

Pre-service ESL teachers engaging in Reflective Practice: Current Observations and Perceived Challenges

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Abstract

This study aims to present the observations and perceived challenges of a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) pre-service teachers (PSTs) engaging in reflective practice in their practicum. Past studies have shown that PSTs are incapable of reflecting on their practice at the critical level. Results from the online survey indicated that reflection thinking is one of the areas respondents opined that they need to improve. Analysis of their practicum reflection forms indicated a low level of reflection shown by the respondents as they reflect on their lessons. Follow-up focus group interviews on the respondents' reflective thinking revealed that respondents lack a clear grasp of what reflective thinking is about, and they also expressed their reluctance of reflecting with their peers on their lessons. The outcome of this study precipitates a need for PSTs to learn a strategy to conduct a critical reflection. Subsequently, it could be beneficial for the respondents to capitalise on peer feedback via an online platform as a means of improving their practice as ESL teachers.

Keywords: ESL, pre-service teachers, reflective practice, practicum.

Introduction

The Malaysian Education Ministry has been making concerted efforts in strengthening the country's education system. The Malaysian Teacher Standard or known in Malay as *Standard Guru Malaysia*, was launched in 2009, with an intention to elevate the competency and quality of teachers via attainment of a list of competencies grouped into 3 core standards, covering professionalism, pedagogical content knowledge and skills (Goh & Wong, 2015). The Malaysian Education Blueprint, launched in 2012, outlined 11 shifts aimed towards attaining a world-class education system in 2025. One of its shifts in the blueprint is to transform teaching into a profession of choice. Hence, the Institute of Teacher Education (ITE) has been tasked to produce pre-service teachers (PSTs) who are competent and possess all the relevant skills and knowledge to teach in primary schools upon graduation. The teacher training colleges had been upgraded to become campuses of ITE as the institution began to confer teaching degrees in 2011.

In the teacher education degree programmes conducted by the ITE, all PSTs are to undergo 2 phases of teaching practice, otherwise known as a practicum. They undergo the first phase in Semester 5 and the second in Semester 7. It is where they first don the teaching cap and begin teaching their subject, or option, in designated host schools within the vicinity of the ITE campuses. In the Malaysian Teacher Standard, reflective thinking is mentioned as one of the abilities that must be demonstrated by PSTs in order to meet the competencies in two areas: possessing relevant knowledge in professional studies and in carrying out teaching and learning activities in the classroom (Bahagian Pendidikan Guru, 2009). Therefore, as an effort to encourage future practitioners who strive to improve, all student teachers are required to complete post-lesson reflections as a part of their practicum training.

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Review of Literature

The word ‘reflection’ originates from the Latin verb ‘reflectere’, which means ‘to bend back’ (Valli, 1997:16). Boud, Keogh, & Walker (1985:3) define reflection as ‘a generic term for those intellectual and effective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation’. One crucial component in teacher training, which the process of reflection is applied in a professional, educational context, is known as reflective practice. Farrell (2016) defines reflective practice as a process of thinking where a teacher, accompanied by a set of attitudes, gathers data about their practice, and at the same time engage in dialogue with others. The process is undertaken with the intention of making informed decisions on their teaching both within and outside the classroom.

It is imperative that PSTs engage in reflective practices as they begin to hone their craft as teachers during their teaching practice. Research has shown that teachers who are reflective practitioners are more likely to develop good reasoning skills in tackling ill-structured problems (Wlodarsky & Walters, 2010), incorporate new practices in their teaching repertoire (Camburn & Han, 2015) and will be more resilient in recovering from the initial shocks they encountered when they start teaching (Moradkhani, Raygan & Moein, 2017). In terms of teaching methods, Ciampa and Gallagher (2015) discover that teachers who underwent reflective practice would become aware of their ‘default’ teaching methods, thus providing them the opportunity to unlearn ineffective teaching methods which may have adverse effects on their students’ learning experience. Farrell (2016) posits that engaging in reflective practice helps PSTs to articulate and reflect on their beliefs, with the hope that a new level of awareness could invite a potential re-evaluation of their practice.

