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EFL Pre-service Teachers' Reflections on Student Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Being reflective is a prerequisite of effective teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL). Without reflecting on their own practice, it is virtually impossible for teachers to identify what they have done well and what needs to be improved. It is essential, therefore, to develop the EFL teachers' ability to reflect early in the pre-service stage. This study described the reflections performed by EFL pre-service teachers about student teaching. Fifty two pre-service teachers participated voluntarily in this study and wrote a reflective essay about student teaching done in the previous semester. The results showed that most pre-service teachers admitted they needed to improve their skills of classroom management. It was the first time they taught actual students in schools and they found it challenging to cope with various learner characteristics. In addition, they realized their English proficiency and knowledge also needed improvement so they could be good models for the students. Finally, they still grappled in explaining the materials to the students and had to search for the most effective methods to teach English to secondary school students. Based on these findings, some implications for teaching practicum, especially student teaching, were suggested.

Keywords: TESOL practicum, EFL, pre-service teachers, student teaching, reflective practice

1. INTRODUCTION

"Self-reflection is a humbling process. It's essential to find out why you think, say, and do certain things—then better yourself" (Sonya Teclai). Betterment begins with self-reflection, and this statement is true for language teachers. Effective language teaching depends, among other factors, on the teachers' ability to reflect about their own practice. They should examine their own instruction and obtain as much information as they could about it: by knowing what they have and have not done well, they can decide which they should improve and which they can continue doing in the classroom to achieve instructional objectives and enhance professional development [1]. Although many teachers all over the world have done it for decades, it was not until the eighties that Schön labeled it as reflective practice [2]. Teachers benefit a lot from reflective practice as they can gain thorough insight about their own teaching and strive to make it more effective. In addition, reflective practice gives such advantages as "the validation of a teacher's ideals, beneficial challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect for diversity in applying theory to classroom practice" [3].

Due to these benefits, it is essential for teachers to engage in reflective practice even early in the pre-service stage [4] [3], which is why the teaching practicum in Indonesia encourages the English pre-

service teachers to perform self-evaluation about their practice. The practicum consists of two stages: the first one is a part of an undergraduate degree, and the second one is available for bachelor degree holders [5]. The present paper focuses on the first stage only. In this stage, the pre-service teachers practice teaching individually by using their peers as the pupils in the classroom (*peer teaching*), then simulate teaching in the lab on campus (*microteaching*), and teach real students at schools (*student teaching*). As a part of the reflection, the pre-service teachers report orally how well they have performed and how they feel about teaching after they practice in the peer teaching and microteaching. They also discuss this with their peers who pretend to be their pupils and negotiate meaning about what the 'ideal' English lesson would be in such a situation. In addition, after the student teaching at schools they return to the campus and write a report and a reflective essay about their practice.

This study aims to describe the pre-service teachers' reflections about student teaching on the basis of the reflective essay that they wrote. The next section explains the procedures of conducting this research. Then the results are reported and discussed in detail in the following section. Finally, the conclusion presents the implications of the findings on the language teaching practicum.

2. METHOD

Approached qualitatively, this descriptive study was conducted in the English Department of a university in Surabaya. The population included 75 EFL pre-service teachers who recently completed student teaching in 2019, and 52 of them voluntarily participated in this study. To collect data from them, document was used as the research instrument. On September 11, 2019 they wrote a reflective essay about their experience in student teaching. They were asked to reflect on what they had and had not done well, then explain how these benefited their teaching and their life in general. Afterwards, they were interviewed to obtain deeper understanding about their reflection. The data analyzed were confined to the pedagogical activities during student teaching, and the other aspects such as the administrative ones were beyond the scope of this paper.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The pre-service teachers reflected on three areas related to their pedagogical experience during the student teaching: classroom management, knowledge and proficiency, and teaching techniques. The rest of this section presents the results of their self-evaluation about the practicum in student teaching. To respect their privacy, their names are replaced with pseudonyms.

Most pre-service teachers reported *classroom management* as one of the challenges they faced when teaching English to real students at schools was classroom management. It was the first time for them to stand before a group of secondary school students and teach them in a formal setting, so they need to learn how to build favorable learning atmosphere that can keep the students focused and attentive. One of the pre-service teachers, John, wrote, "I learn how to ... manage time and how to control the class when students did not pay attention." Similarly, Alice realized that "You have to be smart in getting the students' attention or making the teaching and learning process interesting, and it is not easy." Fifi even used a little bit strong adjective to describe the pupils when she had a problem in classroom management: "I learn to be more patient with certain annoying students. I knew that every student has different ability and character." The most serious case of such a problem probably happened to Paula, who wrote, "... SMK (vocational school) which is different with SMA (senior high school). The students, the culture, the rules in the school, etc. The students are more aggressive. They did 'cat calling,' etc."

