LOOKING INTO MY BACKYARD: SHIFTS IN PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: Professional development is a long-life journey and rewarding in an academia. Teachers are required to improve their competences. They do not only enhance their subject matters but also upgrade their pedagogical knowledge. Professional development can be conducted through many ways. It could be done through formal education, informal training or self-reflection. This is reflexivity on an English teacher's professional journey. It scrutinizes phases of language learning and teaching awareness. The article starts with my first contact with English and then goes on to learning-teaching experience in the later phases. The reflection on these experiences shapes my teaching identity and improves teaching competence.

Abstrak: Upaya untuk peningkatan kemampuan profesi merupakan pendidikan seumur hidup bagi para akademisi. Para akademisi tersebut tidak hanya meningkatkan kemampuan keilmuan mereka semata, tapi mereka juga harus meningkatkan kemampuan mengajarnya. Pengembagan kemampuan profesi ini dapat dilakukan dengan berbagai cara. Melalui pendidikan formal, pelatihan informal atau juga refleksi secara mandari. Artikel ini merefleksikan tahapan-tahapan pengalaman belajar dan mengajar seorang guru/dosen Bahasa Inggris. Refleksi terhadap pengalaman tersebut mis.eningkatkan kemampuan pengajajaran seorang guru/dosen Bahasa Inggr

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REFLEXIVITY

This is a reflexive and narrative inquiry on my EFL learning-teaching experience. As an academician, I see my life journey as a long-life education, in which I learn and thus improve my teaching competent through experience. This reflexivity reminds me to the work of Hickey (2012), in which she asked herself "how might my own experiences bring insights to my knowledge of the experiences of English learners" (p. 149), and thus I start this paper with a similar inquiry. John Dewey once says that "...all genuine education comes about through experience..." (1997, p. 25), and this statement seems applicable to my journeys as a student and as a teacher as well. Kabilan, Adlina and Embi (2011) also put forward that life-long learning is a *must*-journey leading to professional development. This article then begins with this intention.

As I share similar conception to that of John Dewey, I aim at producing a scholarly piece, in which I record my experience being an EFL learner and teacher, and then provide implications for my teaching career. In this article, therefore, I propose to narrate-chronologically phases of my English learning and teaching, and gain insights from those experiences that improve my teaching skills. Learning from and reflecting on experience is an important journey that produces insights for professional development. As this belief has been around for centuries, work on self-development has been developed as well (refer to Christodoulou, 2003; Gibbons, 2009; Peacock, 2001; Pettis, 2005; Tarpey, 2009; and Taylor, 2005).

This article is very straightforward in nature. First, I scrutinize my first contact with English, which was during my Secondary School Years. This first contact was very important to elaborate in this article, since from which I gained interest to English. Factors leading me into EFL learning journeys start form these school years. These years gave me not only experiences as an EFL learner but also experiences as a junior teacher.

The second main section of the article deals with my EFL learning experience in the college years, in which reason underlying my

choice to study at department of EFL education is explained. I also elaborate phase of experience within these four years of colleague and its implication to my journey to be a professional teacher. Again, this phase of journey is colourful. I was a student in the department of EFL education and at the same time, I was an EFL instructor in a private English school. These college years have shifted my pedagogical philosophy upon interacting and engaging with EFL lecturers graduating from American and Australian universities.

The information discussed in the third main section of this article is intriguing indeed. I elaborate phases, in which my interest to EFL teaching increases and at the same time I also give a depth scrutiny to what makes my passionate to English decreases. Therefore, in this section I discuss my negotiation being in the intersection of forked roads. I experienced a battle inside between staying in the path of EFL teaching and choosing other professional career. In the final section of this article, I provide implication of these learning and teaching experience toward my present professional career.

Narrative has been seen as a legitimate professional journey (Knight, 2011. Elliott (2005), and it is "understood to organize a sequence of events into a whole so that significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole" (p. 3). This definition suggests that narratives are embodied in three features: narratives are chronological because they represent events in a sequence; they are also meaningful, since the sequence gives meaning to events being represented; and third, narratives are social because they are produced for a particular audience (Elliott, 2005).

My narrative reflects my learning experience that shaped the way I see my small world as a lecturer in the Department of EFL education and also the way I negotiate my professional career within my big world in the jungle of academic environment.