In determining the methods that can be used to engage in reflection, writing is prevalently used by pre-service teachers. The rationale is that written reflections as a part of visible records of teacher education programmes. The reflection is also used for the purpose of assessment in PSTs’ teaching practice component of their study (Farrell, 2016). Obligations aside, studies have also shown that as the reflection is being written, teachers will be made to think about their beliefs and experiences and how these have informed their practice as a language teacher. This practice, in turn, would assist teachers to understand their personal assumptions of their teaching and perhaps, reflect on the bigger issues and philosophies outside their classroom (Chi, 2010).

Larrivee (2008) developed a rubric and a self-assessment tool for student teachers to assess their level of pedagogical reflective practice. Her rubric has four levels and their characteristics are described as below:

Table 1. Larrivee’s 4 levels of reflective practice and their characteristics

Level	Characteristics
Pre-reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher rationalises the events of the classroom in general without reference to any theories or other relevant situations. - Little or no teacher agency in initiating control of the teaching and learning - Little or no connection between the decisions made in the classroom to theories or evidence in the classroom - Teacher sees the needs of the students as uniformed and general.
Surface reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examination of teaching methods is evident but rather confined to achieving lesson objectives and standards. - prior experience guides teaching decisions, not theory and research. - Teacher begins to differentiate the needs of his or her students
Pedagogical reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers made conscious efforts to think about their teaching practices and the outcomes of their students as a result of their practice. - Beliefs of teaching are specific and rooted in theory and research - Teacher can see his or her teaching from a multidimensional view, making relevant links to broad frameworks.

Critical reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Teachers would constantly examine own pedagogical philosophies and teaching beliefs.- Teacher examines how his or her underlying values, beliefs and philosophies would impact the students socially and culturally.- Teacher would, where possible, promote democratic values in the classroom and ascertain the social and ethical implication of their classroom practices.
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Nevertheless, encouraging PSTs to engage in reflective practice has its sets of challenges. Written reflections by PSTs were discovered to be very teacher-centred, lacking judgements which are supported with evidence (Barnhart & van Es, 2015). They were also found to be rather descriptive and heavily focused on technical issues (He & Prater, 2014), such as lesson planning, classroom management and assessment in their teaching practice (Hayden & Chiu, 2015). However, these studies also revealed that reflections by PSTs did not include detailed examination of their own actions or concrete solutions to problems. Past research has also shown that though PSTs can recall and critically discuss with each other instances in their lessons, they may not necessarily reflect deep enough about their lessons as a whole (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2015), or they lack the ability to reflect at the level where problem-solving and examination of own practice occur (Goldman & Grimbeek, 2015). As writing reflection is a pre-requisite in most teacher education programme across the world, Akbari (2007) cautioned that when reflection is reduced to applying a set of techniques and is done solely to complete a task, it leads to the loss of the essence of reflective thinking and the unique individuality of the teacher (Mann & Walsh, 2017). Closer to the context of the study, an examination of self-reflection notes of PSTs studying in two Malaysian public universities revealed that their reflection entries were mostly at the technical level, with the PSTs demonstrating inability to reflect critically and propose solutions to problems (Wong, Rosnidar Mansor, & Syakirah Samsudin, 2015; Yaacob, Walters, Ali, Abdullah, & Walters, 2014). Another study revealed that teacher education programmes did not adequately provide a learning environment for pre-service teachers that encourages critical and reflective thinking (Ong et al., 2017). Nonetheless, as these studies were conducted in West Malaysia and at public universities, this study would attempt to investigate the reflective practice undertaken by a group of pre-service TESL teachers who are studying in an Institute of Teacher Education (ITE) in East Malaysia.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were first, to identify the needs of the students in their teaching practice as they underwent their first phase of teaching practice in Semester 5; Second, the study wished to ascertain the level of reflective practice as evidenced by the practicum reflection forms used during the teaching practice. Third, the study aimed to elicit the respondents' opinions on the reflective practice that they were asked to engage in as a part of their practicum undertaking. Respondents' opinions were sought on the practicum reflection form that they are required to use throughout their teaching practice. Lastly, this study hoped to discover any issues and challenges faced by respondents while engaging in reflective practices as they undergo their teaching practice.

