

COMPREHENSIVE REFLECTIVE PRACTICES IN AN EFL TEACHING CONTEXT: AN EXAMINATION OF EFFICACY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the efficacy of comprehensive reflective practices that involve lesson plans evaluation, peer observation, observation formatting, peer feedback, and self-reflection in an EFL teaching context among both novice and experienced English teachers. The novice English teachers in this study refer to students performing practicum in TESOL courses as part of their overall academic evaluation. The experienced English teachers were primary school English teachers located in southern Taiwan. This study recruited eighteen novice and eight experienced teachers during the 2018 fall semester. Both groups made lesson plans prior to English teaching observations. Peer observation was performed during each instructor's teaching demo. Soon after the observed lesson was ended, oral peer feedback was given to the teacher to reflect on his or her own teaching practices. An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to the participants of this study regarding their perceptions of the usefulness of peer feedback in reflective practice at semester's end. The findings indicated that both novice and experienced teachers considered peer observation and peer feedback as beneficial to their professional growth since it allowed them access to novel instructional methods. The study concluded with some pedagogical suggestions for efficacious and comprehensive reflection of TESOL programs and teaching practices.

Keywords: Professional development, Observation, Peer feedback, Reflective practice, TESOL, EFL.

INTRODUCTION

Global citizens find it of extreme importance to be able to speak at least one foreign language in addition to their own native speech. Among seven thousand languages currently spoken worldwide, it is commonly agreed to that English is an international language and acting as a lingua franca for intercultural communication. Speaking or understanding English has become a key issue in all sectors, especially that of education, and Taiwan is no exception. The Taiwanese government has encouraged people to pay more attention to English education in order to achieve the goal of making local citizens becoming fluent bilingual speakers (English and Mandarin). In line with governmental policy, the Taiwanese Ministry of Education (MOE) announced its reform of Grade 1-9 Curriculum Guidelines stipulating English education in Taiwan. Such reforms extended from junior high schools to elementary schools in 1997 (Wang et al., 2005). Based on these guidelines, elementary school English education commenced in 2001 to include grades five and six and later extended to grade three in 2005.

Despite the fact that learners have three additional years of compulsory English education, dissatisfaction towards nearly two decades of English language teaching and learning in elementary schools has regularly been reported among policymakers, educators, parents, and learners (Chan, 2004; Zhu et al., 2005). Further, the outcome of English language learners in

rural areas has consistently reported to have worse test scores on the nationwide Comprehensive Assessment Program for Junior High School Students examination (Chang, 2019; Lin & Wang, 2017; Zhang, 2020).

To assist those in a disadvantaged position of English education in rural areas, a so-called “Teach Less, Learn More” program was initiated in 2011 (Chen, 2015). The importance of the “Teach Less, Learn More” concept was first mentioned by Singapore’s Prime Minister in his 2004 National Day address. As the Minister stated:

In fact, I think we should cut down on some of this syllabus. It would mean less pressure on the kids, a bit less rote learning, more space for them to explore and discover their talents, and also more space for the teacher to think, to reflect, to find ways to bring out the best in their students and to deliver quality results. We’ve got to teach less to our students so that they will learn more [emphasis added]. (Lee 2004) (cited in Teo et al., 2013, p. 101).

Nevertheless, this program was introduced into the Taitung school system. It was amended to include the core teaching principles of the “Teach Less, Learn More” (TLLM) program to “reduce half of the teaching materials, no schedule, no homework”. After seeing the successful results of the Taitung TLLM English program, Kaohsiung City followed a similar path. It launched a local pilot project of “Upgrading Primary and Secondary School Pupils’ Achievements in English Learning” as an experimental program in 2013 by utilizing the previous TLLM model. The author of this study was invited to participate in Kaohsiung’s TLLM program in 2018 for one year. During that year, I personally witnessed a group of enthusiastic English teachers spending many hours preparing their teaching materials, writing lesson plans, visiting different schools weekly for in-class observations, conducting peer discussions, and offering teaching reflections. This phenomenon triggered this research regarding the comprehensive effectiveness of reflective teaching practices involving lesson plan evaluation, peer observation, peer feedback, and general reflective practices in EFL teaching contexts among both novice and experienced English teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lesson plans

