, and think (2003:81)". Drawing on work of some researchers Borg suggests that teachers' experiences as learners can inform their cognitions about teaching and learning: "professional preparation programmes which ignore trainee teachers' prior beliefs may be less effective at influencing these". Borg depicts a schematic conceptualisation of teaching within which teacher cognition plays a role in teachers' teaching. Four major components include schooling, professional coursework, contextual factors, and classroom practice. These four components shape teachers' beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, assumptions, conceptions, perspectives, and metaphors about teaching, teachers, learning, and curriculum, which in turn lead to their cognition.

Li (2015) observes the fact indicating that teacher cognition is mainly studied at individual level. The social level of teacher cognition, however, is neglected. The first refers to the study on the study of a teacher's activity within a social context, and the latter is the study of "the process of internalization and externalization (2). Woods (in Li, 2015) developed a cognitive model to study teacher cognition. The model has three key elements: 1) the classroom events/actions, 2) the planning preceding the actions, and 3) the understanding or interpretation that follows the actions. Thus, Li argues that it is essential to study teacher cognition in that "teachers' knowledge and beliefs are evolving with their participation in the activities in the teaching communities and the interaction with other members. Teaching practice in micro teaching and teaching practicum is teaching in a community where people composed of prospective or student-teachers, supervisors, and cooperating teachers and administrators.

A strategy to foster teacher cognition is reflective teaching. Reflective teaching is a process through which we "gain awareness of our teaching beliefs and practices" and to learn "to see teaching differently" (Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999: 4). It is a "process of reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience (Rodgers, 2002:848)". Pisapia (2009) says that it refers to an ability to draw a conclusion about the past and make use the information gained from the experience to plan future actions. It requires ability to use perceptions, experience, and information to draw conclusions about the past (Pisapia, 2009; Cirocki et al., 2014). Rodgers (2002) argues that interpretations are dependent on the person's preferences, desires, and his passion. These factors are reciprocally influenced by experiences which include direct teaching experiences, experiences of observing others' teaching, and experiences gained through studying and reading theories about teaching.

Reflective teaching should be done on a regular basis, so that a teacher keeps improving his/her teaching. Cirocki et al. (2014:27) advocate for the use of regular reflection as "it is planned, active, persistent, and heightens a teacher's focus on problem-posing in their classrooms". For prospective teachers reflective practice not only raises their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses as a basis for improvement (Bailey, 2006; Richards and Lockhart, 1996) but also builds a strategy for professional development (Blank, 2009). Murphy (2001) mentions that reflective teaching expands teachers' understanding of teaching-learning process, their repertoire of strategic options as a language teacher, and enhances the quality of learning opportunities. Experiencing various teaching contexts with a wide range of ups and downs stories certainly expand teachers' strategic options they can apply appropriately to improve the quality of their teaching outcomes. If reflective teaching is done on irregular basis or "rapid reflection", the results are temporarily and are often not followed up (Bailey, 2006:329).

Zichner and Liston (in Bailey, 2006) outline five dimensions of reflective teaching suggested which are categorized into reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The first category includes rapid reflection (automatic and instantaneous) and repair dimensions (online decision making). The second covers review, research, and retheorizing and reformulating dimensions. These three dimensions occur after or before teaching. As for 'review' a teacher thinks and writes about his/her teaching-related work. Research refers to systematic thinking and observation to collect data over time; the teacher collects the data of his/her teaching

and gives some thought of the 'how' and 'why' of the data. Then, the teacher makes connections between his/her work and the work of other professionals, rethorizing and reformulating dimension.

Murphy (2001) suggests several tools for reflective teaching. The tools can be categorized into three groups, formative feedback from learners, formative feedback from other teachers, and self-generated sources of information. In each category there are some alternative instruments. For instance, questionnaires, interview, or even dialogue journals can be used to obtain feedback from learners. Field notes and observation are commonly used to get feedback from other teachers or cooperating teachers and supervisors. Retrospective field notes, video recording, and stimulus recall are used as self-generated sources. Murphy states that by combining two or more three tools, a teacher can get comprehensive information about his/her teaching. A combination of some tools was employed in research about reflective teaching/practice (e.g. Farrell, 1998; Cirocki et al., 2013; Rozimela and Tiarina, 2014). Thus, this current study used a combination of some instruments suggested by those writers.