Fortunately, they viewed the above situations as challenges rather than obstacles. They followed up these unfortunate situations with actions to make it easier for them to manage the class. Fifi tried to "... learn the use

of game, positive reinforcement and rewards to make students become more spirit in studying." Alice made an effort to build better personal relationship with her pupils outside the classroom, as written in her reflective essay: "I learned to be more patient and also made me to keep smiling when looked at them. I always get a good mood when I saw them. I try to be a teacher who have a close relationship to them so they can be more comfortable when study English with me." As to Paula, she wrote the following: "Teaching them in the real life makes me know how to build my character also their character." Like her fellow pre-service teachers, she trained herself to be more patient in handling difficult situations and attempted to build the pupils' good character. What the above pre-service teachers did was in line with Dewey's view of reflective practice, which considered a problem as a challenging issue deserving solutions rather than an error [6]. Using Schön's terms, they reflected *in action* (during the practice) and *on action* (after the practice) [2] to seek the best ways to handle the difficult situations and gain control over the class.

The second aspect the pre-service teachers reflected about was their *knowledge* and *English proficiency*. Because they taught English, it was compulsory for them to master the knowledge about this foreign language and demonstrate good ability to use it. Cynthia, for instance, realized that "Teaching students gives an impact for my study in improving my skills and knowledge. I need to know more and read a lot because sometime students ask unexpected questions." Another pre-service teacher, Zoe, wrote that "By teaching the students, I also try to learn English again, I learn the materials so I can teach them without any mistakes. By learning English again, I found out some materials that I thought it was simple, but actually it is not that simple, so I think it is really important to learn anything again and again." In a similar vein, Deirdre explained the importance of learning English regularly as follows: "Student teaching ... is very beneficial for me. I can share my knowledge especially about English to people (students). From that experience I can know or measure how far is I know about 'English.' That experience also makes me learn again and discover something new." Stella even more specifically mentioned the areas which improved by explaining that "I can improve my skill in speaking and when I taught the students I also feel that I could get improve my grammar because I had to learn the materials before teaching the students." Lastly, Robert seemed to contemplate seriously about his experience in student teaching and was a little bit hard on himself by stating, "I learn that my knowledge and study are not perfect, therefore I must improve to be better and more knowledgeable. I realize that I have a superiority complex that need to be addressed and fixed."

The pre-service teachers generally agreed that life-long learning was indispensable when they chose

teaching as their future career. All of them used the expression ‘I need/have to learn’ in their essay, suggesting that they knew they lacked the relevant knowledge and skills. Indeed, life-long learning which is usually associated with learners actually also applies to teachers [7] [8]. The pre-service teachers came to understand that they became models for the pupils they taught and were expected to be more knowledgeable than the pupils. Consequently, they had to constantly improve their knowledge about English, such as grammar, and their language skills, such as speaking. Some experience in the classrooms at schools may have triggered their awareness of the inadequate knowledge and language proficiency, such as not knowing the answer to the pupils’ questions, inaccurate language use, and others. It was inspiring that—rather than giving up disheartened—they reacted positively by viewing it as an opportunity for self-improvement.

In addition to *what* they taught, the pre-service teachers also evaluated themselves about *how* they taught. As novices in the teaching of English, they were still trying to find the best teaching methods for a particular group of pupils in a particular situation. For example, Cynthia admitted “I learn that every student should be approached differently because they have different characteristics and abilities.” Likewise, Lydia wrote that “In senior high school I am observe the teacher first and know the method she use. I learn how to handle classroom and the student. Sometimes I cannot focus on one method for all class because the students have different way of study.” While Cynthia and Lydia discussed the pupils’ diversity, Wanda focused on her ability in explaining the materials. She explained that “I one of the type of person that has understood the material of basic English but I could not explain it.” Although she had no problem in understanding the concepts in the materials, she had not found the best technique to make the pupils understand them easily. Her counterpart, Steve, was more successful in doing so. He described his effort as follows: “I ... practiced my class language during the teaching which required me to pick the simplest language that the students could understand.” He also successfully conducted an intervention when a problem occurred in teaching real students, and reported that “Vocational high school students are very busy students. They need another approach for the curriculum. This is where my research come in handy. I did an action research about Flipped classroom in there. The result is quite amazing.”

Teaching methods are one of the most essential components in pedagogy because the effectiveness of a lesson relies, among others, on how the teacher delivers the materials to the learners. However complicated the materials are, they become easier to learn if the teacher utilized a method which is suitable to learner characteristics [9]. The student teaching raised the pre-service teachers’ awareness of this principle and prompted them to apply it in their practice. One of them,

Paula, had interesting experience about this as she told in the reflective essay: “... sometimes the students tell me that they do not understand with my explanation, even I think I give them a clear explanation. Now, I know that every student is different. I need to give them some explanation on the materials that they will understand, not I understand. I always do reflection to myself to find the best way to teach them.” Rather than putting the blame on the pupils’ ability to understand her explanation, she was cognizant of the diverse learner characteristics and adjusted the methods she employed to facilitate learning.

4. CONCLUSION

Being reflective during the teaching practicum, especially student teaching, will bring lasting benefits to the English pre-service teachers because it positively shaped their views about the problems they faced in the classroom. It also assisted them to be more independent and open-minded in handling undesired situations related to classroom management, language proficiency and knowledge, and teaching methods. It is recommended, therefore, that English teaching practicum programs encourage the pre-service teachers to perform both in-action and on-action reflections when they practice teaching in real schools. The reflections should be introduced in the on-campus practicum, such as peer teaching and microteaching, before student teaching to familiarize the pre-service teachers with the concepts and the procedures. It is expected that by the time they go to real schools for student teaching, they understand that evaluating their own practice is an integrated part of teaching English.

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