Any lesson should begin with a well-planned lesson pro forma. As Anderson (2015) stated, “the lesson plan pro forma plays a central role in teacher education” (p. 228). Teachers should be educated regarding how to write appropriate lesson plans from the very first lesson of any teaching career. A pro forma is important for teachers to reflect on their perceptions and the given lesson’s effectiveness. Anderson examined 23 lesson plan templates and concluded that the majority of examined pro forma included the following sections:

1. aims, objectives, or learning outcomes;
2. context (including learner profiles and their prior topical knowledge), and the ‘fit’ between the observed lesson and the scheme of work/ syllabus;
3. personal aims or developmental points (sometimes suggesting observer focus);
4. procedure or activities (usually detailing student and/ or teacher activity, timing, interaction, and optionally including stage aims and resources); and,
5. anticipated problems (or occurrences) and solutions (or responses) (p. 230).

A well-rounded lesson plan is frequently complex due to it should be realistic in order to reflect upon teachers’ knowledge about how learning should occur in the minds of learners; it should reflect and compromise teaching practice more precisely, and it must assist both trainee and in-service teachers to teach more effectively.

It is vital for both novice and experienced teacher educators to participate in teaching workshops or conferences. Meeus et al. (2017) investigated what Flemish teacher-educators consider essential in their professional learning practice to meet their professional needs. The study results showed that participating in workshops, refresher courses or conferences, and consultation with colleagues were the top two preferred practices among 225 teacher participants. It is believed that professional teaching skills may become enhanced when educators continually interact with other teaching professionals. When teachers partake in professional development, two predominant issues appear: mentoring programs and reflective practices.

Mentoring programs

Mentoring or peer mentoring programs are far from new. They provide opportunities for beginning teachers to gain more teaching skills and confidence from interaction with their peers or mentors. Nguyen & Ngo (2018) researched whether the participating EFL pre-service teachers in Vietnam benefited after joining a six-week practicum program with a peer-monitoring model. Results indicated, “peer-mentoring not only created opportunities for pre-service teachers to evaluate their own practice but also enhances their professional knowledge. Peer mentoring was not only used for sharing, it also served as a tool for reflection on teaching” (p. 194). It is evident that peer mentoring provides a highly supportive function for participants to be in collaborative, reflective practice and to learn from each other. In a similar vein, Rohmah (2018) also reported that after two semesters of an English teachers’ training program, including monthly workshops, monthly coordination meetings, peer observation, observations by a mentor, pre- and post-teaching conferences with a mentor, nine novice Indonesian English teachers responded positively toward their mentoring program. The participants revealed that the program had helped them to gain confidence in their teaching, as well obtain professional knowledge and upgraded teaching skills. A successful mentoring program also relies on participants’ awareness of their own reflective practices.

Reflective practices

The educational term reflective practice was initially meant to be, “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or support form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 118). Specifically, Richards and Farrell (2011) suggested, “a key to long-term professional development is the ability to be able to reflect consciously and systematically on [one’s] teaching experience” (p. 167). Therefore, to be an active educational practitioner, one should continuously reflect on his/ her own teaching. Farrell (2017) stipulated that reflective practice allows teachers to examine their professional practice on “what they do, why they do it, and how they do it”, both inside and outside the classroom (p. 8). Any teachers who are engaged in reflective practice hope to raise their awareness to seek out problems or impractical beliefs in their teaching to solve issues and to improve their pedagogical practice (Farrell & Ives, 2014; Hunter & Gibson, 2019; Russell, 2017; Walsh & Mann, 2015).

