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Keeping a Critical Eye on One's Own Teaching Practice: EFL Teachers' Use of Reflective Teaching Journals

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Although journal writing is a popular pedagogical class assignment required by teachers in EFL classes, there is still room for research into the use of journal writing by teachers themselves to monitor the effectiveness of their teaching practice. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of keeping reflective teaching journals by EFL teachers in their own classrooms. The study examined reflective teaching journals — written or recorded accounts of teaching — kept by teachers in the study for the purpose of later reflection. The corpus data in the study was comprised of (1) the reflective teaching journal entries which teachers kept for twelve weeks and (2) transcriptions of regular group discussions that took place for the purpose of sharing and discussing important issues addressing the teachers' own professional growth. The study explored the following research questions: a) What functions do reflective teaching journals serve for EFL teachers? b) How do reflective teaching journals help teachers solve teaching problems they face? and c) What effects does sharing of the reflective teaching journals in the support group have on empowering teachers in their EFL profession? Results of the study included substantial qualitative reports, which reinforced the significance of EFL teachers' use of reflective teaching journals as a self-monitoring device in their teaching process. The theoretical and pedagogical implications of the study are set out and discussed.

Introduction

This paper describes a study conducted in Malaysia. The use of reflective teaching journals (RTJs) by eight Malaysian junior high school teachers for the purpose of systematically monitoring their teaching practices was examined. The overall aim of this qualitative study was to examine how

reflective teaching journals impacted these teachers' teaching processes. Data for the study were based on the teachers' reflective logs and transcripts of group discussions.

Literature Background on Reflective Journal Writing

Reflective journals have been used successfully by many action researchers, teacher trainers, theorists, and language learners to promote the thinking and learning process (Roland, 1995; Bolin, 1988; Prisco, 1990; Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988). Vygotsky (1962), a Russian psychologist, classified self-initiated and purposeful writing as thought written down, which in turn, is re-internalized into one's ongoing thinking. Richards and Lockhart (1994) assert that teachers fail to capture events that can help them develop a deeper understanding of teaching unless they keep reflective journals which can serve as a basis for critical reflection of their teaching processes. In addition, Yinger and Clark (1981) described the keeping of a reflective journal as a way to provide immediate self-feedback:

> As writers read the words they have written, the words tell them whether or not they have communicated as they want to. Writers' inner purposes and goals, the expressive component of writing, provide a model of sorts for immediate matching and comparison. By posing the questions, "Is that what I really think and feel?" writers are learning about themselves. (p. 6)

Another advocate of reflective journals, Bartlett (1990) offered the following suggestions for keeping a journal in the classroom:

> Our writing will be about our routine and conscious actions in the classroom; conversations with pupils; critical incidents in a lesson; our personal lives as teachers; our beliefs about teaching; events outside the classroom that we think influence our teaching; our views about language teaching and learning. (pp. 209–210)

Aligning with others' views on reflective journals, Ruddock (1984) wrote, "Not to examine one's practice is irresponsible; to regard teaching as an experiment and to monitor one's performance is a reasonable professional act" (p. 6). Schmidt (1985) found that students who have kept reflective teaching journals in their field experience have expressed many positive benefits from keeping the journals, such as: (1) the awareness that reflection as a personal learning tool can make them become better teachers;

(2) the examination of their mistakes documented in their journals enables them to brainstorm strategies to prevent future problems; and (3) the realization that coming to grips with personal thoughts, frustrations, and concerns in the reflective process is therapeutic. Susi (1995) believes that pre-service teachers who develop reflective skills tend to incorporate inquiry as a key part of the career-long process of becoming a teacher.

