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7 Teachers' Reflective Practice and Challenges in an Indonesian EFL Secondary School Classroom

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Abstract

1 This study investigated the EFL teachers' perception, practices and challenges of reflection in teaching. The study was conducted through qualitative method by purposive sampling technique. The data were collected through observation, semi-structured interview, focused group discussion, and documentation from seven EFL Junior High School teachers in Makassar. The results of the study showed that the EFL teachers perceived reflective practice mainly as an evaluative process to their teaching experience. They all believed that reflective practice was one of the effective teacher characteristics and useful for increasing the quality of teaching and learning. Their reflections were mostly at descriptive and dialogic level. Teaching workload and inadequate knowledge of reflective practice were identified by the EFL teachers as the challenges to reflection.

Keywords: *Reflective practice, EFL teacher, perception, level of reflection, challenges of reflection*

Introduction

Teaching profession nowadays becomes more challenging and more complex and demands individual teachers to continuously reshape their knowledge about teaching and learning. Richards & Farrell (2005) argued that individual teachers within the field of language education must constantly reshape their knowledge of teaching and learning throughout their careers. Recent research in the area of language teacher education, according to Farrell (2018), indicated that the reshaping of such knowledge for language teachers is best undertaken under the umbrella of reflective practice.

Reflective practice is described as an essential attribute of competent teachers who are prepared to address these challenges (Boud et al, 1985; Schon 1983, 1987; Moon 2004). Many researchers look at reflective practice as the foundation for the highest professional competence (Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Valli, 1997; York-Barr et al, 2001). This indicates that reflective practice is urgent, if not compulsory, for sustainable teacher's professional development.

The Indonesian government through the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2017 published ten modules for teacher's professional development. One of the modules (Module J) specifically discusses the issue of reflective practice as an integral part of the government policy to sustain teacher's professional development. This policy infers that reflective practice is mandatory for teachers and educators by which they are required to continuously refresh and update their professional and pedagogical knowledge and skills in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

There are a number of definition of reflective practice, all of which dates back to the definition of Dewey (1933) who defined it as active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends. Thus, according to Dewey, reflective practice is similar to critical thinking. Schon (1983) further developed Dewey's notion of reflective practice with the concept of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action, according to Schon takes place during the action. It refers to the process of interpreting, analyzing, and providing solutions to problems while the action is actually taking place. Reflection-on-action, on the other hand, takes place after the event has occurred. Through reflection-on-action we can find meaning and make sense of what we are doing and understand ourselves. Likewise, Killion and Todnem (1991) defined the term reflection-for-action as thinking about future actions with an intention to improve or change our practice. Similarly, Boud et al. (1985) defined reflection as an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. Different expression but similar meaning, York-Barr et al. (2001) defined reflective practice as an inquiry approach to teaching that involves personal commitment to continuous learning and improvement. Similarly, Glasswell and Ryan (2017) defined reflection as an evaluative process which requires teachers to make judgments about their daily work and their professional lives as to whether or not their own teaching and professional performance meet the standards.

Recently, there have been many researches on reflective practice in teacher education (Ogonor and Badmus, 2006; Sikka & Timostsuk, 2008; Fatemipour, 2009; Rayford, 2010; Yuk Anita, 2011; Bruce and Ewing, 2012; Ahmed & Al-Khalili, 2013; Md. Harun and Suravi Al- Amin, 2013; Cirocki, A., Tennekoon, S., & Pena Calvo, A., 2014). These studies have been conducted mostly with pre-service students to investigate ways to improve reflective practice and quality of teaching in teacher education program. Studying teacher reflection is also important to reveal current situation and to determine their training needs for continuous teacher professional development. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the levels of reflection of EFL teachers in schools. The present study focuses on three research questions: 1) What are the EFL teachers' perceptions about reflective practice in teaching? b) How do the EFL teachers apply reflective practice in their teaching? and c) What are the challenges that the EFL teachers encounter in applying reflective practice in their teaching?

