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# From an Active Learner to a Reflective Practitioner: Learning to Become a Professional Indonesian EFL Instructor

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## From an Active Learner to a Reflective Practitioner: Learning to Become a Professional Indonesian EFL Instructor

### **Abstract**

For teachers, professional development is a lifelong journey and a complex and multi-dimensional process. Effective professional development requires practitioners to engage not only in training but also in habitual reflection. However, research on reflective learning within the context of Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, at both secondary and tertiary levels, is limited. Using the-Self Study, Qualitative Inquiry this article explores my reflective practices in the Indonesian educational context. It is structured around a narration of my roles as an active EFL learner and instructor which have led me to become a reflective practitioner. The article starts with my first contact with English and then goes on to my later learning-teaching experiences. It highlights the process of my reflective learning experience and its influence on my practices as an EFL instructor. In doing so, it aims to encourage similar awareness and reflective professional development in Indonesian EFL teachers. My reflection reveals that learning from experience allows educational practitioners to improve professional competent.

### **Keywords**

Qualitative Inquiry, Self-Study Research, Reflective Practices, Professional Development, Teaching Competence, Learning Experience

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# From an Active Learner to a Reflective Practitioner: Learning to Become a Professional Indonesian EFL Instructor

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*For teachers, professional development is a lifelong journey and a complex and multi-dimensional process. Effective professional development requires practitioners to engage not only in training but also in habitual reflection. However, research on reflective learning within the context of Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, at both secondary and tertiary levels, is limited. Using the-Self Study, Qualitative Inquiry this article explores my reflective practices in the Indonesian educational context. It is structured around a narration of my roles as an active EFL learner and instructor which have led me to become a reflective practitioner. The article starts with my first contact with English and then goes on to my later learning-teaching experiences. It highlights the process of my reflective learning experience and its influence on my practices as an EFL instructor. In doing so, it aims to encourage similar awareness and reflective professional development in Indonesian EFL teachers. My reflection reveals that learning from experience allows educational practitioners to improve professional competent. Keywords: Qualitative Inquiry, Self-Study Research, Reflective Practices, Professional Development, Teaching Competence, Learning Experience*

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## Introduction

I am on a teaching staff at an Indonesian university. This career requires me to engage in continuous professional development efforts. This is relevant to Louws, Veen, Meirink, and Driel's (2017a) suggestion that self-professional development is a must effort that all educational practitioners should consider. This is because qualified teachers significantly impact student learning, and their qualifications and competence can only be established through "continuous professional development (CPD)" (Louws et al., 2017a, p. 487). Studies have acknowledged that one way to engage in professional development is through reflective thinking about previous experience because it enables practitioners to learn more effectively (Burhan-Horasanli & Ortaçtepe, 2016; Körkkö, Kyrö-Ämmälä, & Turunen, 2016; Nodoushan, 2011; Rashid, 2018; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018).

Reflection is understood here as a process of deeply thinking about one's actions and deliberately thinking about problem-solving strategies. John Dewey, a founding father of progressive education, argued that learning only takes place through critical reflection on one's action (Dewey, 1977). He defined reflective practice as a deliberate and persistent way of thinking about one's actions, representing strategies that respond to the need to find ways to improve one's classroom practices (see also Cirocki, Tennekoon, & Pena Calvo, 2014; Garza & Smith, 2015; McDougall, 2010; Thompson & Pascal, 2012; Toom, Husu, & Patrikainen, 2015). Donald Schön extending Dewey's concept, posited three types of reflection: reflection *on*, *in* and *for* action. Reflection *on* action is conducted to identify one's previous practice in order to improve future action (Schön, 2017). Reflection *in* action is teachers' consciousness of their on-going practices. They are encouraged to engage in reflection *in* action to help change or modify their practices. Reflection *for* action, which Burhan-Horasanli and Ortaçtepe (2016)

refer to as anticipatory reflection, is done prior to teachers' actual practices, forming a loop with reflection *on* action.