Rationale for the Study

Armed with the knowledge I have about RTJs from reading the above literature, I decided to conduct a study on the use of RTJs by teachers. In 1996, I taught a graduate course called "Methods of Basic Language Teaching" in the English Language Department at a mid-sized university in Malaysia. This course focused on the different approaches of EFL/ESL teaching as reflected in the field such as audiolingual, structural, grammar translation, situational, notional-functional, communicative, task-based and cooperative learning. Using the principles and theories of second language learning and acquisition, the course examined the applications of research-driven classroom pedagogy. Some of the course objectives were a) to relate theories of language acquisition and learning to classroom pedagogy in the field of second language teaching; b) to employ appropriate instructional sequences and strategies according to students' learning styles; and c) to examine the influence of socio-cultural factors on the process of learning English by EFL students.

One of the goals I had for this class was to provide a bridge that linked my students' existing teaching experiences to new knowledge they acquired in this course. In order to accomplish the above goal, I required my students to keep reflective teaching journals on their teaching practices so that they would be able to closely examine their teaching processes. My study was initially based solely on the reflective teaching journals (RTJs) these teachers kept. As I progressed through the study, however, I was able to transform this individual assignment into invaluable support group sessions for these Malaysian EFL teachers.

Goals of the Study

While the teachers were convinced of the benefits of keeping reflective teaching journals in their classes, I was judiciously following their work with these research questions in mind:

a) What functions do reflective journals serve for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers?
b) How do reflective teaching journals help teachers solve teaching problems they face?
c) What effects does the sharing of reflective teaching journals in the support group have on empowering teachers in their English Language Teaching (ELT) profession?

Method

This exploratory study is qualitative in nature and employs a case study approach. Eight teachers motivated by the intrinsic rewards of gaining an opportunity to examine their own teaching performances volunteered to participate in the study. I opted to use RTJs with teachers in the EFL context because research has documented important benefits for teachers. Journal keeping provides a window to the hidden affective variables that influence the ways teachers teach and students learn.

During the first class meeting in their methods course, these teachers and I discussed their areas of interest in the field and choices of class assignments they wanted to do for the semester. As they were also teaching at the time, they unanimously voted to do an assignment that would provide immediate benefits to their teaching. I suggested that they keep reflective teaching journals. Teachers were then requested to keep 12-week reflective journals on one of their English classes. Guidelines adapted from Richards and Lockhart's (1994) sets of reflection questions to guide journal entries were given to teachers (refer to Appendix A). They were asked to record events and ideas for reflection. They could write about personal reactions to events that happened in the classroom or school, questions or observations about problems that occurred in teaching, descriptions of significant aspects of lessons or school events, ideas for future analysis, and reminders of occurrences to take action on. Teachers were asked to write approximately half to one page on events they observed and half to one page on their reflections of these observations. Then during class meetings, teachers and I read the RTJs, wrote feedback, and discussed journal entries. Approximately an hour was allotted for the class to discuss issues that transpired from teachers' journal entries. Some discussion topics such as teachers' personal teaching experiences were nicely intertwined with the class readings on language teaching methods. These meetings were videotaped.

At the end of the semester, I gathered all of the journals and transcribed the taped sessions. Journals and transcriptions were analyzed to determine emerging patterns of the most frequently mentioned issues. Results were reported, conclusions made, and recommendations forwarded.

Data Analysis

Two main sources of data were used in the study: video-recorded discussions among the teachers and self-reports in the form of reflective logs. In this section, samples of teachers' reflective logs and transcribed videotaped discussions are provided in order to show how the different categories were selected.

After the initial examination of the data, I grouped the patterns that emerged from the teachers' RTJs and the taped study group discussions into these categories: lessons' focus and instructional procedures; identification of students' problems in learning English as a foreign language; teachers' own assumptions and evaluations of their teaching methods ; and discovery of teachers' selves. The above categories shed light on findings in the study.

The following section contains a sample or two of the unedited RTJs and group discussions that transpired from these journal entries within each category. Appendix B contains other sample data of RTJs and group discussions. (*Keys for the items used in data analysis*: TA = Teacher A; TB = Teacher B, and so on; R = Researcher.)