Reflective practice is commonly utilized in teacher education, and it is a practical consideration for most pre-service teachers. Most studies have shown positive results regarding teacher-educators who engaged in reflective practice (Azizah et al., 2018; Val Madin & Swanto, 2019; Shoffner et al., 2010). Others have argued that sufficient guidelines and practical instructions are provided seldomly to the prospective teachers to scaffold their reflective development (e.g., Hunter & Gibson, 2019; Risko et al., 2002; Walsh & Mann, 2015). In-service educational practitioners may find reflective practices useful but remain reluctant to modify their teaching style accordingly (Val Madin & Swanto, 2019).

To address the scarcity of research focused on a comprehensive reflective practice in Taiwan, the present study aims to examine the effectiveness of peer observation, peer feedback, and reflective practices in EFL teaching contexts among both novice and experienced English teachers. The current research intends to answer three research questions related to teacher-participants' perceptions of peer feedback, peer observations, and whether reflective practices aid teachers to modify or change their prospective teaching methods or styles.

METHODOLOGY

The current study employs a qualitative research method, for it best suits the purposes of the study. As Merriam (2009) stated, "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p.13). This study recruited eighteen novice and eight experienced teachers, and it was conducted during the 2018 Fall semester in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. The novice English teachers in this study refer to students enrolled in TESOL courses and who were responsible to perform teaching practice as part of their classroom assignment. Notably, these novice English teachers had previously taken two teaching methodology courses prior to the time of the study. The experienced English teachers were elementary English teachers located in Kaohsiung City, with each having at least three years of real teaching experience.

The data collection of the novice teachers was done by observing the weekly in-class micro-teaching activities and following-up with post-teaching conferences between the instructor, in this case, the researcher, and the entire class. Before launching each micro-teaching session, the novice teachers must prepare lesson plans ready for distribution along with an observation form. The post-teaching conference was conducted immediately after the observed lesson would end. During the post-teaching conferences, the novice teachers would reflect on their teaching aims, strategies, and concerns regarding their class lectures; subsequently, the novice teachers would receive peer feedback from both the instructor and their classmates.

The data collection of the experienced teachers was performed by observing the monthly in-class observation and following-up with post-teaching conferences between the teacher and other teacher participants. Before launching each observed teaching session, the experienced teachers were required to have his/ her lesson plan ready for distribution along with an observation form. The post-teaching conference was conducted immediately after the observed lesson ended. During the post-teaching conferences, the observed teacher would reflect on his or her teaching aims, strategies, and concerns with his/ her teaching with observers (the other experienced teachers), and the observed teacher would receive peer feedback from the teacher-participants.

An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to both novice and experienced teachers at the end of the particular semester. The data obtained from the classroom observations and post-teaching conferences were analyzed afterward to support the data which was collected from the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of Peer-mentoring intervention, reflection on teaching practices stood out in all post-teaching conferences. What became significant from the findings was how both experienced and novice teachers reflected on the strength and weakness of different aspects of

their lessons. The findings are classified into three themes useful to address the research questions of this study, as follows: 1. What is your perception toward peer feedback? And, do you find it beneficial to improve your English teaching? 2. How has peer observation influenced your form of teaching? And, in what aspect? 3. Have you changed your teaching method/ style after receiving peer feedback? If so, please specify how or why and provide relevant examples.

Perception toward peer feedback

The following extracts are used to address the first research question: What is your perception toward peer feedback? Do you find it to be beneficial to improve your English teaching? In this study, peer feedback plays a vital role in facilitating teacher participants to reflect on their teaching and to improve practices with their teaching methodology or classroom management skills. For instance, the statements below are teachers' reflected comments after receiving feedback at the post-teaching conference. Comments from experienced teachers were identified with an initial T (teacher), and novice teachers are likewise identified with the initials ST (student teacher) in the extracts.

Extract 1

"Peer feedback is a great way to improve my teaching. In my opinion, peer feedback is an excellent chance to share your ideas with others. And, the idea may give me some different thoughts that I've never thought before. When I'm teaching, I have some blind spots. With peer feedback, my co-workers can remind me of the things that I didn't notice or the students that I need to pay more attention to." (TM)

In Extract 1, TM strongly supports the use of peer feedback because it helps her discover the issues she was previously unaware of. By receiving feedback from her peers, TM was able to modify her teaching and to pay more attention to her learners' reactions or learning needs. Similarly, TQ made a positive comment toward peer feedback in Extract 2.