Reflective teaching has become a topic of debate in many international contexts, such as Iran (Afshar & Farahani, 2015; Ashraf, Samir, & Yazdi, 2016; Kheirzadeh, 2018), Finland (Körkkö, 2016, p. 198), Turkey (Burhan-Horasanli & Ortactepe, 2016), USA (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2016), England (Goodley, 2018), Vietnam (Nguyen, 2017), and Malaysia (Rashid, 2018). However, due to a deeply ingrained cultural mentality which inhibits free expression required for reflective practice, this approach has not been popular in Indonesian educational contexts and has received very little attention from Indonesian scholars (Zulfikar, 2013, 2015). Although all Indonesian teaching colleges train student-teachers to be socially, personally, professionally and pedagogically competent (Law of Teachers and Lecturers, 2005/Undang-undang Guru dan Dosen, 2) they have limited exposure to exploring or practicing reflective strategies to improve their teaching competence. Part of the argument for giving them limited exposure is that rote learning is still a popular practice in Indonesian educational contexts and it is difficult for practitioners to be truly honest about their own practices (Zulfikar, 2013, 2015). These factors discourage student-teachers from engaging in the critical thinking required for reflective practice. This article seeks to address this gap by providing a model for other Indonesian educational practitioners to follow. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, it outlines the benefits and challenges I experienced in becoming a reflective thinker and practitioner.

### **Reflexivity**

This is a reflexive and qualitative inquiry on my English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning and teaching experience. It is important to reflect on my initial training at teachers' college and also on my professional experience in my post-college years. This is because my experiences during training greatly influenced the shaping of professional identity in my post-college years (Buitink, 2009; Louws, Meirink, & Driel, 2017b; Ragoonaden, 2015). Working in academia requires practitioners to continuously reflect on their experiences to improve their teaching consciousness. This process of lifelong learning also shapes teachers' professional identity (William, 2010). It is for this reason, as a member of university teaching staff, I engage in in-depth reflection *on*, *in* and *for* my teaching (Louws et al., 2017b) that leads to my professional development. This reflexivity prompts me to ask myself: "How might my own experiences bring insights to my knowledge of my students and their learning experience?" (Hickey, 2012, 149). Other researchers have also explored the development of teachers' professional identity in multiple settings (e.g., Bernhardt, 2018). Unlike that of Bernhardt (2018), my reflection goes back to my early years of learning and teaching English, and then moves forward to my post-college years.

Dewey (1997) stated that "...all genuine education comes about through experience..." (p. 25). Kabilan, Adlina, and Embi (2011) also put forward the idea that lifelong learning is a must-journey leading to professional development. These statements are applicable to my academic journeys. They underpin this article that starts by exploring my very first experience of being an English learner and as an assistant teacher.

### **A Self-Study Journey Through Qualitative Inquiry**

Given the nature of this academic exploration, the most appropriate approach to use is the self-study qualitative inquiry. This type of research design refers to the study undertaken to examine ones' experience in relation to their historical, social and cultural context; it is an autoethnography, in which I reflect on my own learning and teaching experience for the

improvement of my teaching competent. The self-study inquiry, which emerged in the 1990s (Samara & Freese, 2009), enabled me to engage in reflexivity through my life story. To do this, I first reflectively recalled my learning experience which I recorded in my personal journals. In addition, to enable me to provide a chronological account of my experience, I started describing my early exposure to English from my earlier age. In this particular self-study, I described step by step experience of language learning and reflected on these experiences to allow me to learn out of my experience and gain insights from it.

### **The First Contact**

My boarding school experience when I was 13 years old in the 1980s was my first exposure to English. Even though learning English was difficult for me, the constant and intense exposure to the language increased my passion for learning it. While this suggests that long exposure to a foreign language increases one's likelihood of learning and understanding it better, teaching style is one of the most important factors (Kazemi & Khalili-Sabet, 2012). During learning, my teachers' teaching styles appealed to me. Most of them developed a good relationship with their students, building rapport and trust. Trust is considered important in the learning process since it promotes continuous learning (Vahdany, Sabouri, & Ghafarnian, 2015). However, as a novice learner at the time, I was uninformed about my teachers' teaching methods.