Lessons' Focus and Instructional Procedures

This category identifies teachers' recollections of a lesson. Teachers started their journal entries with a description of the lesson for the day before they presented any reflections. Teachers described the execution of their teaching plans which consequently provided me with an insight into their philosophy of teaching and choices of classroom pedagogy. The information in this category helped me as a teacher trainer and a researcher to locate two main teaching items in my students' teaching plans: a) teachers' content and language objectives and ways these objectives were achieved during their lesson delivery and b) the kinds of teaching materials used in their classes.

As indicated in the unedited sample data below, I oftentimes used the class discussions in this section as a teaching tool.

Teacher E's Reflective Journal Entry

I gave students foundation exercises and drills in grammar and sentence structures to strengthen their comprehension and basic writing skills.

Group Discussion

R: What are some strategies you can use to help students learn their vocabulary items besides using drills?

TA: I find using Oxford's suggestion of the direct strategy, particularly the memory strategy, very effective. First, I give students topics in which they will categorize their words under. For instance, the topic is kitchen items. Students in groups will brainstorm for items that are found in the kitchen. The group will have to also illustrate these words using pictures. As I circulate around the room looking at each group's product I am able to provide them with words that they do not know by looking at their drawings. Sometimes, they give me the words in Malay and I give the English equivalents. Later, students will write a paragraph using some of these words. I ask my students to make their own dictionary. In their own dictionary, they write words that pertain to their needs most.

R: Great! I am sure your students had fun doing this word activity. Comments, questions ?

Identification of Students' Problems in Learning English as a Foreign Language

Data (reflections made by teachers) grouped under this section were directed toward teachers' critical analysis of English language skills that their students experienced. In the group discussion that teachers and I had on issues within this category, I once again found myself savoring the teachable moments of using these reflective journals to deliberate on course materials such as types of assessments, manner of error corrections, and sociolinguistic issues — code switching and fossilization. This is yet another excellent example of how a reflective journal can serve as both a research instrument and a teaching tool.

Teacher D's Reflective Journal Entry

From my observation, most of the students took too much time trying to figure out the meaning and the structure. Even after repeated drillings and practicing, they still forgot the comma, the date, and the signature (referring to the letter writing exercise).

Group Discussions

TG: Why do you think students have such a hard time with this?
TD: I think their English proficiency level is so low and besides they really do not see the need to write letters in English. They have to learn this because the national English exam has a letter writing question.
R: In what other ways can you approach the teaching of mechanics in letter writing?
TA: In my class, I have my students write a letter to each other without paying attention to the form. Then, I have a couple student volunteers put their letters on the board. I ask the class to work on the form and mechanics together as a whole class activity. After that, I ask them to do the same with their peer's letter, so it's like a peer editing activity.

Teachers' Assumptions and Evaluations of Their Teaching Methods

The selection of emerging patterns in this category pivoted on the knowledge, perceptions, and assumptions that underlie teachers' choice of teaching methodology. Through the reflective journals, teachers had the opportunities to provide justifications that were based on language acquisition theories when using language teaching methodologies in their classrooms. This exercise met one of the course goals which was to link language acquisition theories to classroom pedagogy.

Teacher E's Reflective Journal Entry

I found that they like to do the exercises in the handouts because they contain pictures and they are easy. They like to guess the answers and also relate the pictures to the sentences. In addition, they also like to work at their own pace because the exercises are easy to read, simple and fun to do. May be I should be giving them more of these kinds of exercises but to tell the truth, it was time consuming to produce even one set.

Teacher A's Reflective Journal Entry

After 40 minutes and after making sure that everyone had a chance to finish their books, I told them to stop. I asked them how does it feel to be able to read in this kind of environment (lying on the floor and accompanied by soft background music). They responded positively. Some said that they tended to feel sleepy but the tempo of the classical music prevented that. The follow up exercise was writing a report on the book that they had read either in L1 or L2. Why L1? Remember the object of the reading activity was to enjoy the story so either language would show their understanding.

Group Discussions

TD: I like the way you ask your students to write the report in their L1. That would in some way tell you how much they have understood the story.