The literature describes different levels of reflection, ranging from just describing what happened in a lesson (descriptive writing or technical reflection) to critical reflection which is the highest level of reflection (Van Mannen, 1977; Zeichner and Liston, 1996; Moon, 2004). Van Manner (1977) divided reflection into three different levels: technical, practical, and critical. Zeichner and Liston (1996) defined four levels of reflection: factual, prudential, justificatory, and critical. Moon (2004) identified and described four levels of reflection as descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection, and critical reflection. The present study adopted Moon's to determine the EFL teachers' levels of reflectivity.

Research Method

Subject

Seven EFL teachers working at five Junior High Schools in Makassar, South Sulawesi were involved in this study. The subject selection was made according to Creswell (2012:206) who defined it as purposeful or purposive sampling in which the researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon. The assumption behind using this technique to select the research participants was that they may have come across the term reflective practice since they have undergone some trainings or workshops which include reflective practice activities. The table below summarizes biographic information of the participating teachers in the study.

Table 1. Teacher Characteristics

| Teaching Experience (Year) | Level of Education | Gender | | Total |
|----------------------------|--------------------|--------|-------------|-------|
| | | Male | Female | |
| 5 | S1 | 1 (01) | 1 (02) | 2 |
| 18 | S1 | | 2 (03) (04) | 2 |
| 20 | S2 | 1 (05) | 2 (06) (07) | 3 |
| Total | | | | 7 |

As can be seen from the table, the participating teachers' teaching experience ranged from 5 to 20 years. Two of the participants were male and five were female. Three participants held master degree and the remaining four participants had bachelor degree.

Procedure of data collection

The data for the study were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, focused group discussion, and documents.

Observation

Observation is considered by many to refer to a method for studying behavior as it occurs in a natural environment. In a qualitative study, the researcher is the main data collector or key instrument. As a key instrument through this technique of data collection, the researcher acted as a *passive participant observer*. In his position as passive participant observer (Spradley, 1980) the researcher was in the classroom but not to interact with any of the subjects to be observed and the teacher as well. The researcher took a position at the back of the class from which he was able to observe and write field-notes about what was

happening and how the EFL teachers performed and facilitated their teaching in the classroom.

Interview

In order to get information on the EFL teachers' perceptions of reflective practice and its application in their classroom, face-to-face semi structured interview with the participating teachers was employed. The rationale for employing semi-structured interview in this study was to permit participants to describe detailed personal and useful information. Besides, with interview, the interviewer has better control over the types of information received because the interviewer can ask specific questions to elicit this information (Creswell, 2012:218). The interviews generally lasted approximately 30 minutes each and were digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewees.

With this technique, the researcher conducted one-on-one interview with all of the participant teachers to see whether there were differences in the perceptions of teachers on reflective practice in teaching. The interview was carried out at school after the class or when the participant teachers did not have a class to teach; at the participant's home based on agreement or appointment; or at other convenient and agreed places.

To collect the data the researcher was directed by a list of interview questions dealing with the variables in search. The interview covered questions to elicit the EFL teachers' perception, practices and challenges on reflective practice in teaching English to their students.

Focused group discussion

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a qualitative research method and data collection technique in which a selected group of people discusses a given topic or issue in-depth, facilitated by a professional, external moderator. In qualitative research, focused group discussion is also called focus group interview. According to Creswell (2012:218), focus group interview is the process of collecting data through interviews with a group of people, typically four to six, from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest. The researcher asks a small number of general questions and elicits responses from all EFL teachers in the group in a lively and natural discussion.