Methodology

The data collection process of this study began with an online survey, which used the Google Form application on the Internet. The survey was conducted in two of the campuses of the ITE, which are two of the four ITE campuses dedicated to the training of TESL teachers in the country. A total of 60 students from Semester 5 have responded to the online survey. The survey was conducted with the intention of discovering the areas in the students' practicum where they lacked confidence and needed more guidance and input. The survey was self-constructed by the researcher and contained 6 5-point Likert-scale items, 1 limited response and 1 open response items. The items had been

piloted with a group of 10 students to ensure clarity and eliminate ambiguity. The results were later tabulated and presented using descriptive statistics. Only the results of the limited response item were presented as it serves as the justification for the undertaking of this study.

To ascertain the level of the reflective practice of the PSTs, the study examined the written reflections made by the 16 pre-service TESL teachers. In the campus of ITE where the qualitative data is gathered, the PSTs were required to complete the practicum reflection form whenever they have finished conducting their lessons. The form consists of 10 columns for PSTs to write down the strengths and weaknesses for a maximum of 5 stages in their lesson. At the bottom of the form there are two sections, where they write down their suggestion for improvements and how the suggestion would have an impact on their lessons in the future. Altogether, the form has 12 columns than need to be filled out. Of the 16 respondents who have participated in this study, 10 have consented for their practicum reflection forms to be examined for this research. Their lesson reflection forms for week 3, 6, 9 and 12 were examined. Larrivee (2008)'s Reflective Practice Assessment Tool (LRPAT) was adopted as the rubric to examine the comments written down by the respondents. The findings were classified under 5 categories: unfilled, pre-reflection, surface reflection, pedagogical reflection, and critical reflection. Excerpts from the practicum reflection forms that best exemplify each level are discussed in the next section.

As a follow up to the results of the online survey and the analysis of the practicum reflection forms, the 16 respondents were interviewed in 4 sessions of Focus Group Interview (FGI). The FGIs were conducted to confirm the findings of the survey and to elicit more opinions and thoughts from the respondents regarding the area of needs. FGI was adopted in this study as many research participants perceive it as less-threatening. Thus, it encourages higher level of participation of respondents in discussion and sharing sessions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The synergy that comes from FGI would also unearth data or ideas which may not emerge from a one-on-one interview (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). As the respondents have been studying together for the past five semesters, the rapport among the respondents has been well-established. The interviews were first transcribed, and then analysed, coded and categorised using qualitative analysis software ATLAS.Ti. The categories were later grouped to present salient clusters of themes. The results of the study have undergone member checking with the participants and researchers who teach TESL programmes in a local university for the purpose of ensuring the trustworthiness of the qualitative data gathered (Guba, 1981). The names of respondents were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Results and Discussion

Online Survey

In the online survey, it was discovered that the respondents had highlighted a few areas which they felt they needed to make greater improvements. These areas which the respondents have identified were the areas they felt they need to address before they start their second phase of the practicum in Semester 7.

Table 2. List of concerns in teaching practice as reported by pre-service teachers

List of Concerns	Percentage of respondents
Classroom management	56.7%
Lesson planning	46.7%
Reflecting on own lessons	43.3%
Assessing learners	43.3%
Choosing and utilising resources	40.0%
Selection and sequencing of activities	40.0%

In Table 2, the respondents were asked about the areas which they feel they need more guidance. Classroom management appeared to be the first concern, followed by lesson planning and reflecting on their own lessons. These 6 factors were selected by more than 40% of the respondents of the study. As the respondents comprise PSTs who are very concerned with the immediate skills needed for their teaching practice in primary schools, it is not surprising that reflecting on their own lessons does not make it to the top of the respondents' concerns in the survey.

A teacher's ability to reflect has proven to lead to a higher level of agency, which is the ability of teachers to reflect and solve problems in the classroom and subsequently improve their own practices (Yuan & Lee, 2014). Moradkhani, Raygan, & Moein (2017) postulate a strong correlation between an ESL teacher's metacognitive reflection and a teacher's self-efficacy. Teachers who are self-efficacious are, in turn, more likely to be resilient in facing obstacles (Ross & Bruce, 2007), apply effective and creative teaching methods (Thurlings, Evers, & Vermeulen, 2015) and help language learners' attain a higher level of achievement (Ghanizadeh & Moafian, 2011). Hence, it is likely that the issues raised by the respondents as their main concerns could be solved if more efforts are directed into engaging in critical reflections of their lessons, as the potential benefits from the exercise could alleviate more pressing concerns in the classroom as reported by the respondents in this study.