R: There are several research studies in reading comprehension that have used this strategy in which participants' level of comprehension in L2 is measured by their production in L1. In fact, this can also be used as a diagnostic test to place students in different language proficiency levels.

(Discussion on the topic "positive effects of L1 use in L2 composition," ensued)

Discovery of Teachers' Selves.

This category exhibits teachers' feelings about teaching and how they view themselves as EFL teachers and their profession. It also gives insights into how the discussions of the reflective journals in the support group empower teachers in their English Language Teaching (ELT) profession.

Teacher B's Reflective Journal Entry

At times, I felt frustrated by my students' lack of motivation in learning the English language.

Teacher D's Reflective Journal Entry

I find myself giving up at times to interest my students in staying on task because I realize that it is hard to for them to see the relevance of using English in the environment they are in.

Group Discussions

TC: I agree with TD on this. Some of my friends who are teaching in schools not too far away from KL (Kuala Lumpur) also experience the same problem of students not motivated to learn English because they do not see the need to use English in their kampong (village).

TG: Since the non-speaking English environment seems to be the source of the motivation problem, what options do we have?

TA: I feel the same kinds of frustrations but I often engage my students in the discussions of why it is important and necessary for them to learn and use the English language. In fact, I use these issues as topics for debate in my class.

Discussion

In trying to arrive at some conclusions from the information I have gathered in the study, I find it useful to go back to the research questions.

What functions do reflective journals serve for EFL teachers?

From using reflective teaching journals (RTJs) as a research instrument as well as a teaching tool, I find them serving several functions. First, keeping RTJs allows teachers to systematically monitor strengths and weaknesses of their teaching strategies. The RTJs provide opportunities for teachers to dialogue with themselves on successful and less successful teaching outcomes in the classroom. When teachers identify strengths in their teaching, they can capitalize on them, and when they realize that some approaches result in less productive outcomes, they can demonstrate the willingness to change their approaches. For instance, several teachers in the study oftentimes during the journal group discussions acknowledged that they should have spent more time thinking and planning their lessons so that their classroom activities would effectively help them achieve their lessons' objectives. Therefore, RTJs allow teachers to check their tracks as

they proceed with their teaching and can be used as a self-corrective measure. This self-directed learning exercise parallels current cognitive theory that assumes that knowledge is actively constructed by learners as they interact with objects and people in their environment (Vgotsky, 1978).

Second, RTJs alert teachers to the immediate English language problems that students face in the classroom. Teachers become more sensitive to meeting students' needs. In noticing that their students struggle with the skills necessary to develop essays, teachers are aware of this problem and attend to it. In addition, teachers are seen spending more class time and using more varieties of techniques teaching a particular English language problem when the problem is identified in RTJs.

Third, using reflective teaching journals as a teaching tool serves as an excellent point of departure for discussions of important issues. Topics generated from RTJs led the way for an in-depth discussion of major TEFL issues which ranged from sociopolitical concerns to classroom pedagogy and theoretical underpinnings in the EFL field. RTJs raise teachers' awareness of factors that are beyond their control, such as the EFL environment which has some impact on students' motivation in learning English. From the descriptions teachers wrote about the teaching approaches and activities they used in their classes, discussions on bridging theories of second language acquisition and learning to teaching approaches took place. This is a great opportunity for methods instructors to seize upon so that student teachers can witness how the theories they learn in class can be applied in their own classrooms.

How does keeping RTJs and discussing them in a support group assist teachers in solving the teaching problems they face?

In all of their journals, teachers identified their students' problems in grammar, writing, reading comprehension, and pronunciation. Although teachers in the study did not offer specific solutions to their students' problems, they were aware of their students' language difficulties and were serious about finding ways to help their students improve their English. In the method class, the instructor addressed these issues and students shared their ideas and experience on how to solve some of the teaching problems they face. For instance, when one teacher in the study found vocabulary drills to be tiresome and ineffective, another teacher in the group shared with the class her approach of using a memory strategy which was effective and fun for her students.