My initial understanding of their teaching styles was that the teacher referred to the Grammar Translation Method, one of the oldest methods in ESL/EFL teaching. The focus was on improving students' grammatical competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) with the language, thus grammar was taught explicitly and through translation into the first language (L1). However, the nature of language teaching in a boarding school focuses on promoting students' communicative competence to meet the vision of the school. As students live in dormitories, language practice can be tightly monitored and controlled, and the dormitory allowed us to establish informal and formal communities of learning, in which practicing English on a daily basis was very feasible (DeVillar & Jiang, 2004; Handley, 2011; Morgan, 2004; Nurhasanah, 2015).

Practicing the language in informal and formal settings at boarding school was thus a large part of my English language learning process. I was formally put into groups every afternoon to practice language under the teachers' supervision. This included various fun learning activities, such as guessing a word based on its description by my speaking partner. These strategies helped me to become familiar with communicating in English. For example, in my first six months at the school, my speaking skill increased from novice to intermediate level and I gained sufficient competence to construct simple English sentence. This experience led to my belief that daily practice of the language improves communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In addition, vocabulary memorization was part of my routines. This rote learning required me to memorize vocabulary in isolation, that is, without contexts. However, this technique was only effective for short-term memory. I was unable to retain the vocabulary in the longer term as it was not learned contexts (Nation & Meara, 2002).

Memorization of vocabulary developed my English, but I realized that I lacked the ability to use my English vocabulary in context. Furthermore, my teachers' failure to develop our writing and reading skills limited my ability to be fully competent in English. I was good at using the language and understanding basic grammar, yet I lacked writing and reading skills. This suggests that the four English skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills cannot be taught in isolation (Brown, 2001; Elis, 2005). It also indicates that it takes more than grammatical competence to develop students' writing skills. These early experiences helped

me recognize that teaching a foreign language should use multiple strategies (Richards & Renandya, 2005).

### **Reflection on, in and for Practices**

My teaching career started very early. When I was an eighth grader, I was also a teaching assistant responsible for teaching English speaking skills. In Islamic Boarding schools, it is a common phenomenon that students in their Senior Year act as assistant teachers. For that reason, I was assigned an assistant teacher when I was in Year Eight, and this allowed me to learn how to become a professional teacher while I was a student myself. Reflecting on this period, it is obvious that my learning experience as a student shaped my teaching style. This indicates the influence teachers have and emphasizes that they should set good examples for their students as students will often imitate their teacher's performance in some ways (Burhan-Horasanli & Ortaçtepe, 2016; Meirink, Meijer, Verloop, & Bergen, 2009; Wilson & Deaney, 2010). As a student, I experienced positive interactions with my teachers who effectively used the instructional process. My experiences, in turn, shaped the way I taught in that I believed good communication is a prerequisite for learning to take place effectively (Brown, 2001; Pettis, 2005). This was embedded within my teaching philosophy then and it has remained.

As a student at the time, I was privileged to have teachers who encouraged me to learn and do my best during learning. Thus, I believe that facilitating students to engage in active learning in a conducive classroom environment is important. My passion to be a qualified English instructor took me to teachers' college where I spent four years learning the art and craft of teaching to shape my teaching competence. During my college years, I was appointed as an English instructor in a private English school. My job at the school was a turning point as I learned to reflect on appropriate learning and teaching strategies. This was due to my own status of being the student in one context and the language instructor in the other. This is relevant to Flores and Day's suggest that prior experience "plays a strong mediating role in the identities which new teachers brought into their school teaching experience" (2006, p. 223).