Analysis of the Practicum Reflection Form

A total of 40 practicum reflection forms, each comprising 12 columns, were analysed in this study. The analysis of the practicum reflection forms yielded several insights. First, it was observed that there were many instances where the columns were left unfilled. Though it is not compulsory for the PSTs to fill out every column there is in the form, the lack of responses may indicate the inability on their part to reflect and comment on their own lessons. The total number of the columns that were left unfilled was 202 out of the 480 columns examined, which constituted almost half of the number of columns. As for the columns that were filled out, a majority of the reflections written fell under the pre-reflection and surface reflection levels. Only 13.75% of the columns were at pedagogical reflection, with no columns were examined to be at the critical reflection level. Table 3 below shows the breakdown of the level of reflections for the total number of columns examined.

Table 3. The level of reflection shown in the columns of practicum reflection forms ($n=480$)

Level of reflection	Total number of columns	Percentage
Unfilled	202	42.08%
Pre-reflection	99	20.63%
Surface reflection	113	23.54%
Pedagogical reflection	66	13.75%
Critical reflection	0	0.00

The next section presents some of the entries of the PSTs in their practicum reflection forms. These have been categorised according to the levels of reflective practice according to LRPAT.

Pre-reflection

At this level, PSTs made observations of the classroom, with the teacher showing very little control on the situation at hand. The observation made lacked rationale. If it was an issue, no reason was given to account for it. The solution proposed for the issue would be very vague, with little or no example given.

Students are too weak to do the activity. (Johnson/W3/C4)

Questions were too easy. (Nathan/W6/C6)

Reading session was done effectively. (Nelly/W6/C3)

Pupils were making too much noise. (Alina/W3/C2)

Use other teaching materials. (Wanie/W6/C11)

Surface reflection

At surface reflection level, PSTs made attempts to rationalise the observations made, but the conclusion made was rather simplistic and lacked justification that ought to come from an investigation. If the teacher proposed solutions to problems, there were rather general, with a lack of thoughts on how the solutions can solve problems.

Students are free to give their suggestions, so it's very motivating for them. (Johnson/W6/C5)

Prepare more examples for the articles, not enough was used in class (Rosyam/W6/C11)

Looking at places using VR attracts the pupil's attention. (James/W9/C5)

Plan rules to control class. (Wanie/W3/C11)

Remind the passive pupils to show the class certain activities. (Hannah/W3/C11)

Pedagogical reflection

A step above the surface reflection, student teachers who demonstrated this level of reflection thought about his or her practices and how they could have an impact on their students' learning. When they were proposing solutions to the problems, they were specific. The solutions would also be accompanied with further predictions on how the solutions they have would affect the change that they wanted to their students. Though there were a lack of linking of their actions to learning theories, the respondents made effort in extrapolating and predicting what impact would their actions have on the learning of their students.

Singing songs can help students to refresh their memories, they remember the order of the adverbs. (Johnson/W9/C3)

Getting students to share their experience in travelling is a great idea to give the students an overview of the lesson. (Rosyam/W9/C3)

Use more pupil-centred activities, such as open discussions and pupil's self-exploration. (Hafiz/W12/C11)

Going around checking pupils they will know on how to do the work and they have a better understanding of the topic. (Alina/W12/C12)

No examples could be supplied for the Critical Reflection stage as none of the respondents have shown their ability to reflect at the level in their practicum reflection forms. The lack of critical reflection can best be explained by the structure of the form itself, which is overwhelmingly focused on the lesson proper. Hence, PSTs were only prompted to reflect on their lesson, and not the issues beyond the lesson and the classroom. However, one could see that the outcomes of this study have echoed the research conducted in the past, where PSTs are unable to reflect critically on their lesson. The levels of reflection demonstrated in this study supported the previous research that the PSTs are inclined to make observations and judgements which are not supported by evidence or theories.