Documentation

Documents in a qualitative research provide valuable information in helping the researchers understand the central phenomenon. According to Creswell (2012:223), documents in qualitative research represent public and private records that qualitative researchers obtain about a site or participants in a study, and they can include newspapers, minutes of meetings, personal journals, diaries, notes, and letters. These sources provide valuable information in helping researchers understand central phenomena in qualitative studies. In the context of this study, documents consisted mainly of reflective journal, diaries or notes, lesson plans, or critical incidents written by the research participants concerning with their EFL teaching practices. These documents helped the researcher understand the sorts of reflective activities or tools they mostly used in reflecting their teaching and the level of their reflectivity. The participating teachers were asked to submit their lesson plan in written or via email. Similarly, they were also asked to write reflective journal about their classroom teaching practices at least twice a month for a period of a half semester. Reflective journal

which is synonymous with some terms such as learning journal, learning log, and teaching journal, is seen as a tool for teachers as learners to describe and explore their own teaching practices through the medium of writing (Moon, 2004).

Data analysis

The data from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively for content following the procedures advised by Miles and Huberman (2014). The content analysis comprised determining codes to identify the participant comments specifically related to reflection first, and then pulling them together to form categories based on the research questions. These categories were characteristics of reflective teachers, the content and levels of teacher's reflective practice, and the teacher's challenges to apply reflective practice. These categories also formed the subheadings of the Results and Discussion section in the paper. In reporting the findings, pseudonyms were used and teachers were identified as "T" followed by a number.

The teachers' responses and comments for each questions were grouped based on their similarities. Teachers' reflective journals were analyzed qualitatively. Journal entries together with the interview data were used to categorize teachers' reflection areas and reflection levels. The areas of reflection were categorized according to the works of Schon (1983) and Killion and Todnem (191). The excerpts from the journals and interview data were analyzed to identify comments related to the areas of reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for action. Moon's levels of reflection (2004) provided a model to assess the levels of reflection in the teachers' journals. The analysis of the journal entries included the placement of the extracts into one of the four categories described by Moon as follows:

1. Descriptive writing. Writing that is not considered to show evidence of reflection. This is a description of events or literature reports. There is no discussion beyond description.
2. Descriptive reflection. There is some evidence of deeper consideration in relatively descriptive language. There is not real evidence of the notion of alternative viewpoints in use. Most reflection is from one perspective.
3. Dialogic reflection. It demonstrates a 'stepping back' from the events. There is consideration of the qualities of judgments and of possible alternatives for explaining and hypothesizing. The reflection is analytical or integrative, linking factors and perspectives.
4. Critical reflection. This level is signified by an awareness that the same actions and events may be seen in different contexts with different explanations associated with the contexts. (Moon, 2004).

Result and Discussion

Teacher's perception of reflective practice

During the interviews, the participating teachers were asked about the characteristics of reflective teachers in order to reveal their knowledge and understanding of reflective practice. The teachers' views and understanding were presented in the table below.

Table 2. Teacher's Perception on the Characteristics of Reflective Teachers

| Reflective Teachers: | Teachers |
|---|--------------------|
| Evaluate own teaching performance | T1, T3, T5, T6, T7 |
| Encourage students to participate in the lessons | T1, T3, T5, T6, T7 |
| Are aware of their own deficiencies and try to improve them | T1, T3, T5, T6, T7 |
| Are capable of motivating students | T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 |
| Apply classroom rules | T1, T2, T3, T4, T6 |
| Assess students need | T1, T2, T4, T5 |
| Get close to students | T2, T3, T4, T5 |
| Are patient | T3, T4, T6, T7 |
| Monitor student performance | T1, T2, T4, T5 |
| Are open to change | T3, T4, T6, T7 |
| Are good listeners | T1, T3, T5 |
| Have a good subject knowledge | T1, T3, T5, |
| Are sincere | T3, T6, T7 |
| Encourage student thinking | T3, T6, T7 |
| Have good communication skills | T1, T5 |
| Take student suggestions into account | T1, T3 |
| Avoid similar mistakes | T3, T7 |

As can be seen from the table, the participating teachers listed many characteristics that they perceive reflective teachers have. However, some of the items in the list were not directly related to being reflective. Evaluating own teaching performance, being aware of own deficiencies and trying to improve them, being patient and good listeners, being sincere, encourage student thinking, considering student suggestions, and avoiding similar mistakes were the traits characterizing reflective teachers. Nevertheless, some of the items like applying classroom rules as indicated by five of the seven teachers were not an attribute of reflective teachers, but more of that of effective teachers. Thus, the teachers generally talked about effective teachers and effective teaching when they were asked about reflective practice and reflectivity. Certainly effective teaching and reflectivity are related but the teachers' comments indicate that they are not sure about the meaning of reflective practice.

