Bringing Reflections into the TEFL Classrooms

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Abstract: Reflective practice is defined by John Dewey as a proactive, ongoing examination of beliefs and practices, their origins and impacts. In the reflective practice, the teacher and learners are engaged in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation in order to understand their own actions and reactions, and thereby develop the teaching-learning process on an on-going basis. While English is regarded as compulsory in the preparation of more qualified human resources for the country, there are still complaints about the low English mastery of the majority of secondary and tertiary education graduates in Indonesia. It seems likely that bringing the reflective practice in the TEFL classrooms will help improve the teaching-learning of English in a more caring and responsive manner. It is expected that this will not only improve the English mastery, but also develop personal talents and capacities of the learners. The features of reflective practice in TEFL and their advantages for personal and professional development will be further discussed.

Key words : reflective, TEFL, instruction

At present Indonesia needs potential graduates who are competent in their academic mastery and skillful in the applications of technology relevant to the job market, to develop more qualified human resources for the country. In this respect, English is regarded compulsory since it is the language used for wider communication. Some major international domains of English are among others: the working language of international organizations and conferences, scientific publications, international banking, economic affairs and trade, advertising global branch, audio-visual cultural products, international tourism and tertiary education (Graddol, 1997:8). The short-list shows that English plays a significant role in the global trends, which may shape the social and economic world in the third millennia. Needless to say, it is essential for Indonesia to prepare its human resource with mastery of English so as to be ready to compete at the national and international levels.

However, generally speaking, there seems to be a gap between the quality of secondary and tertiary education graduates on the one hand, and the requirements they have to meet at the job-market on the other. This is due to the general condition in the teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) classes. There are some observable dislocations, like the gap between the expectations and the reality of academic literacy of teachers and students – especially in understanding references written in English, the gap between the theoretical and practical applications in the English teaching-learning practices, and the gap between the required conducive learning condition and the available facilities to strengthen foreign language teaching-learning practices. They put a heavy constraint in the preparation of the younger generation in the nation building and extra effort has to be taken to develop qualified human resource for the country.

It seems obvious that the effectiveness of the *MKDU Bahasa Inggris*, earning two or three credits, taught for 100 minutes per week with the objective to increase the English proficiency of university students is questionable. In order to meet market demands, many universities have set up some requirement for their *S-1* students to show a TOEFL score of around 400 to 450 before graduating, and provided intensive training programs to help students improve their English mastery. An increasing number of students make efforts to participate actively in university intensive courses, or to join private courses mushrooming in the society. This indicates that most students realize the importance of English and that there is a high motivation, on their part, to master the foreign language well. Unfortunately, sooner or later, the enthusiasm fades away when learners have to deal with many faceted problems in learning English - particularly in the TOEFL preparation classes. TOEFL indeed is meant for learners at the intermediate level, while the majority of learners have not reached that level yet. This gap indicates that there is still a need

to further increase the quality of the EFL teaching-learning practices, so that attempts to master the language are a challenge rather than a burden.

An option to improve the quality of the TEFL classes is done by means of bringing reflective practices in the TEFL classes. In the reflective classes, teachers and learners are encouraged to practice self-assessment and to discuss their perceptions, beliefs and attitudes openly. They are engaged in active interactions, emphasizing on some ethics of caring, a creative problem solving in a constructive dynamic learning atmosphere. By adopting reflection in the teaching-learning process, the TEFL classes will not only provide ample opportunity for learners to make use of the foreign language features, but also support personal and professional development of both the teacher and learners. This matter will be further discussed in the paper, by means of emphasizing on the foundations of reflective teaching, and a case of developing reflection practice in the TEFL class.

SOME NOTES ON REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The reflective practice has its root in John Dewey's (1930) concept of reflection, which he defines as: "a proactive, ongoing examination of beliefs and practices, their origins and their impacts" (Stanley, 1998 in Florez, 2001). In the course of time, the reflective practice has been influenced by various philosophical and pedagogical theories. The affecting elements are constructivism, humanism, critical pedagogy and pragmatism, all of which contributing to shape the concepts and practices of reflection in class (Florez, ibid). To start with, there is an influence of constructivism theory, which perceives learning as an active process. In this process individuals reflect upon their recent and past knowledge and experience, in their attempt to generate new ideas and concepts. It is based on the assumption that an understanding of the world is not "something given", but must be actively constructed. Knowledge must be understood in relation to the relevant context. Besides, it also rests on the rejection of absolute truth. Individuals may have different interpretations on certain particular data. Therefore, any judgment is possible as long as there are reasonable explanations.