The FGI sessions were conducted after the analysis of the practicum reflection forms was completed. The researcher hoped to find answers that explain the reflection demonstrated by the respondents as illustrated in the analysis of the columns of practicum reflection forms. Through the FGI, respondents have shared concerns and issues regarding their reflective practice. Some of the issues raised would justify the respondents answering patterns in their practicum reflection forms, particularly on the high number of unfilled columns in the practicum reflection forms.

FGI Theme 1: Pre-service teachers are not equipped with a strategy to guide them in their reflections

In the focus group interview sessions, respondents highlighted the fact that many columns were not filled was due to a lack of understanding on what a reflection is, and most of them relied on what they have done as a reflection in their previous course assignments.

Johnson: I know there is non-academic and academic (reflection). Academic one is with reference.

Hannah: All this while what we know about reflection we brought forward from all the reflection tasks that we did in the past.

Based on the respondents' opinions, they did not have a clear grasp that the reflection explored in their academic assignment is different from the reflection that they will undertake as a language teacher. Aside from not understanding the reflective task, the respondents also reported that they lack strategies to guide them in doing the reflections of their lessons.

Johnson: I don't (use a strategy to reflect). I think there might be, I wasn't taught.

Nathan: I do not really know how to assess myself, I just teach this and I do not really know what to do after that (reflect)... I don't know what to think about. When he (supervisor) asked me don't you ever think about how should you improve this or that?

Kona: I need guide in writing the reflection.... so maybe someone can tell me more what aspect that I can look into in writing our reflection so that I can see more clearly...

Nelly: lecturers can help us in the thinking process of the reflection, going beyond just mere narration... we need guidance to help us to think like that, as in thinking about what went wrong in our lesson.

The opinions shared by the respondents have answered the question of the high number of the unfilled columns in the practicum reflection forms. Their sentiments echo Goldman & Grimbeek (2015) and Wong et al. (2015)'s argument that PSTs lack conception of what is a reflection and at what level and to what extent of their lesson should they ought to reflect on. Saylor (2013) opines that though reflective practice plays a crucial role in the development of a PST's practice as an educator, some teacher education programmes do not emphasize the reflective practice in their training of teachers. Some failed to make reflective practice explicit enough for the PSTs to notice and benefit from it. It could be a presumption on the part of the teacher educator and practicum supervisors that PSTs are able to reflect on their lessons and write their reflections accordingly, when in fact they will need more guidance on how to structure their thinking and provide areas where students can think and reflect on their lessons. As past studies have indicated that there are gaps and shortcomings in the teacher education programmes conducted in Malaysia (Lim, Wun, & Chew, 2016; Othman & Salleh, 2016), there may be a need to restructure and to review the content and the methodology of the teacher education programme to better support PSTs in building their reflective practice, especially during the practicum period.

FGI Theme 2: Students need to develop an awareness of their own practice in class.

In the interview, respondents shared a few reasons why they were not able to engage in a critical reflection of their teaching. One of the aspects that they highlighted is that they were not aware of

their own practices. They were not able to determine whether what they did in the lesson brought either positive or negative effect to their teaching and their students' learning.

Johnson: There is some part we cannot reflect we don't know, we can't see ourselves, for example how we move, how we talk

Nelly: I am used to the way of teaching that way, and because I am used to it I don't see it as a weakness, but maybe for the others or the kids, it is actually one of my weakness. Because we will never know what we did wrong until someone pointed out to us

Hafiz: It's hard for me to see where the weakness part is because there is not third eye in the class, it's just me and the students.

What the respondents have shared mirrored the discovery of Mena-marcos & Tillema, (2013)'s among Spanish pre-service teachers, in that they were unable to make precise analyses of the classroom observations. This observation is what has possibly led the respondents to either not fill out the column of the forms or they gave pre- and surface reflection level comments. Although the PSTs would have benefited from having a third pair of eyes in the classroom to pinpoint any weaknesses or issues in their lesson, the reality of teaching in Malaysia is they would normally be in the classroom by themselves with the pupils. Therefore, rather than relying on another person to point out the errors they made, they ought to learn to be more aware of what they did in class and to develop a sensitivity to their students' reactions and behaviour in class.