The table above also showed that almost all teachers defined reflective practice as an evaluation process of teaching and learning to achieve the certain objective and improvement. As an evaluation process, it requires teachers to discover their strengths and weaknesses of their teaching in order to ensure sustainable learning and improvement. It is line with the statement of York-Barr et al. (2001) who defined reflective practice as an inquiry approach to teaching that involves personal commitment to continuous learning and improvement. This statement implies reflective practice helps teachers understand their teaching performance in terms of what has been good and what needs improving. Similarly, reflective practice requires personal commitment from teachers in order to ensure continuous learning and improvement. In other words, reflective practice helps teachers change in positive way, learn from the mistake they performed at previous teaching session and at the same time make an appropriate adjustment to avoid similar mistakes any longer.

The EFL teachers' perception on reflective practice as an evaluative process is also in accordance with Glasswell and Ryan's (2017). Reflection as an evaluative process, according to them, requires teachers to make judgments about their daily work and professional lives as to whether or not their own teaching and professional performance meet the standards. As an evaluative process, teachers' reflective practice should evaluate the way they teach, the level of their own professional knowledge, and their lesson planning. Thus, EFL teachers merely understand reflective practice as a process to evaluate their teaching performance, identify their deficiencies and try to find alternative solutions to improve them.

Application of Reflective Practice

As indicated earlier, the participating teachers were asked questions and presented scenarios to reveal they do reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for action. All of the teachers indicated that they planned their lessons. As T4 said, "*We made lesson plans together via English Teacher Forum and we used them later in our classes.*" In addition, the teachers reported using feedback from their observations during the lessons in order to make changes in their teaching. T3 said, "*I observe students and their individual or group activities during the lessons. Based on their reaction and behavior, I can change my method of teaching or the activities they have to do.*" Likewise, the teachers indicated asking students to write their learning and expectations at the end of the lessons. As T3 commented, "*At the end of the lessons, I sometimes ask them to write what they learned, what they expect from me, and evaluate the quality of my teaching.*" This is to say that the participating teachers indicated reflecting about their teaching before, during, and after the lessons. But, what about their levels of reflectivity?

Reflective practice requires thinking about our actions, experiences, and strengths and weaknesses. As indicated earlier, such thinking can be at different levels, ranging from the lowest level that is technical (Van Mannen, 1977) or descriptive writing (Moon, 2004) to the highest level that is critical reflection which analyses events considering more political and ethical issues and consequences (Van Mannen, 1977, Moon, 2004). Lesson planning requires thinking about our future actions. Thus, planning can be thought as part of reflective thinking process. However, when a teacher only thinks about the content and methods of the lesson through their lesson plans, it does not mean that reflective thinking takes place perfectly. This can be categorized descriptive level of thinking which is the lowest level of reflection based on Moon's (2004) model. Similarly, thinking about the actions and experiences after the lessons consisted of considering the strengths and weaknesses of the lessons. Such thinking can be an example of dialogic reflection. Therefore, according to the interview data, the participating teachers' reflections were mainly descriptive and dialogic.

The levels of teachers' reflection were also determined from the analysis of their reflective journals. As mentioned earlier, the teachers were asked to write reflective journals about their classroom teaching practices. The table presents the level of reflection that each teacher attained by the end of the study.

As can be seen from the table, the data from the analysis of the journal entries supported the interview data. Four of the teachers wrote at descriptive reflection level, two could write at the dialogic level, one wrote at descriptive writing, and none could be categorized at the critical level.

