# An Autoethnography of an EFL Teacher Stages of Development in Choices of the Best ELT Methodology

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**Abstract**

This paper attempted to share lived experiences in the teaching career of an EFL teacher in her choices of the best pedagogical methods to be applied in her class. The paper was done under the lens of autoethnography, which was believed to be the most appropriate measure to deal with writing genres such as experiences and narratives in one's life. The result presented three important stages that an average EFL teacher might undergo. It is hoped that the paper could provide more insights into the teaching life and experiences of the typical EFL teacher and thus be beneficial to novice colleagues in perfecting their profession.

## 1. Introduction

In May of 2023 when I was attending a "research trends in ELT methodology" course – part of my Ph.D. program, my professor cited viewpoints of ELT gurus on ELT methodologies to provide us with a broader view of choices of a language teacher towards appropriate teaching methods in their class. For example, according to Spiro (2013), a reflective teacher will be able to analyze and be critical to teaching methodologies presented in existing literature when they apply those kinds of knowledge into practice. Through the light of their teaching experience, they will create their own teaching theories or philosophy.

To my astonishment, my professor then asked us to write an autoethnographic paper on our professional self-reflection over our teaching careers as a final assignment of the course. This was the process how I came across the concept of autoethnography for the first time in my academic life.

I believed that I was not the only one who had no prior exposure to this emerging way of doing research, but a lot of my classmates did. As a result, we were drowning in confusion for a while.

Regardless of this fact, I decided to do some sought of relevant research to decode the concept of autoethnography. Fortunately, I found Wall's (2006) article discussing her autoethnography in learning about autoethnography. I found myself very much similar to her to the point that prior to knowing of autoethnography, I had believed that doing research was a very canonical process in which objectivity was the utmost state. As a result, all the concepts of "self" must be entirely neglected, the first or second person i.e. "I, you, we" could not be used or else they would reduce the value of one's research work. Contrary to all these notions, what I learned about autoethnography just challenged all the beliefs I held against the nature of doing research before.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) claimed that autoethnography was an approach to doing and writing research work by analyzing personal experience to achieve an understanding of cultural experience. An autoethnography then was both process and product.

Arikan (2015) further elaborated on the characteristics of autoethnography. According to him, autoethnography is a combination of autobiography- gaining insights into one's past and ethnography-learning about practical cultures, common values, and beliefs to help insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers).

Because of the notion of "lived experience", a variety of data forms can contribute to the data collection for analysis. These can account for personal documents e.g. journals, interview notes and transcripts, poems, and/or artwork (Wall, 2006).

In Ellis and Bochner's (2000) point of view, an autoethnographer wrote about moments that had strong impacts on the trajectory of their lives. Consequently, products of such a process are not any different from those of qualitative research. Specifically, common products of an autoethnographic work include short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, social science prose, and so on. (Wall, 2006, Soleas, 2020, Trahar, 2013).

In short, an autoethnographer attempts to produce aesthetic, artful, and thick descriptions of personal experience evidenced by field notes, interviews, artifacts, etc. using facets of storytelling. This makes their experience meaningful, engaging, and possible to bring about social change for more people (Arikan, 2015, Ellis and Bochner, 2000, Soleas, 2020, Trahar, 2015, Wall, 2006, Yazan, 2019).

## 2. Method

Evoked by the stunning intentions of autoethnography, in this article, I was seeking to share my experience being an EFL teacher over the past 14 years. The focus of my trajectory was laid in my choices of the so-called "best teaching methodologies to ELT in different stages of my experience.

The data were collected from my lesson plans over the years, and the teaching portfolios that I was still having with me. The data were arranged into different themes to help synthesize stages that I had been through in my choices over the best teaching methodologies to be applied in my classroom. The result of this process indicated three main periods during my teaching career up to now, which were discussed in the next section.

This writing consequently, aimed to do a self-reflection on my own teaching so that hindsight that was discussed could help to better my future professional development. The paper also hoped to inspire other colleagues and especially novice teachers in my field to work out appropriate ways to cut off the process to some time and foster their profession more rapidly and efficiently.