The respondents' opinions indicate that they lack 'teacher noticing' abilities, which can be defined as the ability to notice their students' gap or weakness in their cognition or learning, to account for these occurrences and to remedy a solution (Goldman & Grimbeek, 2015; Sherin, Jacobs, & Philipp, 2011). Other than being sensitive to the events in the class, there is also a need for the PSTs to remember and recall what has taken place in their classes because these incidents can serve to help them to reflect deeper about their practice and to articulate their beliefs in teaching (Mohammed, 2016). He and Prater (2014) also advocate that a form of scaffolding can be given to students as means to help them hold on to a critical reflection of their practice. Research has shown that with good scaffolding in the forms of an assessment rubrics or guiding prompts, PSTs can be coached to think and reflect deeper on their teaching, eliminating the instances of superficial reflective writing (Parkes & Kajder, 2010).

FGI Theme 3: Students adopt various ways to help themselves reflect on their lessons

As the students independently engaged in their reflections, the FGI revealed that the students had devised various ways on their own to help them become more aware of their practices and to gauge the effectiveness of their teaching. One of the respondents recorded himself on a video so he could see himself in action.

Johnson: For me it's video. I recorded some of my teachings, it is a good way because it is a way of you know you can really watch the video again, take a look of what you did.

Other respondents developed a keen eye for observing, mostly in reading their pupils' facial expressions and by looking at their seat works to help them reflect on the effectiveness of their lessons.

Kona: For me, I use the students as a measuring stick because when I teach them, I can see that they are enjoying the lesson, the activities then I know I can say that it was successful ... but for me when I teach them the class is quiet,

they are not responsive, I can say maybe my activities or my explanation something is wrong somewhere.

Hannah: For the class, through their works, from there I can reflect on my own teaching, oh so what I taught is actually working because they can answer it.

Joel: I ask myself what I do today... I just recall about the students, remember their faces and look back at the lesson plans, look at the stages, think about what went wrong

Safira developed a series of reflective points for her to review whenever she did the reflection for her lesson. She also directly asked the students for their feedback on her lessons.

Safira: First I recall the students feeling, their faces and expressions, I have that list, their faces and how they react to my lesson. My work and then the classroom management. And then I look at how I felt... sometimes I will ask them personally when you don't understand English I will ask in Malay how did I do today, they will say the honest things... I get what I needed for the boxes of my reflection from them

These efforts undertaken by the individual student teachers have demonstrated their creativity and resourcefulness in engaging reflective practice, which would partly explain why there are still a significant number of respondents who were able to produce reflective comments which are at the pedagogical level. However, as they used different approaches, their varying levels of success at reflective practice were shown in the distribution of the 4 levels of reflective practice according to LRPAT.

FGI Theme 4: Respondents have mixed opinions on the use of the practicum reflection forms

Pre-service teachers who are studying in the selected campuses of the Institute of Teacher Education were required to use a practicum reflection form to reflect on their lessons. In this form, students were asked to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of every stage of their lesson, and they were asked to suggest improvements to their lessons and how the improvements affected their teaching and learning. The respondents were mostly positive about the use of reflection, particularly in its function to help them structure their thoughts when they reflected on their lessons.

Alina: I prefer filling the box because I like the format, what are the strengths and weaknesses, I can fill it out... Down there what should I do? The cadangan (suggestion for improvement) and what is the ksanpelaksanaan (the outcome of suggested action). I think the columns...very structured and (the form) directs your thinking, you reflect on your lesson stage by stage

Nelly: Because in practicum we planned it (lessons) according to stages. In the form itself you have to find your strengths and weaknesses. So, using the forms, I am able to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of every stage of my lesson and I think filling up the form somehow helped me in doing my reflection

However, some lamented that there was a lack of opportunity for the PSTs to reflect beyond what were required in the forms, which for them can be very rigid at times. A respondent even expressed her desire to write an open form reflection, which could give her room to reflect beyond her lessons.

Wanie: The form is helping us in a way to help us prompt the ideas, but it also hinders us in the way that we only get to see those things. They (boxes) want us to see the weaknesses ... want us to see the strengths. Whatever the boxes ask, we respond but they don't help us to see beyond those things

Hannah: If I write the reflection on my own, I will find that I can reflect more, and write longer. Using the form sometimes can be quite limiting

Some of the students also expressed their concerns regarding the way they had conducted their post-lesson reflections, seeing it more as a routine or a chore rather than the act of thinking and reflecting on their practices.