THE FIRST CONTACT

My first contact with foreign languages was in 1989 during my school years at a Boarding School, in which I learnt both English and Arabic as two core subjects. This learning experience was terrifying, since English was a total alien to me. In fact, none of my family speaks the language. Nevertheless, similar learning anxiety seemed to be absent in my Arabic learning.

This anxiety, however, did not halt my English learning motivation, and in the end made it as my learning focus. My passionate toward English begins during my intense exposure with my first English teacher at the school. I was attracted with his teaching styles. He seemed to combine L1 and L2 but more emphasis was made on the later. He also developed good relationship with students. He built rapports with students through gaining their trust toward him. Trust is considered important in the learning process, since it triggers continuous learning. As a novice learner, however, I was not certain about my teacher's teaching methodology.

My initial assumption suggested that English was taught through Grammar Translation Method. This was because teaching process was concerned with grammar; teaching grammar deductively was the focus of GMT (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, 2004). It believes that to learn a language, students are to acquire grammatical competent, and thus it should be taught explicitly and through translation into L1. However, the focus of the instruction was not on developing reading and writings as the focus of GTM (Richards & Rodger, 2001, p. 6); instead, his medium of instruction was very much like Direct Methods (Richards & Rodger, 2001, 2004). He was concerned with developing speaking skill. In spite of this mixed methods, his ways of teaching was intriguing.

In addition to practicing English and Arabic in class of 35 students, we were to speak the two languages outside of the classroom. As we live in dormitories, our language practices can be tightly monitored and controlled. Dormitory allows students to establish a community of learning, in which practicing the language in daily basis was very feasible (DeVillar & Jiang, 2004; Morgan, 2004). Students are required to speak English from Monday to Wednesday, and Arabic from

Thursday to Saturday, and Sunday was devoted to the two languages. Speaking the two languages within the dormitory building was an obligatory, and thus breaching this rule will result in severe punishments.

Practicing these languages in informal settings through role play and partners was also our model of language learning. Under teachers and seniors' supervision we were put into groups every day at 5 pm to practice the two languages. We used various fun learning activities such as guessing vocabularies based on partners' description of the word. Partners' description was a clue to predict the vocabulary.

In addition, as a part of our routine activities, every morning we were to write three vocabularies in our notebook and submitted it to teachers' office. The book should be collected in the afternoon by memorizing these vocabularies to enables us get the book back. This method seemed effective in vocabulary building in the short run, but it did not help students to understand the use of vocabularies in context as they were memorized in isolation (Nation & Meara, 2002).

In spite of some shortcomings in such a teaching methodology, it helped student to develop their communicative competent. For example, in the first six months of schooling, my speaking skill had increased from level 0+ to level 1 or 1+, in which I gained sufficient competent to develop simple English expressions. While those who study in state secondary schools, in which speaking English is not an obligatory, gained very limited communicative skill. This experience led to my hypotheses that daily practices of the language improve the chance to gain sufficient communicative competent (Richards & Rodger, 2001). In fact, the boarding school was transformed into language learning community, and thus it enhance feasibility that students will acquire language competent, especial oral proficiency more easily (Morgan, 2004 and DeVillar & Jiang, 2004).

Nevertheless, our negligence in writing and reading skills created potential problems in our ability to be fully competent in English. We were good at using the language and understand basic grammars, and yet we lacked in writing and reading skills. This suggests that the four English skills cannot be taught in isolation (Brown, 2001). It also gave me insights that teaching a foreign language should be approached through multiple methods Richards & Renandya, 2005). For example, my boarding school taught grammar deductively as in GTM, but was not concerned with reading and writing; instead it was concerned with spoken skill as in Direct Method. As the result, our language skill was handicap, in a sense that we acquire sufficient competence in certain skills, such as grammar and spoken language and have limited ability in other skills, such as reading and writing skills.

BEING A NOVICE TEACHER: My first exposure

In 1991, I was assigned as an assistant teacher who was responsible for teaching and improving students' speaking skill. My ways of teaching during this initial year reflected to a large extent, my learning experience. I taught students the way I was taught by my teachers. In spite of this limited teaching competence, I believe that healthy teacher-student relationship is a pre-requisite for good classroom practices (Brown, 2001; Pettis, 2005). This belief shapes my ways of interacting with students. I also regarded students as colleagues to develop warm communication and mutual learning can be enacted. In turns, students were confident to communicate with me either in English or Arabic. My four-year language teaching experiences was equipped with this philosophy and it remains to these days.