#### Method

This is a descriptive study employing qualitative approach. The study was conducted with twelve prospective teachers who were taking Teaching Practicum course unit at the second semester of 2014/2015 academic year. They taught at four different junior high schools in Padang, West Sumatera. They taught in accordance with the schedule set up by the schools.

The data were collected through journals written by the participants (henceforth prospective teachers), observation notes by the researchers and the cooperating teachers, and interview conducted with the prospective teachers and the cooperating teaching. The prospective teachers were told to write the results of their reflection based on what they thought they did successfully (well), what they did not do well, and what they thought they had to do to improve their next teaching performance. The researchers observed each prospective teacher teaching three times. Their teaching presentations were video-recorded to support the observation notes. Right after teaching each prospective teacher was required to express his/her opinions about his/her opinion his/her teaching presentation orally to the cooperating teachers and the researchers. They also received feedback from the cooperating teachers and the researchers. At home the student-teachers were assigned to reflect upon their teaching and recorded the result of their reflection in a journal. The prospective teachers were interviewed after the first visit of the researchers (considered as the first cycle), and after the second visit. Interviews will also be conducted with the prospective teachers and the cooperating teachers by the end of the program implementation. The data obtained through these instruments were analyzed qualitatively and the results of the analysis were described as they were.

#### Findings

The findings of this study are presented based on the themes that emerged in the observation, journals, and interview. They are arranged based on the intensity of the difficulties and problems faced by the prospective teachers, and they also showed how reflective teaching helped the prospective teachers raise their cognition and to overcome the problems.

##### *Classroom management*

Classroom management was the utmost teaching aspect the prospective teachers were concerned with in their journals and in the interview. Their opinions were supported by the observation notes by the supervisors (i.e. the researchers). Eight of them (75%) wrote in the earlier notes of their journals of that they had serious classroom management problems. It was very difficult for them to make their students follow their instructions and paid attention to the lesson. Sometimes they stated that the students refused overtly to follow what was instructed to them to do. Four students did not comment on classroom management.

The result of the first observation did suggest that the prospective teachers had classroom management problems. Apart from the fact, also reinforced by the cooperating teachers, that many students were disobedient, the prospective teachers seemed to have no idea or strategy how to handle such disorder. Among the problems included not stopping the students from making noise, neglecting the students who did other activities such as chatting with friends, neglecting those who did not seem to be interested with the lesson, and not checking the students' participation in group discussion. Thus, the objectives were not reached. Despite that, four prospective teachers (25%) could be considered as not having big problems dealing with classroom management. Generally their students behaved well and followed their instruction. One of the prospective teacher was a high achiever in her class and coincidentally taught at an accelerated class whose students were known to be discipline and had no behaviour problems. Two prospective teachers taught at one of favourite schools in town where most of the students were good. The other one was also lucky to have a class of good students.

At the discussions between the researcher and each prospective teacher and cooperating teacher of the first visit, the prospective teacher was required to articulate her/his opinion about her/his teaching, and

got some feedback from the cooperating teacher and the researcher. She/he was suggested to do further reflection at home and write in the her/his journal, and find out some ways of how to overcome the problems in the next teaching presentation.

Their notes in their journals of the second cycle of teaching showed their concern of classroom management persisted. Yet, they also reported they felt they had some progress in handling problems dealing students' misbehaviour. In the interview they stated that they became confident, and thus were 'brave' enough to take action to stop their students from doing disruptive activities. Interestingly, one of the prospective teacher said that she thought hard how to handle the students in her reflection and found a strategy that she believed effective. She discussed with the students how they would like to study English, and the students would like the classroom to be arranged. That strategy worked well.

The observation affirmed the notes in the journals and the results of the interview. The researchers observed the prospective teachers' progress in handling the classroom was not merely caused by an increase of their confidence, but also by other factors such as improved techniques of teaching and instructional media. In fact, a prospective teacher used activities that involved her students both physically and mentally such as arranging scrambled sentences into a good paragraph and then reporting it orally in front of their peers. This activity made the students focus on doing the task, and thus reduced the level of misbehaviour.

### Executing plans

Reflective teaching helped the prospective teachers improve the way they executed the plans they had written in their lesson plans. At the first cycle it was found that most of them (17%) did not apply completely as the plans or did not write what they thought they would like to do either.

From their journals it was found that the prospective teachers were aware of their problems. Four of them commented on some activities that they forgot to do, four wrote about the misarrangement of the planned activities, two wrote that they did not do what they meant to do, and the two others stated that they thought some activities were not interesting. These comments indicate that the prospective teachers were aware of their problems.