Johnson: I wouldn't say I am happy with my reflection because I am filling out the form just for the sake of filling up the form.

Hannah: Sometimes we take the forms for granted because we just solely fill it up just to show the lecturers that we have filled out something. Somehow like every time after the lesson when I fill out the forms I feel like I am not really reflecting, I am writing this for the sake of writing.

Mann & Walsh (2013) postulate that when teacher trainees are asked to repeatedly reflect and write down their thoughts, they can easily become 'mechanical' and 'recipe-following', which lead to the reflection being written more to satisfy the programme's requirement rather than to promote deeper analysis of own practice (Fox, Campbell, & Hargrove, 2011). When the practice of reflection is made a mandatory exercise rather than as a genuine action undertaken by PSTs for the sake of improvement, it could potentially lose its benefits as it becomes a mere task to be completed during the teaching practice. The form's structure and format could be a possible factor that explains the absence of critical reflection level comments found in the forms, as the respondents have remarked the rigidity of the form itself. Nonetheless, even when the PSTs should be encouraged to reflect on their lessons for the purpose of developing their practice further, the scope should not be just at the lessons level. They should be encouraged to reflect not only deeper, but also further into the school culture and practice. PSTs ought to reflect on how social contexts can affect the teaching and learning that take place in their language classrooms (Farrell, 2016). Perhaps a compromise here would be PSTs are given the option to write their post-lesson reflection using either a free-flowing field notes or the practicum reflection form format provided by the ITE campus.

FGI Theme 5: Peer to peer discussions are done in a casual, light manner and are more about sharing of experience.

Yang (2009) in her study postulates that when PSTs discussed their lessons among themselves, the discussion was rather descriptive than critical, as they were fearful of offending their course mates and damaging their relationships. This point is proven in this study when the student teachers reported that although they do engage in discussions on their lessons among themselves, they found that the discussion is rather light in nature. The respondents refer to what they share with their peers as a 'chat' rather than a discussion and the reasons why.

Rosyam: It was noisy but the students were having so much fun. Later I told my friends in my class I did this and this and this it was very good. They will say oh I should try this.

Hafiz: The peer discussion tends to be light and less critical, compared to the one you do with your observer when you discuss with your supervisor or your mentor teacher... Peer discussion tends to be very light and scratch the

surface... we worry about offending each other. We are going to be stuck with each other for 3 months.

Johnson: It is natural for teachers to chit-chat. 'eh you know my students did this this this.' but then again because we see it as a normal chit chat, so we do not take it too seriously ... (I) don't bother giving Joel any suggestion and he didn't ask for it

Essentially, there were instances where the sharing of practices occurred among the peers. However, the fear of offending relationships kept them in a very casual manner. There could also be because of the sensitivity of some PSTs to peer comments or suggestions, as they can be misconstrued as a form of criticism or personal attack. Furthermore, another reason was they refuse to give suggestions when they were not solicited, or that they refused to.

Nelly: It helped me quite a bit because we get to discuss. Usually on the bed, we (respondents and her roommate) would discuss what happened in our lesson, you know what we did in our lesson today. We get to compare and exchange notes we can somehow anticipate what will happen.

The excerpt above supported what Yuan & Lee (2014) found in their study, that when PSTs are encouraged to reflect in post-observation discussions with their peers; they would experiment with different teaching approaches, leading to a higher level of awareness and changes to their practices. However, the light, casual nature of peer discussion as reported by the previous respondents implied that there is a need to provide a setting where peers can sit together and discuss their lessons more critically, with the hope that a more serious, focused discussion could potentially deliver benefits to improve the teaching practice of the PSTs.

