
CAN REFLECTION ENABLE TEACHERS TO PROVIDE A MORE HUMANE LEARNING PROCESS?

Reza Pahlevi¹ Lena Nurfadillah² Nurhadianty Rahayu³ Dian Ikawati⁴

¹Expedia Group

²³Universitas La Tansa Mashiro

⁴STAI Wasilatul Falah

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring the practice of teachers' reflection as a potential medium to disentangle the rigid teaching and learning interactions where teachers take control or dominate learning discourses. Utilizing the qualitative method of narrative inquiry, this study offers insight into how teachers' reflective practices can set the ground for more humane pedagogic practices for students to express their voices in learning. The stories from two teachers and a student contribute to a deeper understanding of how the simple acts of reflection can deconstruct the rigid teachers-learners interactions and create opportunities for a more collaborative and equal position of knowledge-sharing practices between teachers and learners.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of reflection is predominant in teacher professional development. Through this paramount activity, researchers/teachers utilize reflective discussions as a means to provide insight and criticism on what has and has not been done in their teaching practices. Teachers who actively reflect in and on their teaching to develop “more informed practice”, attempt for the explicitness and visibility of practical knowledge, which then leads to “new ways of knowing and articulating” (Crandall, 2000, p. 40). In contrast with that perspective, teachers who do not reflect upon their practices “will be likely to teach as they were taught and, thus, ineffective teaching strategies...will be replicated” (Braun and Crumpler, 2004, p.61). Akbari (2007) points out that reflective teaching in ELT has risen as a consequence of the post-method debate (Prabhu, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

In the context of the study, the teachers find it frustrating to meet the learning objectives while facilitating students’ learning problems. It is hence important to trace back on what worked and what did not when implementing teaching methods and facilitating students’ learning in the classroom by conducting a reflection. Reflection here refers to the act of navigating the issues teachers and students face in the classroom, particularly when learners demonstrate challenging learning situations. Drawing on the teachers’ and a student’s personal experiences, in this paper, we trace our experiences of creating teaching-learning environment that gives space for students to express their creativity and vulnerability once they face challenging learning situations.

There is consensus that reflective practice has practical values such as increased self-awareness (Meierdirk, 2016), improved decision-making (Pope et al., 2018), enhanced practical problem-solving (Hong, and Choi, 2015), and for faculty members improve faculty experience and positive effect on student learning (Greenberger, 2020). However, the study discussing teachers and student reflection is still scarce, hence, this study tries to explore what potentials teachers’ reflective practices have to provide a humane, context-specific learning process.

RESEARCH METHOD

Narrative inquiry is utilized in this study to make meaning of the reflective practices conducted by two teachers in a private university in Indonesia. Narrative inquiry in English Language Teaching (ELT) field has been conducted to take the perspective of teachers and learners (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014; Barkhuizen, 2015; Bell, 2002). Reflection in the form of narrative can also offer a space to understand how the personal and social are a part of teachers’ practices and how the experiences are shaped by the larger social and institutional narratives in which they live (Clandinin, 2006). Drawing on Schon’s (1983) distinction between reflection-in-action (reflection while teaching) and reflection-on-action (reflection after the teaching is done), this study takes the data from the practices of both types of reflection. The teachers-researchers are also the participants in the study but the first author is also an in-house translator in a private digital lifestyle company in Indonesia. Meanwhile, the second author is a full-time university teacher.

The data was gathered over two courses of a full semester. The courses in which the teachers instruct are the practice of translation (taught by the first author) and academic writing (taught by the third author). The data is gained by teachers’ casual conversations, discussing their challenges to mitigate students’ diverse learning issues that affect the achievement of learning objectives. Besides, the two teachers also keep teaching-journals in which they write about how the teaching is done and what critical incidents happen during the learning interaction. The discussions were held three times during the semester via oral conversation face-to-face and via voice call. During the initial semester, they talked about their plan to teach the courses and what

learning activities can be done to facilitate students' learning in a fun way. The conversation is held again in the midst of the semester to reflect on the issues that emerged as a result of the challenging situation faced by the teacher in their context-specific environments. The last conversation was again held after the final test was over during which they highlight the ways they mitigate learning gap between students' needs and wants and the courses' core objectives. To gain the illustration of students' needs and wants, the teachers held a collective reflection during and after the learning period. Hence, the second author is asked to be involved in this research. The second author is one of the students that takes both translation and academic writing classes that are taught by the first and third author. She has also showcased remarkable engagement in each and every learning activity held in both classes. This sign of active learning involvement does not mean that she always gets the highest mark for writing and translating skills. Despite her enthusiasm, she also demonstrates struggles as she is not only student but helps her mother establishing small restaurants. However, she strives anyway, never once she shows any hint of irresponsibility in fulfilling the courses' assignments.