My experience as a student also significantly informed and shaped my classroom practices. I realized that teaching in a real classroom with students from many different backgrounds was a complex experience for beginning teachers like myself (Maistre & Parê, 2010). Numerous factors such as motivation, attitude, planning, and transference need to be considered and addressed. Experts in second language acquisition identify three types of motivation that also affect the acquisition of the language (Brown, 2000, 2001). *Integrative motivation* encourages students to learn English to integrate with English-speaking communities (Brown, 2000; Gass & Selinker, 2001). In *instrumental motivation*, English is seen as an instrument to improve their career or continue their education. For example, Indonesian students learn English and coach themselves to improve their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score to enable them to gain admission to universities in the United States or as a requirement for scholarship applications. The third type of motivation is *motivational intensity* (Brown, 2001). Students learn EFL because of their innate motivation to learn the language.

When students learn FLs, they may be motivated because of a combination of these types of motivation. In some instances, instrumental motivation affects student language acquisition more than integrative motivation does. For example, my students' goal in learning a foreign language was not because they want to assimilate into Western culture but because they believed that English would help them to obtain certain jobs. In other instances, integrative motivation may be better able to help students' learning, since learning a language is not limited

to learning syntax, morphology or sounds. It is a long process where learners need to assimilate into the culture of the target language.

In addition to these three types of motivation, Brown (2001) adds two more sources of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. The former is the commitment to learn which comes from inner consciousness. The latter is the commitment that is fostered by external factors. Although both sources of motivation play a significant role in shaping students' attitudes, intrinsic motivation, which emerges voluntarily, lasts longer than extrinsic motivation, which may be involuntarily. Although motivation is not the only resource for successful learning, it is an important component of success (Gass & Selinker, 2001), and those who are intrinsically motivated will learn better than those who are not.

Attitude, which is defined as the positive or negative behaviour of certain language learners, is also an important component in second language acquisition (SLA; Aveni, 2005). When learners are positive about their ability and are confident in their use of the language, as I experienced in my early days of learning English, they will have the courage to communicate in the language and use it in their writing. In addition, a positive attitude will determine when, where and how a learner uses the language (Aveni, 2005). By contrast, if language learners feel negative about their ability and lack confidence, it interferes with their use of the language and can reduce their confidence toward the language.

In my classroom, I observed a student who had an average level of English. However, most of his classmates regarded him as an intelligent student who exceeded their language ability. This assumption boosted his confidence, resulting in his being willing to use the language daily and becoming talkative in class. This positive perception of himself affected his attitude to learning the language and in turn, it made him one of brilliant students. It means that boosting students' self-efficacy should be a priority during the instructional process.

Since motivation and attitude are important in language learning, I was committed to increasing my students' motivation and challenging their language learning attitudes. In spite of my ability to boost students' motivation, I recognized that I lacked abilities in designing an effective lesson plan. I often came to the classroom with limited preparation, such as what and how to teach, and I gave little attention to the objective and philosophy of the lesson, even though I knew that good lesson planning helps effective teaching to take place (Brown, 2001; Farrel, 2005; Woodward, 2004). This drawback created a problem because it was hard for students to grasp the materials I taught. I realized that planning the lesson well was one of the central components of effective teaching.

### **Learning from Experience**

In the department of EFL education, English was also used as a tool of interaction among students and teaching staff. I studied the four skills, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as grammar separately. However, the lecturers used English as the medium of instruction and, as a result, I was always exposed to spoken skills, and this improved my speaking competence.

At the school I was responsible for providing teaching materials and arranging instructional schedules as well as teaching. I not only had valuable teaching and learning experiences, but I was also mentored by professionals in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) on how to conduct effective teaching. Mentorship is an important process that all beginner teachers should take into account (Maistre & Parê, 2010).

As my experience had shown that teaching EFL should be conducted by integrating all skills instead of teaching each skill separately, I started approaching teaching EFL in that manner. To facilitate a more effective teaching and learning environment, I divided the class into different levels of competence: Basic Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper

Intermediate, Advance to Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) classes. The four skills were equally emphasized in all levels. I also offered Basic Conversation and Pre-Intermediate Conversation classes to enhance interested students' speaking skills.