## 3. Results: Development in choices of the best ELT methodologies over the time

*3.1 Adoption of Communicative language teaching (CLT) in the teaching context*

Similar to any colleague, during my very first years of teaching practice, I did not hold a lot of experience in the field. My professional identity was forming and I still needed time to make it stable. As a result, I tended to adopt the CLT in my teaching since I was amazed by its characteristics when I studied at university.

Under the CLT perspective, language learning is a process of negotiation of meaning because language is seen as a means to express and achieve specific purposes of the communication process so that learners or speakers of the language can perform real-world activities (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). To serve that purpose, there is an emphasis on interaction attained by pairwork, group work, and the authenticity of the input through classroom activities.

With that affinity in mind, a typical version of my lesson plans at that time was full of activities targeted at communication and closely followed the steps of the CLT. For example,

<center>

**UNIT 6: CULTURES OF THE WORLD**

**CLASS: 1**

**PART I (p. 102-p.106)**

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| TIMING | ACTIVITIES | CONTENT | TEACHER'S PREPARATION |
|---|---|---|---|
| 15' | **Warm-up:** Discussion Group work | Give an overview about cultures of the world. Students talk about discussion questions in groups: 1. Look at the photo. What is the young woman doing? 2. What kinds of difficulties can a person have when visiting or moving to a place of different culture? Give example. 3. What places and cultures are you interested in? Why? **Answers will vary** | - A funny story about cultures |
| 10' | **Pre-Listening:** pre-teaching vocabulary Pair work | Students learn how to guess meaning from context by doing exercise in section 2, page 103 **Answer key:** 1. impression (n): opinion, judgment 2. used to: accustomed to, familiar with. 3. exotic (a): unusual, different from the usual 4. doggie bag (n): a bag in which people take food home from a restaurant 5. amazed (a): surprised 6. so far (adv): until now 7. leftovers (n): the food that wasn't eaten | |

| 20' | **While listening** | - **Listening for main ideas**: Focus on key words<br>1. What is Salma's impression of the United States?<br>**Answer**: The people are friendly and the city is beautiful, but the food isn't so good.<br>2. What surprised Salma in the restaurant?<br>**Answer**: Salma is surprised about several things. In restaurant, you received too much food. Beth took the leftovers home. There is air conditioning in restaurants, so it's very cold. They put ice in the water. You can't smoke in restaurants<br>- **Listening for details:** students should be able to specify when the answer is mentioned and consider carefully the related information<br>**Answer:**<br>1. False. Salma doesn't like hotdogs because they are usually made from pork.<br>2. True. He didn't like it at first, but he is used to it now<br>3. False. Yolanda wasn't surprised. Salma was.<br>4. True. In Lebanon, people use cell phones "almost everywhere"<br>5. False. Salma uses that expression when she says that it was OK for Beth to make her smoke outside.<br>- T and S together give an explanation for the proverb: "When in Rome, do as Romans do. | Write the two questions on the board.<br>Have students read the instruction and then close their book.<br><br><br><br><br><br>Remind students that they should write down clues for each answer also |
| 30' | **Speaking:**<br>group discussion<br><br><br>**Another listening exercise** | **Students discuss questions:**<br>1. Is the proverb always true? Give an example when it's possible and impossible.<br> 2. Have you ever been in a situation where everyone was behaving in a way that you didn't like? How did you feel? What did you do?<br>- **Listening for stressed words** (part 5, p.104).<br>**Answer**: 1. first; 2. impression; 3. friendly; 4. food; 5. first; 6. used; 7. love; 8. Mexican; 9. exotic; 10.like; 11. pretty; 12. too much; 13. finish; 14. amazed; 15. leftovers; 16. isn't; 17. doggie; 18. else | Write questions on the board |
| 45' | **Learning with foreigner** | Students talk with the foreign volunteer about cultures in Viet Nam and in Germany | |

As presented in this lesson plan, the teaching procedures closely followed the model of the CLT approach. Specifically, the pre-communicative activities lay focus on vocabulary and structure learning through a communicative task (group discussion). Then students learned about listening strategies and applied them in a listening exercise to check for accuracy. The next stages of the lesson, however, were full of interactive activities which emphasized information-sharing and information-exchanging (via group discussion and interaction with a foreign volunteer who joined the class through a volunteer exchange program between the university and non-governmental organizers)

*3.2 An adaptation of methods to the teaching context*
After some first years of teaching practice, I developed expertise in understanding and application of the CLT. Despite this fact, during this period I kept questioning myself when I recognized a number of issues arising after my application of the CLT.