One of the main topics that kept emerging in the discussion was students' lack of motivation. An important justification that teachers have about why students are not interested in learning English is because students do not think that English is important to them. Most of the teachers felt that it was difficult to convince their students that English is important, and when they eventually do, it is often too late. Students' motivation in learning English differs between urban and rural schools. The teachers who teach in the cities do not find motivation to be a problem whereas those teaching in schools in rural areas find that their students are not interested in English. A suggestion to motivate students is to make learning English fun and to use authentic materials that are meaningful to students. Some teachers employ competitive games, music, cartoons, literature books, and cooperative learning groups in their class. One of the teachers told about her use of newspaper articles as authentic materials that motivate her students to learn English.

Most of the teachers find that there is a conflict of interest between the administration and the teachers. One of the teachers related her fear of using innovative teaching strategies in her class such as cooperative learning and group work because she would be accused by her principal of not teaching her students. Cooperative learning groups yield too much noise, and too much noise is assumed by some as testimony that learning is not taking place. Most of the teachers agree that they experience similar reactions by administrators.

Another teaching problem these teachers face is having to cover the syllabus before the end of the school term because students in high school and middle high sit for the national exam. Teachers feel that they have to teach for the exam purposes and thus do not have the leisure of doing fun activities in their classes.

By writing about these issues in their reflective teaching journals, teachers were not only able to directly deal with their frustrations, but gained the opportunity to discuss some possible solutions. Together members in the group supported one another by finding solutions to some of their teaching problems—problems with the administrations, students, or finding innovative approaches to teaching the English language skills in an EFL setting.

How does keeping RTJs empower teachers in their ELT profession?

All of the eight teachers reported positively about keeping reflective journals as a class assignment because of the immediate benefits that they

experienced. Most of them reported the changes they have made in their classes as a result of the weekly discussions. These teachers really liked the opportunity of airing their problems and getting feedback from the group. They felt that putting their frustrations and satisfactions of their teaching experience on paper was in itself therapeutic, for they were able to keep their thoughts and feelings about teaching in check. Some found the theory in practice and the residence researcher role an eye-opening and empowering experience which helped them in their professional development as teachers.

Conclusion

As a teacher trainer, I believe it is crucial that educators realize that classroom pedagogy does not operate in a vacuum, rather it has roots in research findings and underlying theoretical assumptions. Consequently, success in teaching stems from the wreath teachers weave out of the leaves and branches of new knowledge and practices, as well as their own prior knowledge and experiences. To me, the reflective journal is an excellent research and teaching tool that helped me bridge theory and practice which otherwise would remain nebulous. It can be used along with observation, or it may be used as a substitute to class observation in cases where supervisors are not able to observe their interns' classes. Although it is a time-consuming task, reflective journals can also be used in the pursuit of finding significant patterns in teachers' and pre-service teachers' thinking about teaching.

Reflective teaching journals provide both teachers and researchers a window into teachers' selves. Zeroing in on details of classroom events makes it possible for teachers to critically examine the improvements needed in their teaching . In addition, the process of writing itself triggers insights about teaching; writing in this sense serves as a discovery process (Richard & Lockhart, 1994). In writing descriptions of events in their classrooms and later reflecting on these events, teachers are utilizing metacognitive strategies, which Chamot and O'Maley (1990) consider as executive processes used to plan, monitor, and evaluate a learning task, in the pursuit of more knowledge in the teaching field. The metacognitive strategy that journal keeping asks of teachers enhances teachers' awareness of their teaching styles and assumptions about learning. Because of this inner dialogue that exists as teachers write their reactions in their journals, teachers can be alerted to the matches and/or mismatches of their teaching

styles to their students' learning styles. Likewise, if used with the preservice teachers, supervisors can hope to help change some interns' mindsets about the teaching profession. Let us hope that more soon-to-be educators want to be teachers not because of the long vacations that the teaching profession offers, but because they are dedicated to making a difference in a child's life.

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Appendix A: Reflection Questions to Guide Journal Entries

(Adapted from Richards & Lockhart, 1995, pp. 16–17)

The following are some questions to help you write your journal entries. This list is not exhaustive so please include your own questions and observations.