Furthermore, I selected different materials for each level based on their proficiency. All students who registered for classes were tested and then put into classes for their proficiency levels. The Manager of the School, who holds a TESOL degree from an American university, always emphasized three teaching philosophies. *First*, showing affection and promoting a friendly classroom atmosphere are important attitudes all instructors should hold on. *Second*, as learning language requires constant practice and exposure to the language, teachers are encouraged to use the language as the medium of instruction. *Third*, a lesson plan that covers study objectives, proficiency training, and instructional activities should be well-prepared in advance. The lesson plan not only helps teachers to stay on track but also provides a big picture for students in the course of learning.

Certain teaching philosophies drove my teaching performance, and I always tried to apply these during teaching. Teaching philosophies reflect one's ways of teaching as suggested by Gutek (2004), thus it is important for all teachers to hold them. I believe that trusting students and giving them sufficient time to think will encourage students' learning and this becomes my teaching philosophy. In one of my classes, for example, I provided an illustrated English text. I asked students to skim the text and spot the difficult vocabulary. This activity was conducted in the first five minutes of the class. Students then read the text on their own in silence for 10 minutes. The next step was asking some volunteers to explain the content of the text without translating it into the L1. Finally, I highlight some structural elements and explain them to the students (refer to DeCarrico & Larsen-Freeman, 2002; Ellis, 2002; Hinkel & Fotos, 2002). This teaching strategy was strongly very much influenced by the combination of my learning and teaching experience and my reflection on my reading of the EFL textbooks.

To enhance students' writing ability, I sometimes switched my teaching strategy from asking them to explain the content of the texts orally, to explaining it in the written form. Listening skills were also developed by playing English cassettes and then asking students to answer some questions about the recording. This strategy enhances students' speaking ability as well, as it gave students' opportunity to practice their language.

### **The Contestation Between Learning and Teaching Experience**

Having received my BA in language teaching, I started teaching English as the permanent English instructor in the private English school and as a teaching assistant at my college. Prior to being given my full tenure as a member of the teaching staff, I was required to attend a course to sharpen my language skills. The learning experience in the program was somewhat different from my previous learning experiences. My speaking skills were developed through debates and discussions of particular topics provided by teachers. This experience was challenging because to debate well I needed to read a wide range of literature. However, this gave me a chance to improve my reading skills.

My other learning experience in my post-college year was my training at the Indonesia-Australia Language Foundation (IALF), Jakarta, at the Monash University English Language Centre (MUELC), Australia, and in the Ohio Program of Intensive English, USA. This improved both my learning and my teaching of the language as I shifted my position from being an English instructor to an English learner. I understood what it is like to be a learner, to have expectations of my instructor and to aspire to achieve my learning goals. This experience helped to train me to be a reflective practitioner upon my return to teaching.

In addition, my experience as a student in the Department of Linguistics at an American university was insightful and influential. Three core subjects: Material in Teaching English as



a Foreign Language (TEFL), TEFL Methodology, and Practicum in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching were influential in helping me to become a reflective practitioner. This was due not only to the extensive exposure to those subjects but also to the reflective papers I had to write on a weekly basis. These subjects also prepared me to become a more competent practitioner as I increased my skills in developing teaching materials and improved my teaching competence. These language learning experiences were advantageous when I stepped into my real teaching career. I applied all of these to my instructional activities. In addition to maintaining my teaching philosophies, designing good lesson plans and covering all necessary components become my new priorities.