The first problem was derived from the class size. Specifically, when there were more than 50 students in the class, I started feeling confused since I could not reach all but just part of them, leading to the drawback that some students were left behind. It must be a guilty act of a teacher but I could not do more about it since the large class size did lead to overwhelming work for me. The second shortcoming of the CLT was that although my students could achieve good fluency in their communication, they just kept making lexical or grammar mistakes during the process of their speaking. This could be accepted when they conveyed basic communication. However, this could be an obstacle that hindered their accomplishment of a higher level of language proficiency. These problems urged me to seek alternative teaching ways. Then I decided to change from adoption to adaptation of the approach, making it more appropriate to my teaching context. An example of my lesson plan in this period is presented as follows

**A LESSON PLAN ADAPTING METHODS TO THE TEACHING CONTEXT**

Teacher: Lý Thị Trà My, MA

Date: 18th, Sept., 2014

Class: English Language 8B

Lesson 6: Listening & Speaking: Chapter 3. Business and Money Duration: 50 minutes (7:50 AM – 8:40 AM)

Objectives: after the lesson, the students are supposed to be able to:

-       Master some expressions to talk about money
-       Be able to show their opinion about money in English
-       Improve their listening skills via listening activities
-       Be able to ask and give advice in English

| Timing | Focus | Activities |
|--------|-------|-----------|
| 10' | Reviewing key words in previous lessons | **Warm –up:**<br>- Have students play a vocabulary game then guess the topic of the lesson |
| 15' | Speaking | - Have students work in groups to discuss the questions<br>- Have students speak in front of the class to share their ideas |
| 5' | Previewing vocabulary for listening activities | - Have students guess the meanings of the words or phrases using the contexts given on page 53<br>- Check vocabulary |
| 10' | Listening | - Have students read the listening exercise<br>- Have students listen and find the correct answers<br>- Check and correct students' answers |
| 10' | Giving advice | - Have students look at the audio script on pages 279, 271 and find out the ways people ask and give advice and then discuss the expressions<br>- Have students watch a video to learn more ways to give advice to someone<br>- Introduce some more ways of giving advice |
| 10' | Speaking practice | - Have students work in pairs and give advice to each other on some situations given to them<br>- Have students perform their conversations in the class |

A close look at this lesson plan reveals that communicative activities still remained the dominant feature of the learning and teaching process. However, a more focus on form was taken into account when there were more activities to check student's form accuracy. For example, in the first 10 minutes, students were asked to learned key words, then the teacher checked students' understanding through a game. In the 25th minute, students learned more vocabulary in another context, then were checked again. This was repeated in the 20th minute before the lesson ended.

Aside from that, interactive activities also changed to be more diverse. In addition to group work and pairwork, students now did more communicative tasks on themselves e.g. monologues or oral presentations. Obviously, there were a lot of modifications to the CLT that were present at this stage of my teaching career.

*3.3 Application of an eclectic ELT approach*

Now that I became more mature and experienced in my career, my teaching methods kept evolving in proportion to my teaching cognition. It was thanks to my professional development courses about ELT that I got to know more diverse applicable ELT approaches. In this article, I wanted to discuss three most striking of them namely the Text-driven approach, Task-based language teaching and the PERMA model.

A text-driven approach is a language teaching approach which uses engaging texts to drive units of material. Engaging texts are texts focusing on learners' emotional responses and are expected to be able to stimulate multi-dimension representation which can help to achieve an affective impact and deep process that can facilitate language acquisition (Tomlinson, 2003). This is so because Tomlinson (2003) believes that the success of language learning and teaching depends much on learner engagement in learning. Therefore, it is important to initiate learners' emotions and experiences to help durable learning occur.