1. What is your philosophy of teaching?
2. What did you set out to teach?
3. What techniques did you use?
4. What theoretical underpinnings or research findings of SLA/SLL do you base your teaching methodology on?
5. Is your philosophy of teaching reflected in your lesson?
6. Did anything unusual or amusing occur during your lesson?
7. Which parts of the lesson were most successful? Least successful?
8. How do you feel after your class is over?
9. Do you feel that you have accomplished what you have set out to teach for that day?
10. Were you able to complete all of the activities in the lesson or did you run out of time?
11. What changes do you think you will make when teaching the lesson again?
12. How are you helping my students in learning English?
13. How can you improve your language teaching?
14. How can you grow as a developing language teacher?
15. How do you feel about keeping RTJs as part of your daily teaching practice?

Appendix B: Other Sample Unedited RTJ Data

Lessons' Focus and Instructional Procedures

Teacher E's Reflective Journal Entry

For this lesson I focused on teaching how to write a summary based on an article entitled "A Giraffe". This piece of text was written on the board and the learners were expected to copy it in their exercise books. This was followed by a session in which we discussed the main points, what needed to be omitted and so on. Using the facts which were relevant, learners did a mind-mapping of the important features. Then as a final product learners used the information to write about seventy words on a giraffe.

Teacher A's Reflective Journal Entry

Today I gave the students a handout on letter writing. Actually, the handouts contain guided cloze exercises on letter writing in which students needed to read and then fill in the blanks with suitable words which were given. The objective was to give them the format of letter writing and also to familiarize them with some of the expressions and sentences used in letter writing.

Teacher B's Reflective Journal Entry

The lesson started with brainstorming for the word "celebrations". I wrote the word on the board and then started to form bubbles when the kids began to give words that related to the word "celebrations". At first we were brainstorming on celebrations celebrated by various ethnic groups in Malaysia such as Malays, Indian and Chinese. Next I erased the ethnic group words and asked them about celebrations celebrated at school. Now, the students had to brainstorm with their partners on activities related to the special events held at SMBF (school's name in acronym) . Next, I asked the students to try answer questions from the textbook and they could use the story bubble to help them.

Teacher C's Reflective Journal Entry

I put the books in the center of the room and asked the students to pick any book that they like. Then I told them to relax and just read their books quietly and just enjoy the story. After that I played the tape I brought. No.

Not "the Lemon tree" song but classical soundtrack from the movie Braveheart.

Group Discussions

TA: Why did you play the tape as they were reading?
TC: (pause) Oh I don't know, I thought it was a good idea and students may like it for a change.
R: What language learning method utilizes music for relaxation purposes?
TD: Uhm… is it Suggestopedia?
R: Yes. Let's review and talk about this method.

(Discussion on language teaching methodology began.)

Identification of Students' Problems in Learning English as a Foreign Language

Teacher B's Reflective Journal Entry

Their main difficulty is in sentence constructions and limited vocabulary.

Teachers' Assumptions and Own Evaluations of Their Teaching Methods

Teacher C's Reflective Journal Entry

I got a lot of words because I told them to ask and answer WH-questions.

Teacher F's Reflective Journal Entry

Using the bubbles, it is easier for them to understand the relationship. The activities went on productively. Surely, the bubble helped them because it is easier to understand and see the relationship between the ideas. I think with brainstorming, story bubble and a good timing, the class was a success.

Teacher B's Reflective Journal Entry

By doing the mind mapping, we are making the information overt. Hence, this made it easier for my students to understand the reading comprehension passage.

Discovery of Teachers' Selves

Teacher A's Reflective Journal Entry

I enjoy what I do—teaching English. I often made my lessons entertaining and interesting. We often role play characters in stories and debate on controversial issues. My students love it.

Teacher G's Reflective Journal Entry

It was such a rewarding experience to see my students smile when they demonstrated some comprehension of the difficult passage.