### **Being a Reflective Practitioner**

My long experience as an assistant and a part-time and full-time EFL instructor has shaped and developed my professional competence. My reflection *on*, *in* and *for* my experience has helped me to realize that becoming an effective language instructor is not a one-way process. It is complex and multi-dimensional, as argued by many other researchers in the field of teacher education (see Flores & Day, 2006; Jephcote & Salisbury, 2009; Louws et al., 2017b; McDougall, 2010; Timośtśuk & Ugaste, 2010; Williams, 2010; Wilson & Deaney, 2010). One should indeed engage in reflection and professional development efforts to enable one to become a more effective instructor. It is important to engage in reflection and professional development efforts to become a more effective instructor. This is a lifelong process (Flores & Day, 2006). My experiences of being both an EFL student and instructor suggest that teaching competence is shaped and reshaped, not only by formal teacher training but also by one's teaching experiences and contexts.

For example, my first experience of language learning at boarding school led to my understanding that language should be taught step-by-step in chronological order and in coherently in sequence. Pettis (2005) supports this view. Therefore, in my first years of boarding school, I was taught simple grammar and then developed it gradually (Ellis, 2002; Hinkel & Fotos, 2002; Swan, 2005). If students understood parts of speech, for example, teachers then went further to teach higher levels of grammar, and all instructional activities were conducted in English. However, this strategy did not train students to acquire integrated language skills.

As I reflected on my learning experience at the school, I realized that teaching EFL is much more than training students' grammar *per se*. Students who learn EFL should be taught through an integrated language teaching approach rather than teaching each component in isolation. Teachers should at least combine receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing), for example, by teaching listening and speaking at the same time, and/or reading and writing. This strategy is arguably more effective in helping students learn the language (Machmud & Abdullah, 2017; Meikheimer & Aldosari, 2013).

In addition, my experiences of learning at the university gave me insights into developing warm communication with students (Brown, 2001; Lewis, 2005; Pettis, 2005; Tavakoli & Baniasad-Azad, 2017). Lewis (2005) asserts that teachers should display positive personal attributes in the classroom. Teachers should also help students to develop collaborative approaches to learning. The most important classroom practice lies in the teacher's ability to connect students' prior knowledge with their recent knowledge. In addition, I found that lack of preparation of lesson plans outlining study objectives made students confused about what they were required to achieve. Therefore, designing good lesson plans is at the heart of the instructional process (Farrel, 2005; Woodward, 2004).

During my tenure as an English instructor in the English school, I found that good lesson plans enhanced the instructional process (Drost & Levine, 2015; Stephanie, 2012).

Farrel (2005) and Woodward (2004) state that an effective teacher will design good lesson plans which identify overarching goals.

My experiences after my college years justified my innate belief that creating a learning community, where students are taught through learning-partners, role plays, developing their intellect, and enhancing their self-concepts, is indeed an effective way of instruction (Pettis, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Ur, 2005). In addition, these experiences taught me that providing equal opportunities for students to express themselves can help reduce feelings of resentment among students. The other lesson learned from my training at the IALF, MUELC, OPIE was that students' mistakes should be corrected in such a way that they will not be discouraged (DeCarrico & Larsen-Freeman, 2002).

All these experiences have formed the basis of my teaching career as a junior faculty member in a higher education institution. Upon entering a full teaching tenure, I was prepared by those multiple contexts and experiences, and I am able to transform my teaching philosophy and practices. I apply all the insights I gained during my training. In my first meeting with students, for instance, I provide them with the syllabus containing study objectives and course expectations. I also maintain good relationships with students from the early days of my teaching. This increases students' confidence to develop their competence and effectively develop their language abilities.

### Discussion

This article has shown the importance of reflective practice to help practitioners' awareness of their practices. As I reflected *on*, *in* and *for* my practices in this article, I have recounted my learning during my earlier years of learning and teaching English. I have also explored my learning-teaching journeys. These journeys have shifted my teaching and professional philosophies, in which I have defined and redefined language instruction. In reflecting on these experiences, I recognize that I have learnt, and continue to refine, three important components in my teaching. Firstly, English should be taught in an integrated way, with all four skills emphasized. Secondly, a well-developed lesson plan is central to effective teaching. Finally, a healthy teachers-students relationship is one of the most significant factors for successful learning.

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