The factor affecting reflective practice is its humanistic approach. Reflective thinking values the opinions of individuals regardless of age,

sex, religion and ethnicity. In the reflective practice, individuals are expected to express themselves in an easy and acceptable manner, which can foster individual growth. To rephrase, there is an ethic of caring for one another in the reflective practice, and since reflection rejects values that can limit growth, the reflective teaching-learning process supports personal and professional development.

In addition, critical pedagogy and pragmatism are two other theories affecting reflective practice. In terms of the former, individuals are noted to carry out some introspection of their potentials and careful examination of their past experiences. Learning from previous experience makes up the basis for further development. In other words, both the teacher and learners need to make some self-assessment and critical evaluation of their potentials, which can be used as intakes to determine further steps.

Finally, the pragmatism aspect emphasizes on refining ideas obtained through experience followed by some active implementation for further development. This is related to the need to take intelligent action after taking thoughtful consideration and analyzing of previous experience. It is worth adding that doing reflection is not necessarily intended to solve a particular problem. Rather, its objective is to observe and refine the teaching-learning process for further development on an ongoing basis.

The above description indicates that reflective practice involves four stages, namely: some self-assessment of past experience, an attempt to understand and analyze it, then a search for the ways different situations might show alternative actions and reactions, and finally an effort to create and implement a plan that involves new insights. The stages are cyclic and ongoing, and are expected to create insights for refinement in future growth. Hence, the reflective practice will provide opportunities for both the teacher and learners to develop their personal and professional development.

ADOPTING REFLECTIVE TEACHING-LEARNING PRACTICE

Andrusyszyn (2001) states that reflection in the context of learning is a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals are engaged to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations. The above definition shows that reflection practice emphasizes reflexive examination of experience and

finding ideas for further development in an acceptable and appreciative manner.

In the conventional practice, teachers often have to cover pre-designed materials within a certain time frame, so that the learning activities are rigidly patterned. Although there is commonly a room for discussion practice, most of the time, discussions in the TEFL classes are limited to questions of a general nature, referring to the subject matter discussed. There is often not enough space for teachers to make learners think deeply about how far they have learned and whether their learning has any relevance to their needs. The difference between the conventional and the reflection practices is that the former usually probe questions to ask for information and opinion. Teachers' questions would be like: "What is the topic sentence of the paragraph?" and "What's your opinion about the arrangement of ideas?" In reflective thinking, however, learners are motivated to do some reflection and to raise questions about their own performance, like "How do I feel about my work-paper?" "What do I find interesting in this task?" "How could I modify it to make it relevant to my needs?" Besides, it is also possible for their peers and the teacher to raise similar questions, so that they provide feedback for the learners in a positive manner. The teacher may also assist in reflective questioning, which will help learners make connections between what they are learning with their personal experiences and knowledge. In turn, this will make learners more reflective in their thinking, speaking and writing. By doing so, both teachers and learners can get better insights about how well the learners master a particular learning material and whether it is relevant to their needs. In this matter, Andrussyszyn (ibid) mentions that teachers should not shift from topic to topic quickly, without allowing adequate time and space for conceptualization, reflection and integration. It is essential for teachers to help learners make connections between what they are learning in class and their personal experiences and knowledge.