Table 3: EFL Teachers' Levels of Reflection

| Level of Reflection | Teachers |
|------------------------|----------------|
| Descriptive writing | T2 |
| Descriptive reflection | T1, T4, T6, T7 |
| Dialogic reflection | T3, T5 |
| Critical reflection | - |

Descriptive writing excerpts consisted of the description of the events took place during the lessons. Below is an example of descriptive writing in T2's journal:

I began my class with reminding the students with the previous materials before I told them that they are going to learn about how to make something (procedure text). I divided them into groups. I asked them about their favorite foods. I showed the video about how to make fried rice. Then students classified the characteristics of procedure text. After that, I gave worksheet to each group. They then arranged the jumble pictures and completed monolog text by adding appropriate verb. To present the result of the group work, I called the head number of a group member. Before I ended the class, I asked them to review the lesson.

Descriptive reflection excerpts consisted of more details than the descriptive writing. They involved not only a description of events but some attempt to provide justification for the events or actions in a descriptive way. Below is an example from T6's journal:

This week was the time for students to learn narrative text in reading activity. I chose to apply Story Map activity. Classically I explained the parts of narrative text. Then I gave them a task to complete a story map in group with different text for each group. In fact, they could finish the task earlier as I expected because they only copied the sentence from the text and pasted it in the story map frame. When I asked them whether they understand the story and they answered only a little. Maybe this happened because the learning process was not interesting enough or I needed to modify the activity that can force them to understand the story more completely.

Dialogic reflection was identified in two of the teachers' journals. Dialogic reflection requires a 'stepping back' from the events and discourse with self and considering alternatives. Such reflection is analytical and or integrative of factors and perspectives. Below is an excerpt example from T3's journal:

I felt happy with this lesson. My students enjoyed matching a noun with its appropriate adjective to form a noun phrase. They also made complete sentence correctly. However, I sometimes experience ineffective lessons as well. Sometimes I feel frustrated when students do not understand and are not interested in my lessons. Many reasons could be behind this. They may not have the necessary background knowledge about the lesson. They may lack of vocabulary necessary to understand the topic. They also have different learning styles. I try to find some solutions for these problems. I sometimes discuss them with my colleagues to solve the problems. Or try to employ different methods and activities in my classes. At times, I search new ideas from internet to broaden and enrich my horizon.

From the data presentation and analysis above, it is clear that the participating teachers' journals showed three levels of reflectivity: descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, and dialogic reflection (Moon, 2004). As indicated by T2, her journal is merely a description of events, steps or activities the teacher does during her teaching session. The journal does not reveal any discussion beyond the description; it does not show which part of the worksheet that worked best and which did not and why. This type of journal according to Moon (2004) is categorized as descriptive writing since it does not show any evidence of reflection in it. Instead of revealing reflection evidences, the T2 journal just describes a series of activities the teacher and the students do during a teaching session with no discussion beyond the description. In Mannen's (1977), such a journal is classified as technical reflection which is the lowest level of reflectivity. Under this level, the teacher considers only the technical application of educational knowledge and basic curriculum principles for the purpose of attaining the desired objectives. e.g. teaching content, teaching methods, management skills and subject matters. The findings of the research also revealed that the participating teacher does not only describe what she did during her teaching session, and what and how her students worked with the worksheet given, Instead, T6 begins to analyze what happened during the teaching session in her class and what might be the causes. In other words, T6 has already shown some evidence of deeper consideration in descriptive language which is basically a part of reflection. T6 also mentions some alternative viewpoints although she does not elaborate the real evidence. Therefore, in Moon's (2004) viewpoint, this type of reflection is categorized as descriptive reflection since the reflection T6 made is merely from one perspective. Still, the research findings also demonstrated the higher level of reflectivity which Moon (2004) called dialogic reflection.