Extract 2

"As an inexperienced teacher like myself, I benefit a lot from peer feedback, especially in teaching techniques, methods, classroom management, and teaching tools. I really appreciate how those teachers were willing to share their teaching experience, and I've learned a lot from them." (TQ)

In the post-conference, TQ always listened intently and took notes on all of the comments and issues discussed in the meeting. TQ sometimes asked the researcher to explain the advantages and disadvantages of various teaching methods discussed during the meeting. As an inexperienced teacher, she was enthusiastic to learn from others to enhance her teaching practice. The statements made in Extracts 1 and 2 resonate with Nguyen & Ngo (2018) and Rohmah (2018) studies. They both stress the significance of having a mentoring program available because participants benefit tremendously from peers' or mentors' feedback. The following Extracts 3 and 4 are reflections made by the novice teachers. It should be noted that this was the first time the novice teachers engaged in peer observation and peer feedback.

Extract 3

"I think it's quite good to know others' opinions toward my teaching. Through peer feedback, I can know what I need to improve and what I need to do to make my teaching better. Through peer feedback, I realized that I prepared too many materials in a lesson, and the speed and classroom management also have some problems. Next time, I'd spend more effort to improve my teaching." (ST1)

Initially, when these novice teachers knew that they had to conduct a simulated forty-minute lesson in class, they were so panicked that they complained that they could not teach for such a lengthy period. However, it turned out that most of the students had prepared more than enough materials for their teaching practice, and ST1 was one of the examples. Although ST1

seemed to receive some less-than-favorable critical comments from his peers, he was not discouraged; instead, he was determined to make more efforts to improve his teaching practice. A similar situation was applied to ST2, seen in Extract 4.

Extract 4

“I think I like this peer feedback activity. According to the activity, I can clearly know my disadvantages in my micro-teaching. Although peer feedback may be a little critical, it is the most direct method to face the problem. Classmates are not teachers, and they can use the perspective of the student to tell us the disadvantage in the micro-teaching. We can know what students want from our teaching or something they think is not important in the class.” (ST2)

Data from multiple sources suggested that both novice and experienced teachers noted colleagues collaboration had assisted them to become reflective of their own classroom practices. As Walsh & Mann (2015) stressed, to make a reflective practice successful, teachers should cooperate and discuss their teaching with a critical friend or colleague for receipt of practical comments and suggestions. Notably, peer feedback facilitated them to become involved with more critical self-reflection of their practice after each lesson is completed. They could see the problems they had not noticed, and they were able to make changes to enhance their teaching practice, classroom management skills, and to become more caring of learner needs.

Influence of peer observation

This section intends to answer the second research question: “How has peer observation influenced your teaching, and in what aspect?” Walsh (2006) stated that “observations are of considerable value as a process of consciousness-raising and enhancing understanding” (p. 127, cited in Farrell & Ives, 2014). Observations not only offer teachers a chance to review their own as well as others’ teaching processes, but they also allow teachers to examine their teaching abilities throughout the lessons. There are numerous excellent comments taken from participants to express how peer observation has raised their awareness and influenced their teaching beliefs. Due to the limited space, only five extracts were chosen for this purpose, and they are discussed below.

Extract 5

“The purpose of peer observation is to ‘look up to the good models, if not, then reflect on our own practice (建賢思齊, 見不賢而自內省).’ Hence, I paid lots of attention when observing other teachers’ teaching, especially teaching skills, procedure, and T-S interactions. Of course, If I see the ‘not okay’ teaching, I will remind myself to avoid that. For example, I once saw a teacher using a Chinese proverb in her English class, and the students liked it. This gave me a different thought on how to incorporate various topics in my teaching.” (TL)

TL in Extract 5 used a Chinese proverb to explain the notion of peer observation, which is to ‘look up to the good models, if not, then reflect on our own practice.’ The statement is precisely the core value of peer observation. Participating teachers pay closer attention when observing others’ teaching practices. They continuously remind themselves of what they can/ should do, or what to avoid in pedagogical practice, as TL mentioned when she was inspired by other teachers to utilize more topic-matter in her lessons. In Extract 6 below, TD noted that before joining the program, her teaching was characterized to merely follow commercially-available materials, and it was monotonous. Nevertheless, after watching others’ teaching performance, she began to incorporate various teaching tools to boost teaching and learning results.