In a reflective class, activities need to be integrated in order to stimulate reflective thinking. To introduce learners to reflective thinking, the teacher has to start from asking them to do an observation task, such as: "Observe the learning facilities in the library", then move on to assigning them to do a reflection task, such as: "Describe a confusing event you experienced when you first make use of the library services of

the university". As indicated earlier, there are four steps in the reflective cycle. It starts from an assignment "to observe for gaining experience", and moves on "to describe what happened objectively", then "to analyze by interpreting, drawing conclusions and generating options by means of viewing the situation through different perspectives", and arrives at "to plan for intelligent actions". In the above reflection task, for instance, the last part of the assignment will be something like "planning to use the library services effectively in the future". As indicated in the cycle, the reflection practice stimulates the processes of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Reflection tasks can be conducted independently or in groups, and may take such forms as developing a mind map, analyzing a case study or designing a project. On the one hand, group work can be quite time-consuming, but on the other, it provides a learning opportunity to practice using the language learned, and at the same time to stimulate cooperative learning that emphasizes on knowledge building. In addition, the reflective aspect embraces introspections of personal experiences that can enhance learning. In the Indonesian cultural context, where collectivism is a dominant feature, the reflective group work is also useful for learners to practice critical thinking and to develop personal confidence before producing properly designed individual projects in the future

Generally speaking a reflective program includes sessions that are commonly found in the conventional in-service training. A language teaching guide, for instance, may include general questions like: a) What am I teaching? b) What do I want my students to do with this material? c) How will I know if my students have learned the material? and d) How will I prepare my students to demonstrate their learning? In the reflection practice, however, the above guide is to be developed to help language teachers to define their purposes in the classroom as clearly and precisely as possible during the preparation stage. Besides, room has to be made for reflective thinking. If the purpose is not clearly articulated, a teacher might find difficulties to identify what is working, what is not, and why it is not working. Specific answers to the questions lead to a clear description of the steps and purposes of delivering the lesson. An example of a framework generated during the preparation stage is as follows:

	Guiding Points	Teaching-Learning Points
1	What am I teaching?	Linguistic items: Vocabulary: kinship terms, house-work terms Grammar points: personal pronouns, possessive adjectives, present tense, sentence patterns: WH-pattern, affirmative pattern Cultural points: comparisons of family units, kinship relations, and the functions and positions of the members of the family. Language skills: speaking, listening
2	What do I want my students to do with the materials?	• Student will have 3 minutes to describe his family, the kinship relations and the functions and positions of family members to the rest of the class. • Students will ask and answer questions about their families and related topics. This will take place in groups. • Students will make observations and discussions about similarities and differences of kinship relations, and their function and positions in their families.
3	How will I know if students to have learned the materials?	• By circulating among students as they work in small groups to listen to then as they ask and answer questions; • By listening to students as they deliver their presentations; • By listening to students as they make observations and discussions about the similarities and differences among their families.
4	How will I prepare my students as they make observations to demonstrate their learning?	a) Presentation (10 minutes) Teacher draws family trees on the board Teacher shows pictures of his families Teacher explains the relationships, functions and positions of the family members related to the topic and writes keywords. b) Practice (30 minutes) Teacher points to two family members in the picture; students show their relations Teacher introduces the question: "What is the relationship between X and Y?" Teacher has students produce the question and directs them to ask and answer one another. Teacher introduces the question: "How is X's function different from Y's? Teacher has students produce the question and directs them to ask and answer one another Teacher introduces the question: "How is X's function similar to Y's?' Teacher has students produce the question and directs them to ask and answer one another c) Use (40 minutes) Students draw pictures of their family-trees.

		Students show the functions and positions of the members of the families. In small groups, Students ask each other questions about their families. Some Students give a 3 minute presentation of his family Teacher points to drawings and asks students to make observations about similarities and differences
5	How do I expect to obtain feedback through reflection?	Closing (10 minutes) • Students (presenters) make reflections: a) how they feel about the task; b) how they would like to modify it and make it better; c) how it is relevant to their needs. • Other Students provide feedback by doing the same reflections about the task. • Teacher concludes the discussion, highlighting the significant points.

The above plan includes a reflection practice, which differentiates it from the conventional lesson. As indicated above, in any reflection practice, there is always a project or task presentation that is critically questioned through reflective thinking. The essential function of this part is to build knowledge based on personal experience. This is the part where the presenter obtains feedback from the person himself, his peers and the teacher, and it has to be analyzed for further development. There are various ways to obtain feedback in a reflective process. Some of them are by means of keeping a journal or a portfolio, watching a videotape, and developing reflective partnership. These strategies help the elicitation of opinions, and provide sources for critical analysis and documentation.