The observation notes of the researchers showed that the prospective teachers had various problems in delivering the lessons. Among the problems included lack of interactive activities, monotonous and boring activities, and too-theory oriented activities. When corroborated with their lesson plans, what they wrote in their journals was evident. They did not really do what they had planned.

In the interview, we asked questions in accordance the problems faced by each prospective teacher: why they did not teach as they planned, why they did not write what they thought, and why they did not write their plans in detail. They had several reasons. Firstly, they did not understand why; they thought it was probably because of being nervous. Secondly, they forgot to do certain activities because they were distracted by the students' behaviour, unexpected students' responses, and limited time available. Last, they thought they did not have to write the activities in detail. Unfortunately, as they stated, they forgot to do what they had had in mind.

At the second cycle, there was promising improvement. Based on the analysis of their journals it was found that the prospective comments on the discrepancy between their plans and the realization was as extensive as those at the first cycle. Most of them claimed that they could execute their plans better. Only two of them who still wrote that they did not do a few activities as what and how they planned. In spite of that, almost all of them (94%) stated that they still felt unsatisfied with the way they executed the plans. They could feel some flaws such as problems dealing activating the students, making the students participate, and time division of the activities.

The result of observation revealed that the prospective teachers' difficulties in manifesting their plans decreased, indeed. They taught as what they planned. Unfortunately, some of them were not quite successful in carrying out some activities. For instance, they wrote that they would guide their students to understand a text through question and answer techniques. Yet, what they did was only asking questions, and then requiring the students to answer the questions. When a question could not be answered they provided the answer. This means that guidance was not realized properly.

In the interview, they felt they had done better and felt more confident. The fact that they still had many problems in realizing the plans was mostly due their persistent matters dealing with the students. Eight of them (67%) stated that their difficulties of running some activities were resulted from the students' low participation, attention, and motivation. In the end, they thought those problems were due and closely related with classroom management matters.

### Using English

It has been an inherently agreed requirement that a teacher teaches English is expected to use English as much as possible. Prospective teachers are usually suggested to use English as a means of communication

when the teach English because their English is one of input and model that their students should pick. This is also emphasized to student-teachers before they go to the field. However, in the field the prospective teachers had difficulties to apply this principle. Reflective teaching, fortunately, could reduce the problems to some extent.

In the journal, eleven prospective teachers (94%) did not write anything related to their difficulties of using English in the classroom. One of them, however, wrote that he could not use English in the classroom as his students did not understand and requested him to speak Indonesian language.

The result of the observation showed that two prospective teacher used English quite much (more than Indonesian language), three mixed English and Indonesian in balance, and the rest used Indonesian dominantly. It seemed to us this was caused by their students' low English ability, and the teachers' lack of strategies and persistence or patience. When the prospective teachers used English, the students were confused, began making noise, and yelled for Indonesian language. Some of them then mixed with Indonesian, while the other: quickly turned to Indonesian language. To illustrate, when their students asked for the meaning of certain words, they instructed the students to consult their dictionary directly. There was almost no effort to use any strategy such as giving synonym or brief explanation, or demonstration through which they still could keep using English.

In the interview, the prospective teachers had some different answers about why they tended to use Indonesian. Except the two who dominantly used English, they actually wanted to use English, yet their students did not understand and 'asked' them to use Indonesian. Besides, when they used Indonesian their classroom management problems became bigger because the students did not pay attention, did not do what they instructed the students to do, thus they could not teach. Accordingly, they decided to use Indonesian. Before the commencement of the second cycle, they were pushed to do reflection profoundly and think alternative strategies to enable them use English as the classroom language.

In their journals, the prospective teachers did not write specifically about the use of English. Most of their comments were related to their opinions about the teaching aspects that they felt they did better and those they were still not satisfied with such as the teaching techniques and the classroom management. Despite that, some of their expressions implicitly revealed that they had some thought of how to reduce the use of Indonesian. For example, one of them said that she used pictures of objects of new words. She felt glad as she did not use Indonesian to translate the words into Indonesian.

The observation notes of the researchers revealed that all of them attempted to increase the use of English even though some still seemed to have big difficulty. They did try to give simple instructions and question in English. Whenever the students seemed to have problems they switched into Indonesian. They also used pictures as media to reduce translation. Sometimes, unfortunately, they used English dan translated into Indonesian straight away, which did not motivate the students to try to understand English.