Extract 6

“When I first started teaching, I didn’t know how to teach. I always used materials taken from computer disks. So, students were learning from the designed program. After peer

observation, I started to realize that I shouldn't just ask the students to read textbooks and watch commercially-made programs. I began to use word cards, songs, and tools to reinforce students' learning outcomes. I've changed my teaching style, and I've learned a lot after each peer observation." (TD)

TC gave a similar comment in Extract 7.

Extract 7

"When I was teaching at a cram school, I would pay less attention to know whether students had really learned the lesson or not. After I joined this 'Teach Less, Learn More' program, I had changes to observe other teachers' teaching. I've found some problems with why students can't learn well. So, I think using spiral teaching is excellent. Setting a precise teaching aim is essential. Observing peer teaching and learning from each other, designing various activities and worksheets to meet different learners' needs are very important." (TC)

The following two extracts are reflections made by novice teachers. It is surprising to see how inexperienced student-teachers could give such critical comments, and the receivers would not be offended. The critical comments did not defeat ST8 and ST16 in the following separate extracts; conversely, they valued the comments and reflected on how they could improve their skills and how to design better activities along with learning time management skills.

Extract 8

"One of my peers pointed out that my warm-up wasn't good because my original design didn't work. It made me think about why it didn't work, and I found out that my warm-up was too short. I didn't start it strong enough to get students' attention." (ST8)

Extract 9

"When I finished teaching, my peers' opinions were mixed. Someone said we should have more activities. So, I think I need to produce more activities, just like other groups. The other said we shouldn't do the same activity too many times. All the comments make me think about what I can improve next time." (ST16)

The findings of participants' perceptions regarding peer observation implementation are consistent with previous research (e.g., Sahin & Yildirim, 2016; Rohmah, op.cit.). Peer observation provides significant value for both novice and experienced teachers to engage in self-reflection; and, it facilitates a change in the teachers' pedagogical beliefs and overall classroom practices. Moreover, it serves as a tool to improve teachers' substantial motivation.

Changing teaching method/ style

This section addresses the last research question: "Have you changed your teaching method/ style after receiving peer feedback?" In Extract 10, TL explicitly pointed out the positive transformation of her teaching within the past six years. These affirmative changes include ELT teaching methods, styles, activities, and student assessment. Notably, this TL is a so-called "seed teacher" in elementary schools. She was frequently invited to various schools for ELT teaching demonstrations. The changes she had made over recent years also inspired other teachers to improve their professional ELT practice.

Extract 10

"I've joined this program for six years. Within these six years, I've made lots of changes about my teaching, including teaching methods, my attitude toward the students, and my teaching content. For example, I used to follow the lesson plans all the time; hence, I just taught chapter-by-chapter, explained the textbook content, grammar, and vocabulary. Sometimes, I gave quizzes. But, after I participated in this program, I started to care if students really 'learned' the lesson or not. Now, I plan my lessons more rigorously as well

as pay more attention to students' learning outcomes. I also design different worksheets to meet different levels of student needs." (TL)

TM in Extract 11 gave an example of modifying one's own teaching methods after receiving external suggestions.