In addition, I saw that motivation and learning attitude play a big role in helping students succeed in their learning. Experts in second language acquisition identify three types of motivation that affect the acquisition of second language (Brown, 2000, 2001). *Integrative motivation* is one of the motivations that urge one to learn a foreign language. Students learn FLs because of their attempts to integrate into the community whose language is being learnt (Brown, 2000; Gass & Selinker, 2001).

The second type of motivation is *instrumental motivation*, in which the language

was learnt for the sake of educational improvement. There are a large number of learners who fall into this category. For example, Indonesian students learn English and coach themselves to improve their TOEFL score merely to enable themselves gain admission into US universities or as a requirement for scholarship application. The third type of motivation is referred as *motivational intensity* (Brown, 2001). Students learn FLs because of their innate motivation to learn the languages. Integrative motivation may be better able to help students' learning, since learning a language is not limited to learning syntax, morphology or sounds. Learning a second language is a long process where learners need to be assimilated into the cultures of the target language.

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

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

Like motivation, attitude, which is defined as the positive or negative behavior of certain language learners, is also an important component in SLA (Aveni, 2005). When learners are positive about their ability and are confident in their language, they will have the courage to communicate in the language and use it in their writing or various forms of communication. In addition, a positive attitude will determine when, where and how a learner uses the language (Aveni, 2005). By contrast, if language learners have a negative attitude toward themselves, it interferes with their use of the language and it certainly reduces their confidence toward the language.

In my classroom, I observed a student who actually had an average level of English. However, most of his classmates regarded him as a bright and intelligent student who exceeded their language ability. This assumption boosted the student's confidence, and thus resulted in his willingness to use language daily and being a talkative student in class. This positive perception toward himself affected his attitude in learning the language and in turn, it made him really one of the bright and brilliant students among his classmates.

Since motivation and attitude are important source in the language learning, I was committed to increase my students' motivation and challenge their language learning attitudes. In spite of my ability in boosting students' motivation, I lacked the ability in designing the lesson plan. I often came to the classroom only with limited preparation such as what to teach and how to teach, and little attention was given to the objective and the philosophy of the lesson, while good lesson plan help effective teaching to take place (Brown, 2001; Farrel, 2005; Woodward, 2001). This drawback created a problem because it was hard for students to grasp the materials I transferred, although they like being in my class due to my teaching approach. This fact shapes my teaching identity, in which I realized that planning the lesson well was one of the central components of effective teaching.

My passion to be a qualified English teacher took me to Faculty of Education, Ar-Raniry Islamic State Institute, majoring English Teacher Education.

BEING A LEARNER AND A TEACHER: The College experience

In the department of EFL education, English was also used as a tool of interaction

among students and teaching staffs. I studied Listening, Speaking, Writing, Grammar, Translation and Reading separately. In spite of their isolation, all subjects were taught in English. The response for this strategy was positive indeed. In fact, students love to study with lecturers who used English in their teaching.

During my college years, I was appointed an English instructor in a private English school. My job at the school was a turning point in my teaching styles. In the school I was responsible to provide teaching materials and to arrange instructional schedules as well as teaching. I not only observed valuable teaching and learning experiences, but also was mentored by TESOL professionals on how to conduct effective teaching. In the school we did not teach grammar in isolation; we taught grammar inductively through contexts. To keep us on the correct track, we divided classes into some levels. We ranged them from Basic Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper Intermediate, Advance to TOEFL. The four skills were equally emphasized in all levels. Besides, we offered Basic Conversation, Pre-Intermediate Conversation classes for those who want to enhance speaking skill *per se*.

Furthermore, we selected different materials for each levels based on their level of proficiency. All students registered for classes will be tested and then put in classes of their proficiency level. The manager of the school, who holds a TESOL degree from an American university, always emphasized three philosophies in instructional process. *First*, the instructors should always show affection to students by developing mutual learning and friendly interaction with them. *Second*, teaching with L2 was highly emphasized. *Third*, a lesson plan covering study objectives, proficiency trained, and instructional activities should be well prepared in advance.

These teaching philosophies supported my own philosophies, and I therefore, did not encounter major difficulties adopting them. I always tried to apply these philosophies although designing lesson plan was still my biggest weaknesses, but these philosophies became my teaching guidance. Teaching

philosophies reflect one's ways of teaching as suggested by Gutek (2004) and thus it is important for all teachers to hold on them. In one of my classes for example, I provided a pictured English text. I asked them to skim the texts and spot the difficult vocabularies. This activity was made in the first five minutes of the class. Students then, were to read the text in silent for 10 minutes. The next step was that some volunteers were to explain the content of the text without translating it into the L1. In the end, I picked up some structure elements then explained them to students (refer to DeCarrico & Larsen-Freeman, 2002; Ellis, 2002; and Hinkel & Fotos, 2002).