The Implication and Suggestions for Further Investigation

The outcomes of this study point to the fact that pre-service teachers may not be adequately prepared to engage in reflective practice when they are undergoing their practicum. Hence, there is a need for PSTs to be given appropriate coaching on how to critically reflect on their lessons. Dervent (2015) in his study proves that reflective thinking skills could be learned and honed over time, and the knowledge developed from reflective thinking would be pivotal to the teacher's professional practice. In learning to reflect, PSTs would benefit from an explicitly defined framework (Bloomquist, 2016; Fox et al., 2011; Goldman & Grimbeek, 2015). The outcome of this study implies that suitable reflective thinking tools can be utilised to help them to structure their thinking and determine their own strengths and weaknesses in their lessons. Similarly, a strategy can also be taught to help PSTs in developing awareness of their practice, chiefly by looking at objective evidences that can be gathered from the students' responses and their performance during seatwork. Developing sensitivity and 'withitness' (Kounin, 1977) to teacher's own teaching and students' learning, also known as 'teacher noticing', would be instrumental in helping a teacher to assess his or her own teaching better and to start questioning his or her own practice (Sherin et al., 2011). These strategies taught will lead to a clearer understanding and execution of the reflection process. Subsequently, it is hoped that they would be able to demonstrate their ability to reflect on the higher levels of reflective practice, namely pedagogical and critical reflection.

The respondents have also expressed positive and negative feedback towards the use of practicum reflection forms in their teaching practice. As the use of the form is a mandatory practice in the campus where the respondents of this study are based, it could be more helpful if the teaching practice supervisors can relay the feedback on the form so that necessary adjustments for improvement can be made on the format of the form. In the meantime, they can also play their role in assisting the PSTs to make the most of the structure of the forms by helping them to engage in

reflective practice at the deeper levels. Alternatively, the campus can explore making the use of the practicum reflection form an option to the PSTs.

Outcomes from this research would also render it worthwhile to investigate further the untapped potential of the role of peers in developing ESL student teachers' practice in the classroom. Even though it was conducted in a largely casual manner, it was noted that PSTs in this study did brainstorm ideas for lessons and engage in the sharing of good ideas and practice as they underwent their practicum as a cohort. Therefore, perhaps it is feasible to explore a platform where PSTs can provide their reflections and have their peers become critical friends in providing feedback, solutions and opinions on the lessons that they have taught. Caldwell and Heaton (2016) lamented that there is a dearth of study where teachers, as communities of practice, engage in reflective practice using creative and innovative technologies. This could potentially be accomplished via a web 2.0 platform, such as a Learning Management System (LMS), Moodle or even Facebook. Past studies have shown the feasibility of using web 2.0 applications such as video logging, blogging and e-portfolios in fostering a deeper level of reflective practice among the PSTs (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2015; Krishnan & Yunus, 2017; Long & Hall, 2015; Özkan, 2018). The researcher would be embarking on a future study that fuses the use of explicit thinking framework and the application of web 2.0 tools for sharing of reflection and practice among PSTs in the same campus where the respondents of this study were drawn from.

Conclusion

This study, though rather small in scale, has unearthed many potential findings that warrant further investigation. The results from the online survey revealed that reflecting on lessons is one of the main concerns which respondents felt require improvement, though it is likely that they have underestimated how reflection could potentially be useful in attending to their other reported concerns. The analysis of the practicum reflection forms showed that almost half of the columns given were left unfilled, and those that were filled were mostly comments at the pre-reflection and surface reflection levels, which were the lower levels of reflective practice in LRPAT. Based on the themes that emerged from the FGI, PSTs who participated in this study had demonstrated their resourcefulness in gathering evidence of their teaching to support them in their reflection practice as inexperienced language teachers, though they are experiencing difficulties in engaging in higher levels of reflective practice. The difficulties range from not grasping the task of reflection to not having the ability to notice and observe classroom situations.

In light of the findings discovered in this study, it can be seen that as teacher educators, there will be a need on their part to formulate a type of intervention or a pedagogy that teaches reflective thinking skills, particularly in helping PSTs to become reflective ELT practitioners. Teacher educators would have to ensure that the PSTs have developed all the necessary basic skills to reflect critically before they embark on their practicum. Other than teaching PSTs to use an explicit reflecting thinking framework, teacher educators ought to consider engaging PSTs on their reflective practice as budding ELT practitioners via the use application of web 2.0 tools, such as a social media network, in providing feedback and promoting exchange of ideas among mentors and PSTs who are undergoing practicum. Not only would it be helpful to reach out to the PSTs who are increasingly digitally savvy in their 'home' ground of the world wide web, it will also create a community of practice among the teacher educators and the PSTs.

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