Extract 11

"One time, I played a game called 'Heart Attack.' My purpose was to make G3 students recognize the letters A-Z. I divided all the SsWhen my students played the game, I noticed that some of them couldn't do it. After the class, one teacher told me that it was too difficult for the slow learners because they couldn't listen, speak, and look at the card at the same time, not to mention they had to memorize the order of the alphabet. After thinking about it, I play the game in vocabulary, not alphabet now." (TM)

Playing games is considered necessary to compensate young learners' short concentration span in most of the observed lessons. Some teachers use it merely for fun; others adopt it for educational purposes. It is heartrending sometimes to see teachers who spend lots of energy on hand-made game materials, but can not achieve the results in the way it was initially planned; TM is one of the examples. Having realized the problems, most of the teachers had amended the use of games. The results of restructuring teaching methods, producing games, and organizing activities in this study are in line with Sahin and Yidirim's (2016) research. Another positive comment on how teachers amended their teaching methods and incorporated games into the lesson is noted in Extract 12.

Extract 12

"I've changed my teaching method after receiving peer feedback. I tried to slow down the teaching speed since the most important thing in teaching is to make the students understand the content. I also cut down on the number of my materials so that the students can digest the lesson content more easily. Furthermore, I also added up some activities since kids will quickly get bored or lose their interest after a long lesson. So, having some exciting activities is necessary." (ST1)

Owing to the widespread utilization of technology in the classroom, some teachers have switched from using traditional tools, such as blackboards and textbooks, to mainly relying on computers and PowerPoint (PPT) presentations. The effectiveness of such a decision is still arguable at best. ST6 in Extract 13 reflected on his use of PowerPoint. Like many university lecturers in Taiwan who rely on PowerPoint content when delivering lectures, he thought the same method might be applicable for teaching younger learners. However, he quickly found out that it is not practical to do so, and it has usurped the crucial role of teachers in the classroom.

Extract 13

"I've changed my teaching method after receiving peer feedback. I used to put all the contents of the lesson onto the PPT, and then I taught it based on the PPT. But now, I think it's a stupid way. PPT is just a complementary tool to help teachers to teach more conveniently. I should put the main or essential content on the ppt. It should be 'part,' not 'all.' Otherwise, there's no need to have a teacher in a class." (ST 6)

The above mentioned in this comprehensive reflective practice program led the teachers to become more aware of their subjective teaching methods, style, and pedagogical beliefs. They paid more attention to what they were doing in the classroom as well as to students' learning progress and needs. This study's significance is to find out how these enthusiastic, experienced teachers devoted their time and effort to planning for their lessons and willingness to travel to different schools weekly to partake in the "Teach Less and Learn More" program to learn from one another. The stressors of being observed and criticized were overcome and transformed into motives. The study also examines how the novice had benefited from the contributions of

others and learned from comprehensive reflective practice. The findings of exploring teacher beliefs and classroom practices through reflective practice correlate with Farrell and Ives' (2014) study. Although all the participants mentioned both in the post-teaching conference and the survey about how they would improve their teaching to accommodate the learners' needs, two still remind unchanged.

CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed at examining the effectiveness of a comprehensive reflective practice that involves evaluations of lesson plans, peer observation, observation form usage, peer feedback, and self-reflection in various EFL teaching contexts among both novice and experienced English teachers. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that all the participants in this study provided positive comments on the use of the comprehensive reflective practice, particularly shared concepts gained from peer observation and peer feedback at the post-teaching conferences. Farrell and Ives (2014) indicated that "by engaging in reflective practice, teachers can construct and reconstruct their own beliefs and practices so that they can provide optimum learning conditions for their students" (p. 608). Evidence in this study shows that peer observation and peer feedback create opportunities for teachers to evaluate their own practice, enhance their professional knowledge, and improve their use of games and activities in their teaching practice. As Hunter and Gibson (2019) pointed out, reflective practice has provided ELT teachers with an alternative method and applied linguistics as a vital foundation for teaching. This study suggests the value of a comprehensive reflective practice as a way of learning and professional development in these two studied groups. It is perhaps yet another similar context where awareness to reflect is considered vital and beneficial. The model of comprehensive reflective practice discussed in this study is employed in elementary contexts or teacher education programs in Taiwan. No one has utilized this method at the tertiary education levels. It is strongly suggested that a successful model such as this could be extendedly applied in higher education with considerable benefit for both teachers and students alike.

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