To enhance students' writing ability, I sometimes switched my method from asking them to explain the content of the texts orally, to explaining it in written form. Listening skill was trained by playing English cassettes, and then I asked students to answer some questions corresponded with the recording. This method seemed to work better than that I experienced in the Boarding School. With this method, we were able to train students' speaking ability and other language skills simultaneously. It also encouraged instructors to prepare themselves and read the article beforehand.

BETWEEN LEARNING AND TEACHING: The post college year experience
5.1. The Sargede Experience

Having received my bachelor degree, in 2001 I was recruited as a teaching staff in an Islamic state Institute. However, I had to take English and Arabic training for five months as a pre-service training. The training was conducted in Sargede Inn, Yogakarta. During the training I did not only learn various English and Arabic skills but also gain various teaching techniques. In the English class, I learnt speaking skills through debate and discussion. The instructor divided us into two groups, one was an affirmative group and the other one was a negative group. To make debate run smoothly, the instructor acted as the moderator who was responsible in guiding the path of the debate.

In addition, in learning grammar, the instructor provided us the error sentences, which later on they were identified and corrected by

students. The answers then were discussed in the classroom. Teachers sometimes asked students in the first row to make initial corrections, but sometimes he also asked those at the back row to read an error sentence (DeCarrico & Larsen-Freeman, 2002).

5.2. Between IALF, MUELC and OPIE

A couple of months later, in October 2001, I got an invitation to have an English training in Indonesia-Australia Language Foundation (IALF), Jakarta for six weeks and then proceeded to have an English training at Monash University English Language Centre (MUELC), Australia for five weeks. In these two places, I experienced slightly similar methods of learning English. In the first meetings, we were given a pre-test to determine our English language level. In the learning process we were given English texts, and we were to explain the content of the text. Next, we were to generate our ideas and opinions, and the instructor noted mistakes simultaneously; he examined word choice, sentence structure, diction and also intonation and fluency. Other students in the class were required to listen to their classmates' explanation and raised questions in the target language.

In the following meeting, the instructor reviewed lesson through correcting the previous mistakes. Since we were all adult learners, the feedbacks seemed to be useful and we often made fun of our own ridicules, without the feeling of resentment (DeCarrico & Larsen-Freeman, 2002). In addition, the instructor also used the texts to examine the grammatical structures. With this practice, the class covered all skills; we enhanced our reading through critical reading on a text, improved listening skill by listening to classmates' explanation on the texts as well as recorded cassettes, and improved conversation skill through oral explanation on the content of the text. Finally, we also increased writing skill though writing critical review on the article.

In 2004, I had a chance to pursue my study at Ohio University, USA. It was a wonderful experience and it was my second time being in an English spoken country. Before the academic year commenced, I had to take a three week language program administered by

Ohio Program of Intensive English (OPIE). My learning experience being at OPIE was not far different from those obtained in IALF and MUELC. There was a similarity in the learning process. The OPIE experience strengthened my perception in the significance of teaching language skills in integration, since language is the combination of those multiple skills.

In addition, my other backyard, which was insightful and influential, was my experience being a student in the Department of Linguistics, Ohio University. While pursuing my Masters degree at the Faculty of Education, I enrolled in a TESOL certificate program offered by the Department of Linguistics. In the program, I was exposed with many subjects in the fields of Applied Linguistics. However, three subjects: Material in TEFL, TEFL Methodology and Practicum in EFL teaching were the most influential that shape my teaching identities. Material in TEFL gave me an idea on how to develop effective teaching materials from limited sources. For example, advertisements in newspapers can be a fabulous teaching material for reading, speaking and also for writing (see Brown, 2001). This subject challenged my former assumption that teaching materials can be only obtained from printed books, such as Interchange, Let's Talk, Person to Person, Headway and other printed materials.