Learners usually need time to try to understand their own actions. Besides, they also need to practice seeing the reactions they prompt in themselves and in others. A learner's self-analysis may include looking for the answers to the following issues:

- What have I learned so far?
- What insights have I gained about myself and my learning?
- What has helped me to learn?
- What has hindered or not helped my learning?
- What challenges or questions do I have at this point?

To be able to answer the above questions, learners need to practice reflective thinking. They often have to learn from one another through shared experiential learning. In this matter, Culantomo (1982) states that individuals may take different learning patterns in experiential learning.

Experiential learning comprises concrete experience, observations and reflections, formation of abstract conceptualization and generalizations, and testing of implications of concepts in new situations. It seems that sharing experiences in learning is quite beneficial. Due to the different patterns in experiential learning, sharing experiences in cooperative learning is useful for widening the learners' knowledge, and for shaping his concepts, attitudes and beliefs. Likewise, while learners share experiences in doing the on-going self-analysis, there is a sense of caring among them during the learning process.

Beside learners, the teacher also has the opportunity to do reflective thinking based on the learners' actions and reactions. He obtains feedback regarding how well his learners master the learning material during the reflective process. The intake can give insights for revising the learning materials, redesigning his approaches and teaching techniques, and even modifying the course program. They are also useful to reshape his perceptions and beliefs. Through continued self-analysis, the reflective practice can thus improve the teacher's teaching profession. To summarize, in the reflection practice, the teacher and learners are involved in a continuous cycle of self-observation, self-analysis and self-evaluation, which brings about personal and professional development.

POST-SCRIPT

The above discussion indicates that the reflection practice has several advantages in terms of flexibility, professionalism and sustainability. As reflection practice enhances personal experience, it easily accommodates the variety of purposes in TEFL. This is relevant to the present TEFL situation, where learners have various aims in learning the foreign language. TEFL classes particularly those for adult learners usually vary in their objectives, curricula, instructional contexts and learning facilities, so that the reflection practice is likely suitable to accommodate the variations.

Since the reflective process practices on going intellectual exercises and stimulates cooperative learning, it fosters personal and professional development. Learners are trained to exercise making analysis, synthesis and evaluation, and planning future actions, so that they get experienced in solving problems logically, systematically and contextually based on

their experiences in an inquiry model. Besides, they are trained to develop human capabilities for taking responsibilities, and working independently or in groups, which is part of the requirements at work. The TEFL teachers are also able to develop professionalism since the reflection practice promotes some careful planning and implementing of instructions. Teachers also improve their ability to critically view the ongoing analysis as well as to respond spontaneously during the feedback sessions.

Since the reflection practice is carried out on an ongoing basis, it also supports sustainability. The cyclical process deals with reflection, implementation and follow-up activities that do not only make room for continued progress of the TEFL program, but also foster the growth of skills and attitude of learners and of the teacher. Sooner or later, the continued reflective thinking will also become a good habit.

Reflection practice has been adopted in several parts of the world, particularly in the USA. The Teacher Knowledge Project at the School for International Training in Vermont, for instance aims at designing, doing, documenting, and disseminating reflective professional development. A reflective training program for teachers - particularly language teachers - is usually based on the belief that professional development for teachers must embrace ongoing, in depth, and reflective examination of their own teaching and learners' learning.

In addition, reflective thinking has been identified as a prerequisite competency for beginning nurse practitioners in Australia and New Zealand. Teekman's research (1999) found out that reflective thinking is an effective tool for theory development in practice; it contributes to learning situational "know-how" rather than "theoretical knowledge".

The above discussion of the nature of reflection practice shows that it is worth considering to adopt the reflective nature in the TEFL teaching-learning practices in Indonesia. The Indonesian system of education today needs to make more space for learners to exercise thinking critically, making analysis, synthesis and evaluation, and planning future actions. The reflection practice also enables learners to practice the use of language independently or in groups. Besides, the Indonesian culture accepts the concept of *gotong-royong*, which is close to the practice of shared experiential learning. Considering that reflective process fosters

personal and professional growth, it is expected that introducing reflection into the TEFL classes will contribute to the preparation of more qualified graduates for the country.

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