In the interview, most of them claimed that in their reflection they thought about how to minimize the use of Indonesian in their teaching. Interestingly, one of them said that she told the students that she discussed with them how they would like the class to be conducted and arranged as far the students practiced English. She promised that she would use simple English and would use Indonesian only if it was very important. She made the class rules, and motivated their students use English. She argued that that strategy worked. In fact, the students did not complain and began using English.

Thus, it may concluded that reflective practice made the prospective teachers aware of that they need have strategies to make English as the classroom language. It also made them aware that of the importance of motivating students through persuasive way and negotiated rules to realize the intention to use English.

#### Discussion

A partial result described above reveals that reflective teaching is a promising strategy to help prospective teachers understand their difficulties and problems, which become a point of departure for improvement. In fact, the results of their reflection written in their journals and their answers in the interviews show that they were challenged to find ways to improve their teaching performance. This is resulted from the process of reflection through which prospective teachers develop their reflective and critical teaching (Keyes, 2000; Zeichner, 2003; Rust, 2007). The result is in line with a number of previous studies (Ferraro, 2000; Cornford, 2002; Farrell, 2007; Rozimela, 2013 and 2015). A study conducted by Kettle and Sellars (cited in Ferraro, 2000) which showed that peer reflective groups enabled student-teachers to relate existing theories and their own perception and views of teaching. Rozimela (2013) also states that reflective teaching increased the student-teachers' teaching skills and it could reveal the student-teachers' concerns in EFL teaching, which can be used as a basis to assist them to improve their teaching and input for teaching English programs (2014).

The result also indicates that the most problematic factor faced by the prospective teachers is classroom management. Apparently this affects the prospective teachers in many ways. Some of the activities they had planned could not be executed well. For example, they had problems in making the students work

in groups, inviting the students to participate, and making them pay attention. At the beginning the prospective teachers seemed to be unable to control the class. Johnson in Stronge (2007) states that inexperienced teachers are often unable to control a class. All teachers in his survey said that they faced a big challenge classroom management and agreed that classroom management was vital. Through reflective teaching these problems decreased. They were challenged to find solutions. Some of the strategies included what Emmer and Everston suggest in their book "classroom management" (2009). They were setting classroom rules and procedures, monitoring students working in group, redirecting behaviour, and creating attention-grabbing activities and media.

The next aspect of which reflective teaching helps the prospective teachers is executing their lesson plan and their plan in mind. The former refers to what teaching and learning activities they wrote in their lesson plan, and the latter means the detailed activities they did not write but would be done, and how to do the activities. At the first cycle most of the prospective teachers had a big problem to do what they knew and planned to do. This fact affirms a evidence-based conclusion stating that transferring knowledge into practice is difficult for teachers, especially the inexperienced ones (Rozimela, 2015). Bailey (2006) states: "novice teachers may have credible knowledge. However, they may lack the skills for working with real language teaching". Reflective activities through which they enhanced their understanding about their knowledge and their conceptual insights enabled them to make some progress. Among the improvement made were planning the activities in detail, arranging the activities well, preparing some extra activities, using more interesting media, and anticipating unexpected situations such as blackout when planning to use multimedia. Improvement in the teaching activities also affects classroom management positively.

Overall, it could be said that reflective teaching fosters teacher cognition. The result of this study shows that prospective teachers were challenged to raise their awareness about their knowledge and assumptions of teaching or their cognition and to develop their competence to respond to the reality of teaching in the field by making use their knowledge and skills and enhancing and refining them through reflective teaching.

#### Conclusion

It is obvious that reflective teaching can help prospective teachers raise their awareness about the discrepancy between what they know and assume with what they encounter in the real context of teaching. For the prospective teachers who were involved in this study, classroom management was an aspect that challenged them a lot and demanded them to exercise their skills of putting their theoretical knowledge into practice. Reflective teaching also made them aware of the importance of being explicit and precise in planning their teaching and writing their plan in their lesson plan. The result of this study also implies that the English teaching program should give some attention of providing student-teachers with strategies dealing with classroom management. More emphasis on models and modeling how to put knowledge into practice in respective courses such as TEFL and Micro Teaching is needed. To scaffold student-teachers to teach effectively, reflective teaching should be done continually; it empowers them to develop their teaching skills.

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