In Task-based language teaching (TBLT), meaning is the focus of the learning process. This can be obtained through a set of communicative tasks that learners perform (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). A TBLT lesson include primarily three stages e.g. (1) pre-task stage, (2) a main-task stage and (3) a post-task stage but only (2) is needed. According to Ellis and Shintani (2013), when language learners perform a variety of different types of tasks in groups or individually, they will be able to attain their language learning purposes. In such a case, the nature of tasks plays a major role in deciding the learning outcomes. Hence, Ellis and Shintani (2013) in support of Prabhu's (1987) pedagogic classification present types of performing tasks that language learners should be exposed to including information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap.

The final theory that governed most of my teaching at the moment was named the PERMA model. This

model though was not a true ELT approach was found meaningful to language learning and teaching because of the values it brought to students' well-being. Proposed by Seligman and colleagues (2009), the model covered five dimensions that contributed to Positive education including Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning in Life, and Accomplishment. These aspects are incorporated with each other to pursue a state of well-being.

*Positive emotion*

According to Seligman (2011), positive emotion is the first element that shapes the construct of well-being. Specifically, hedonic emotions e.g. love, contentment, pleasure, etc. all contribute to constructing a state of positivism which helps to achieve a happy life and reduce biases. Happiness and life satisfaction though remain subjective measures are what human beings long to seek for their entire lives. Therefore, positive emotions should be cultivated in education to help student learning thrive.

*Engagement*

What human beings seek to ensure an "engaged life" may rest upon the so-called 'the state of flow' (Seligman, 2011). Flow is a major part of an engaged life which includes a loss of self-consciousness on time stopping people from being 'one with the music' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seligman, 2011).

Once the flow of engagement occurs, people can exploit their highest strengths and talents to cope with challenges hindering their way. As a result, engagement facilitates learning and hence needs to be activated in classrooms.

*Relationship*

Seligman (2011) attaches the term "Other people" to describe the meaning of positive relationships. This is to say that the connection that people have with other people around do have an important impact on their pursuit of positive emotions, engagement, meaning, and accomplishment. Therefore, relationship also contributes to well-being.

*Meaning in life*

The fourth pillar in the PERMA model refers to a meaningful life. This dimension is especially vital because it gives one a purpose to live on. Meaning is increased when people feel their connections to others in the community (Seligman et al., 2009). In this case, Meaning in life has a strong bond to Relationship when both imply the importance of the connection between people. In this perspective, meaning is attained when people know what they live for and thus identify their strengths to obtain something that is larger than themselves. (Seligman, 2002).

*Accomplishment*

The last dimension in the PERMA model – Accomplishment is a mediation to reach achievement, mastery, or competence (Cheng and Chen, 2021). Throughout the process of working toward and reaching their goals, and developing self-engagement, students achieve 'a sense of pride', contributing to their learning well-being and success (Seligman, 2011).

The work of these five dimensions is to ensure the occurrence of students' well-being in the classroom (Helgesen, 2016; Seligman, 2011). Therefore, a number of education institutes have implemented this model in their educational programs. Those can account for the Penn Education Interventions, the Positive Psychology Program in the United States of America and the Geelong Grammar School Project in Australia.

Absorbing strong characteristics of these language teaching approaches, I constructed my own teaching principles which were usually based on the combination of many different approaches. In the following section, I presented the teaching principles that I based my teaching on and the general lesson plan that I designed on the foundation of the PERMA model used in teaching speaking skills to EMP students.

*Approach*

Language learning is a process of cultivating students' well-being which acts as a medium to attain learning purposes. The process is broken down into five important pillars namely positive emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning in life, and accomplishment. These dimensions do not exist isolatedly from each other. Instead, they integrate into and support one another to achieve the purposes of the learning process.

*Method*

The teaching methodology is PERMA-oriented. Specifically, teaching strategies should focus on integrating the main contents with specific techniques that target at five dimensions of the PERMA. Furthermore, one specific teaching strategy may target at a certain pillar or more. Regardless of how much a PERMA dimension is focused on in each teaching strategy, it is important that the whole lesson in one class meeting obtains all the positive emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning in life, and accomplishment.