As indicated in their journal writing, two participating teachers indicate their consideration of the qualities of judgments about the students' learning performance and hypothesize some possible alternatives to improve their teaching and the students' achievement as well. Up to this point, the research findings indicated that the participating teachers could not reach the highest level of reflection which Mannen (1997) and Moon (2004) called critical reflection. Thus, based on the research findings and analysis above, it may be concluded that the participating teachers' journals mostly stayed at descriptive level. They actually think about their teaching experiences but this does not always mean they are reflective. Reflection is not just thinking hard about what one does, but it requires looking at our experiences through critical lenses which means questioning our experiences, researching the reasons behind the events, setting cause and effect relationships and considering wider effects of our actions. This is what is expected from reflective teachers. Unfortunately, the participating EFL teachers did not show us these evidences in order to be called critical reflection.

Challenges to Reflective Practice

As indicated from the previous parts, the participating EFL teachers were not very familiar with the term 'reflective practice'. Based on the collected data, some different reasons and arguments could be drawn. The table below presents the challenges encountered by the participating teachers in applying reflective practice in their teaching.

As can be seen from the table, all of the participating teachers indicated that workload and lack of time to reflect were two main causes that challenged them to reflect.

Thus, It might be important to provide time for teachers to reflect although this may not guarantee that they will automatically be reflective. Zeichner (1996) also argued that reflection does not occur in many schools although time has been set aside for that purpose.

Table 4. EFL Teachers' Challenges to Reflective Practice

| Statements | Teachers |
|---|----------------------------|
| Workload | T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7 |
| Lack of time to reflect | T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7 |
| Reflective practice was never taught to them during pre-service teacher education | T1, T3, T4, T6, T7 |
| Absence of constructive feedback from supervisors | T3, T4, T5, T6, T7 |
| Supervisors only deal with administrative work | T3, T4, T5, T6, T7 |
| Inadequate collaboration among colleagues | T3, T4, T6, T7 |
| Low level of students | T2, T4, T6, T7 |
| Inadequate proper and meaningful trainings | T2, T3, T4 |
| Lack of commitment | T2, T5 |
| Not accustomed to being criticized | T3, T6 |

¹² The present study also infers that reflective practice should earlier be introduced at the pre-service teacher education program in order that the student teachers have adequate knowledge about reflective practice before they graduate since five of the teachers argued that reflective practice was never taught to them during in-service teacher education. This issue refers to practical and cognitive challenges (Abduh & Dunakhir, 2020). Similarly, school supervisors are necessary to focus on clinical supervision by giving teachers constructive feedback based on their classroom observation, and do not only check teachers' administrative work instead. As T3 said, "*We seldom got feedback from school supervisor for our professional development. The supervisor usually checked our lesson plan or other administrative jobs.*"

Conclusion and Suggestion

¹⁷ The present study concluded that the EFL teachers perceived reflective practice as an evaluation process toward their teaching practice experiences which they considered important to understand their strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Nevertheless, they found it difficult to provide a proper description of reflective practice.

The teachers' level of reflectivity based on their journal entries were mostly descriptive statements about what happened in their classrooms. There were some brief evaluative comments describing how successful their lessons were but no evidence of critical reflection was found in which they do not only analyze the events happened in the classrooms but also details on their own feelings in depth and draw conclusions for future actions.

The inadequate understanding and the lower level of reflectivity as shown by the teachers is due to the lack of clarity and guidance. As indicated by all teachers, they were not given any appropriate training on reflective practice, but they are expected to reflect. This presents implications to policy makers and the authorities who expect teachers to reflect without providing them appropriate training.

The results of the present study enriched previous research findings in that teachers' efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning are largely affected by their perceptions of their patrons – they need a model from their school supervisors. If their school supervisors do not provide them constructive feedback, they will not be motivated to regularly write reflective journals from their classroom teaching practices. Therefore, a conceptual change in teachers is necessary. They need to believe that teacher professional development must start from teachers themselves and other parties including school supervisors only function as supporters. If teachers are willing and wholehearted to develop professionally, their teaching will be more effective and their students' performance will become better and better. Such a conceptual change may be not as easy as we think, but it can be achieved through well-organized trainings, strong commitment, and sustained and appropriate support.

4 Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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