A thematic analytical approach (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008) was adopted to examine teachers' stories to explore how narrative reflection can unlock the potential to provide a more equal and context-sensitive approach to address certain learning problems. The tension, emotions, and accomplishment are seen as evoked by the situations and teachers' decisions whenever conflicting circumstances occur.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of teachers' narratives unveiled the realization that the initially set learning objectives in the designing of syllabi are not meant to be achieved without considering the reality that the teachers face in the process of teaching and learning. No matter how often this fact is circulated in research around teaching practices when the two teachers face it firsthand, the shock is inevitable. The plans they have set before coming to the class need to be not only readjusted but taken a reroute and thus made the learning pace a little slower if not stuck. The teachers' decisions to address learning issues are affected by what happened inside and outside the classroom.

Teachers' Expectations Versus Students' Learning Condition

The learning objectives set in the initial phase of syllabus-making are not enough to be the point of departure to structure students' learning activities. This is the result of teachers' reflection after implementing the lesson plan for their courses. Students' assessment in the translation course shows that they still have difficulties finding the equivalence of certain English words to Indonesian. Hence, their translation result is still far from the course's expectations. Likewise, the same thing happens in the academic writing course in which students' understanding of academic texts still needs to be guided, therefore the process of paraphrasing and citing external sources also needs to consider this particular problem.

Table 1. Teachers' Reflection After The First Four Meetings

Reflection from Translating Course	<i>Students' translation work was far from the expected result.</i>
	<i>They relied heavily on Google Translate.</i>
	<i>Their English equivalence was awkward in Indonesian.</i>
Reflection from Academic Writing Course	<i>Students knew how to navigate journal articles but found using the appropriate keywords challenging.</i>

	<i>They still could not understand the structure of an abstract.</i>
	<i>They were still unfamiliar with the functional structure of the introduction, method, and findings.</i>

Since the first author is invited to teach due to his expertise in the translation industry, his encounter with teaching challenges became prominent and critical because he was still surprised by the real condition in the classroom context. He consulted the third author and uttered that he tried to do his best in addressing this issue by investigating the reasons behind students' cluelessness. Likewise, the third author, even though has been teaching at the university level for eight years still finds classroom real-life issues challenging to tackle. Sometimes the slower pace seems like the real inhibitor for the third author as she put in her journal entry: *I need to re-route the teaching and learning activities if this problem remains. This makes me feel left behind and helpless, but I need to keep up my spirit.*

The inevitable sense of helplessness is visible in the first and third author as they need to not only act as the teachers but also are expected to achieve the initially stipulated learning objectives. While theoretical realm might appear flawless, the real classroom context is naturally messy and dynamic. This experience-based fact cannot be taken carelessly. Instead this kind of gap is an evidence that the very dynamic classroom life is to be considered as organic proof to improve educational policy in the micro level. Greenberger (2020) reports that this internalization produces practical knowledge that has the ability to transform pedagogical practices and shift perception and feeling about the problem of interest.

There Must Be Another Way

The initial reflection done by the teachers demonstrated the first reaction they might need to come up with because the expectation and reality were not aligned. In this reflection phase, the teachers were more aware that their students might have their own reasons for why their learning pace cannot be adjusted and that they might have their own personal learning issues which made them unable to follow the pace of their learning according to the syllabus. Therefore the reflection from students' perspectives is an essential source to take into account.

Table 2 Students' Voices

Translation Students' Reflection – the second phase	<i>I feel clueless about translating from English to Indonesian.</i>
	<i>I don't like reading English books, maybe this is why I find translating hard.</i>
	<i>I don't know that idioms were idioms.</i>
Academic Writing Students' Reflection – the second phase	<i>I am frustrated when navigating journal articles because once I input the wrong keywords, I am unable to find the relevant research.</i>
	<i>Reading journal articles is so difficult to do. There are a lot of unfamiliar words.</i>

	<i>The most difficult thing to do for me when doing academic writing is to arrange my ideas and paraphrase them. The teacher knows if I copied and pasted my writing from the web.</i>
	<i>To read academic article means we need to invest our time and energy, while for us, teachers in Islamic boarding schools, it is almost impossible to decline any workload from the seniors. How to make time longer is a source of confusion, not to mention our depleted energy after the school workload. If we cannot focus on the course, I think the teachers need to understand our reality first.</i>