*Techniques*

Different techniques will be employed on intervening positive emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning in life, and accomplishment in the English class. They could be the use of PERMA-based speaking prompts, PERMA-based tasks that meet the requirements of the course, and the use of related videos. The next section will explain the target at each PERMA pillar in specific.

**A PERMA-BASED LESSON PLAN**

| Teaching and learning focus | ACTIVITIES |
|---|---|
| **Pre-step:** <br> - Getting ready for the class. <br> - Revising old knowledge | - Students talk about *what they do well before the class.* <br> - Students perform their take-home conversation and listen to the teacher's and their friends' comments |
| **While-step:** <br> - Providing necessary knowledge | - Students watch a video about the topic and do follow-up assignments (multiple choice questions, True-False questions, Short answer questions) to better their understanding of the topic. <br> - The teacher presents the necessary vocabulary and designs games to check students' understanding (crosswords, lucky number, Slap the board, …) <br> - The teacher presents the sample conversation (ready-made in the textbook) and asks students different types of questions to analyze the potential content. <br> - Students practice the sample conversation in pairs. <br> - The teacher asks questions to trigger students' ideas for the required content of the conversation. <br> - Students work in groups and discuss the answers to the guided questions. <br> - Students work in pairs and prepare their conversation. The teacher goes around to deliver help when necessary. |
| **Post-step** <br> Consolidating the knowledge learned | - Some students volunteer to perform their conversations in class (if time allows). <br> - The teacher and friends give feedback <br> - Students discuss the question: "What did I do well in the class today?" <br> - The teacher reminds students to write their e-diary and responds to it. |

In this lesson plan, although the PERMA-based teaching techniques were more prominent, there were still other ELT approaches present since the lesson was actually a combination of the best characteristics of different approaches. For example, that students recalled the good things that happened to them before going to class, watched relevant videos, played games to trigger their prior knowledge and vocabulary exemplified the characteristics of the Text-driven approach. Moreover, that students practiced speaking English through a wide range of tasks reflected the Task-based language teaching.

Generally, I felt most satisfied when I achieved this stage of my teaching career. When I had a sufficient understanding of the pedagogical methods, the importance of teaching based on learner needs, the context and requirements of the workplace, I preferred to use an eclectic approach based on my personal principles and practical knowledge. By following this, I could always produce effective lessons that could help learners achieve their expected learning outcomes and thus align with the demand of the workplace as well as society.

**4. Conclusion and recommendation**

It was more than 14 years since I started my teaching career. Through the ups and downs in my job, I had to admit that I made progress in my professional development and became more mature in choices of how to carry out a lesson.

Basically, I believed that an average teacher would just undergo these three stages in their career, accounting for the adoption of the methods learned into practice, the adaptation of the methods to meet with the teaching reality and finally the construction of oneself's teaching principles based on the eclectic approaches (Richards and Rodgers, 2014).

The process of achieving such maturity is precious and worthy, however, rather time-consuming. Had I been guided about this process more closely when I was in university, I would have been able to cut off some time of this maturity process to achieve professionalism much faster. Having said that, I recommend that teacher education programs nowadays make an effort in providing teacher students with more efficient ways to help them achieve stage two or three earlier than their previous generations. This is significant for not only teacher professional development but for learners also because in any circumstance, a language teacher should be able to select the most appropriate teaching methods that are in line with learner needs and social demands (Richards and Rodgers, 2014).

**5. Closing statement**

The primary purpose of this paper is to share my experiences in the changes of my choices towards the best ELT methods over time, I really hope that novice colleagues can find it helpful to their professional development. I am strongly following Yazan's (2019) viewpoint that autoethnographic work is never finished. As teachers, we need to continuously do hindsight, look back at our work to make our teaching career thrive, ourselves updated, and in demand for society's development.

I also thank my professor for giving me a precious opportunity to learn about autoethnography. This has

helped me to learn more about another interesting way of doing research. In the end, I find that autoethnography is not to confuse teachers but to help them reflect on their own teaching in an aesthetic and effective way.

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