The other two interrelated subjects TEFL Methodology and Practicum enabled me to understand how the many teaching methodologies, such as the Silent Way, Audiolingual, TPR and other teaching methods put into practices. These two subjects also helped me understand that shifts in teaching methodology should be undertaken when necessary. For instance, teachers may have an initial plan to conduct teaching through TPR or CLT. The teaching contexts however, may require teachers to shift their teaching methods to better meet the objective of the learning. Therefore, it is a common phenomenon that teachers oftentimes use eclectic methods, referring to many different methods during their classroom practices.

Teaching grammar inductively, such as the English School, the Sargede, IALF MUELC and OPIE experience, seems to be seen as more

effective in today's language classroom. In fact, such a classroom practice helps many students to master English not only its spoken but also its written form. Our classroom activities such as role play, pair work, interaction and trial and error, creative learning seem to be like the characteristics of CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). I myself felt that under such instruction, I was able to equalize my ability in the four skills that was almost impossible to acquire through 'traditional' ways of learning (Gass & Selinker, 2001).

However, this method is not without shortcomings; as all methods are not drawbacks free (Richards & Rodgers, 2004) This method will be insufficient as well as inefficient if lacking the reading materials and incompetent teachers. In addition, learning grammar inductively sometimes create problems for certain students because the grammatical items will not be taught chronologically. For example, teachers do not introduce basic grammar such as pronouns, parts of speech and also simple sentences. The grammar is taught based on the availability of the texts. If the first text contains comparative degree, then instructor will teach this problem first before teaching other basic grammar, which should be actually taught first. In spite of its drawbacks, such problem can be minimized or even eliminated when enough supply texts and competent teachers are made available.

These language learning experiences in various places advantages me when I step into my real teaching career. I apply all different useful learning experiences into my instructional activities. In addition to maintaining my teaching philosophies, designing good lesson plan covering all necessary components, becomes my new priority.

BEING A PROFESIONAL TEACHER: Changes in my professional identity

These language learning/teaching experiences have shaped my pedagogical philosophy. My first experience of language learning in Boarding School led to my understanding that language should be taught step by step in chronological order and also in sequence and coherent. Jere (2000); Good and Brophy's (2000); and Pettis (2005) supported this view as they believe that teachers should provide materials in sequence. In addition, teaching languages which emphasized on communicative skills was found to be effective. Therefore, in my first years of Boarding School, I was taught simple grammar and then developed it gradually following students' development (refer to Ellis, 2002; Hinkel & Fotos, 2002; and Swan, 2005 on teaching grammar). If students understood Parts of Speech, for example, teachers then went further to teach higher level of grammar, and all instructional activities were conducted in English as our commitment. However, the failure of our method to cover the four skills made it handicap.

In addition, my experiences learning in university provided me with some insights that teachers should develop warm communication with students to enhance their confidence (Brown, 2001; Lewis, 2005; and Pettis, 2005) assert that teachers should display positive personal attribute in the classroom (Lewis, 2005). Teachers also should be concerned with showing their affection to students to develop collaboration. The most important teachers' classroom practices lie on their ability to connect students' prior knowledge with their recent knowledge. In addition, I found that lack of preparation in term of lesson plan, which covers study objectives made students' confused for what they are required to achieve. Therefore, designing good lesson plans is the heart of instructional process (Farrel, 2005; Woodward, 2004).

During my tenure as an English instructor in the English School, I found that in addition to students' preference to learning communication through pair work and role play, good lesson plan made instructional process effective. This experience justified my experience in the university. Farrel (2005); Fernadez and Chokshi (2002); and Woodward (2004) state that an effective teacher will aim at designing good lesson plans, which identify overarching goals as an important part of instruction.

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

All these experiences have formed the basis of my teaching career a junior faculty member in the Islamic State Institute, Indonesia, I applied all knowledge I obtained during my trainings. In my first meeting with students, for instance, I provided them with the syllabus containing study objectives and course expectation. I also maintain good relationship and mutual learning with students from the early days of my teaching. The result was amazing; I can promote relationship with them inside and outside the classroom. This relationship develops students' confidence to develop their communication skill and discuss their study problems with me.

THE CLOSING REMARKS

This article takes me back to my earlier years of learning and teaching English. It explores my learning - teaching journeys. The journeys have indeed shifted my teaching and professional identity, in which I define and redefine language instruction. These experiences taught me three important teaching components. First, English should be taught in integration, in which all four skills need to be emphasized. The second important component is that a well developed lesson plan is central for effective teaching. Finally, these experiences shaped my teaching identity and strengthened my belief that healthy T and S relationship is one of the significant factors for successful learning.

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