Drawing on students' voices, teachers are not bound to frustrate themselves due to their cluelessness on where their students' levels are in the learning process as the second author, "*It is not solely our mistakes when we cannot achieve the learning objectives according to the previously agreed timeline as stipulated in the syllabus. The students, who are mostly studying while working, need more effort to learn.*" The third author adds, "*It is thus important to read students' conditions but I think the institution needs to take action as well. I think you need to discuss it with the head of your study program so that students' learning needs are also mediated in the syllabus.*"

This study shows that teachers' reflections also require them to listen to the students' voices so that their decisions on the next step are carefully considered based on real conditions. Besides, it is completely fine to take any detour and readjust the learning pace if the teachers discover challenges along the way. Judging the cause of students' learning problems cannot be done solely according to teachers' assumptions and perspectives but also by students' unique reasoning as organic evidence. This can be utilized as an attempt to demystify rigid teaching-learning activities whose domination is held by the teachers in classroom interactions.

We All Struggle: Meeting in the Middleground

In the academic writing reflection, the second author highlighted that she still struggled to paraphrase and organize the writing in a cohesive and coherent manner. She wrote:

"The first {learning issue} is in paraphrasing sentences ... and when I do that often the sentences are still very similar and can include plagiarism or even the meaning doesn't match so in my opinion this is quite challenging and complicated. The second is writing systematically. I find it difficult when writing an academic paper. Often the sentences I use go round and round or are not even conveyed in a straightforward manner."

This is commonly found in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academic writing instruction in which the learners not only study to write academically in English but also to acquire the appropriate language they need to organize their writing. Schleppegrell (1998, 2003); Christie (1986, 2002) reported that students lack understanding of expected language use for academic writing, such as produce recount text, lacking analysis of the events in term of action verbs, lack

of modality and also inappropriate use of verb tense. This is also faced by the second author, hence, it is important that from this reflection, the academic writing teacher can take fitting steps to take and make informed decision regarding her pedagogical practices.

Several themes emerge from the second author reflection regarding the translation course. First is unfamiliarity with the course and the lecturer.

*“At first, I was a little worried and afraid because the lecturers who were going to teach me and my friend were experts in translation and **we had never been taught by him**. But after meeting and getting lessons it turned out that he was quite understanding and also friendly in demeanor and not stiff. I enjoyed the translation learning class.”*

*“There I **learned a lot about translation**, what the recipient is like, how the translation process is, the translation method, how to translate properly and precisely where the translated text is adjusted so that it sounds natural and much more.”*

The next theme is the challenges during translating, i.e. translating from Indonesian (learners' first language) to English (learners' foreign language) and translating idioms.

*“I think the challenge is when we translate **Indonesian into English** because we have to think hard so that the placement of tenses, the choice of words and also the right form of sentences so that the English text we compose sounds like a native or natural so **no** strange **misinterpretation**.”*

*“...another challenging thing for me is idioms ... What's **more I don't really know much about idioms** so when my lecturer gives a test about idioms I have to think hard and guess what they think is the appropriate translation when the idiom is translated into Indonesian.”*

The last theme is the role of students and teacher's reflection to address learning issues. In this context, reflection opens up space for students to explore their learning problems and thus inform the teacher on what step to take to address the issue.

*“...**he always asks what difficulties we are experiencing** and many of us say about the lack of idiom knowledge **so for this sixth semester at every meeting he will give us idioms and invite us to ask about idioms we want to know**.”*

CONCLUSION

What we can draw from this study is that the implication of students' learning problems in translating and academic writing courses can only be navigated after teachers reflect on their practices and take students' voices into account. At the beginning of the study, the teachers showcased their frustration regarding the reality that does not match the teaching plan. The inability of students to perform well in the courses cannot be separated from their own organic circumstances. They have multiple roles on different occasions, they can be students, teachers, and school staff while also struggling to cope with the course objectives. The teachers' reflection is a fruitful means of questioning how a course can be implemented using what teaching techniques. Besides, this dialog can provide a framework for involving students' voices to design a more humane learning process. This humane learning refers to a condition where assessment is not done based on students' academic achievement only but also on their perseverance and willingness to do their best in each stage of their learning. This study is beneficial to enlighten the power of students' and teachers' reflection to inform practical

findings that can affect teachers' pedagogical orchestration that is informed by students' perspective. This practice of reflection opens up opportunity for a more humane interactions in which teachers are not the sole decision makers. Besides, students' input proves to be beneficial to collaborate and create a more enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences for learners and teachers as well.

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