

Reflective Practice through Journal Writing- A Case Study

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Introduction

Diary/Journal Writing

A teaching journal/diary is an ongoing written account of observations, reflections, and other thoughts about teaching, usually in the form of a notebook, or electronic mode, which serves as a source of discussion, reflection, or evaluation. The journal may be used as a record of incidents, problems, and insights that occurred during lessons; it may be an account of a class that the teacher would like to review or return to later. 'Writing a teaching journal provides an opportunity for teachers to use the process of writing to describe and explore their own teaching practices' (Ho & Richards, 1993, pp.8).

There are no hard and fast rules for reflection. However, writing tends to be a more powerful way of reflection than merely thinking about an experience. Producing written documentation helps us to construct a more in-depth analysis, can act as a useful memoir, may be required as a part of an appraisal, and is a useful way to record our own progress. Keeping a reflective journal enables teachers to think about the issues they confront during their day-to-day classroom teaching, and helps to develop reflective and critical thinking skills, and prepare for class discussions. Reflective journal is not a summary of the lesson taught. While reflecting, teachers may:

- (i) discuss, what they think.
- (ii) reflect upon their feelings in response to what they read.
- (iii) relate what they read to previous experience.
- (iv) discuss ideas they would like to explore in the future as a result of having read the chapter.
- (v) account for learning new ideas they have not considered before.
- (vi) provide conclusions they thought of in response to the reading.

In preparing to compose a reflective journal, teachers may ask themselves the following questions:

- (i) What ideas from the reading caught my attention?
- (ii) What ideas from the reading were new to me?
- (iii) What is my personal response to the reading? What is the basis for such a response?
- (iv) What conclusions can I derive from the reading material?
- (v) How can I implement the ideas contained in the text in my professional life?

Not the teacher is expected to address each one of the above questions every time she reads. The questions are meant to help the teacher go beyond mere summarization.

Case studies are of value in refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability" (Stake, 1994, p. 245).

The present case study aims at expanding the theory that is available on teacher self-evaluation by providing teacher's feedback on her experience.

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

As far as reliability is concerned, this researcher has carefully documented all the procedures followed in this study in detail as possible, so much so that if another researcher were to conduct a comparable case study, she would arrive at similar findings.

The application of validity to case study research is a much-debated subject in the literature on second language research:

There are two points of view on the issue of validity. On the one hand, there are the researchers who feel that, while internal validity is important, external validity may be irrelevant. On the other hand, other researchers take a different view, arguing that tests of validity should be stringently applied to the case study as to any other type of research.

(Nunan 1992: 80)

In naturalistic research, generalizations from one group of people to others is often suspect because there are too many elements that are specific to that group. It is for this reason that Yin (2003) argues that while statistical generalizations are valid for empirical research, case study research depends on analytical generalizations in which the findings of a study can lend support to some broader theory.

PROCEDURES ADOPTED FOR DATA COLLECTION

This researcher has maintained separate file for participant teacher with her pseudonym. In the file allotted for participant, the researcher kept a copy of the teacher's profile containing her personal details, designation, educational qualifications, years of experience, objective in choosing the teaching profession, and a copy of the transcript of the interview. The information was obtained through interviews on various emergent themes/strategies/patterns, which were considered important.

Before the subject set about her exploratory practices, this researcher administered her with semi-structured questionnaire. The purpose was to make the teacher reflect on her own teaching and realize her strengths and weaknesses. The questions focused on the teacher's beliefs about ESL teaching-learning process, teaching strategies, opinion on reflective practice, and the use of bilingualism while teaching.

The teacher participant was led into free discussions with this researcher about her research and about the possible means for improving her professional competence. The teacher decided to spend a minimum of five minutes to write her experience and reflect on the problems encountered either by introspection or through discussion with a colleague. While writing an entry in the journal, the teacher was asked to reflect on the following:

- How was the class planned?
- Is there any deviation from the plan?
- What types of questions were asked by the teacher at the beginning, middle, and towards the end?
- What about the student-teacher, student-student interaction in class?
- Was the class a success or a failure?
- How can it be made more effective next time?
- How will the teacher plan for the next class based on the previous reflection?

The teacher participant was also guided to make journal entries after each class, reflecting on her experiences and with suggestions for improvement for the next class. To encourage her, to

make a start, a list of questions was distributed. The teacher participant was also asked to write a lesson plan for each lesson she was willing to teach. The entries, the teacher made in her journals were unguided, but the list of questions was only to motivate her for the purpose.

The journal entries made by the teacher participant are collected into her file, her way of progression qualitatively in day-to-day teaching practice was registered, and the new methods and materials devised for regular reflection were determined. The improvement in her questioning pattern and classroom interaction, student involvement and learner evaluation techniques employed by the teacher was collected from the teacher's point of view. A small discussion on these entries was conducted to arrive at a better conclusion, which proves the effect of reflective practice in language teaching – learning process.

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER IN THE SUBJECT'S REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The researcher's role was that of an observer-cum-participant. She conducted a questionnaire survey of the subject's beliefs, studied the records of the subjects' reflective practice (such as journal entries), and took part in review discussions with her about reflections. Whenever the participant gave her experiences and opinions, the researcher carefully documented them. She also made a time-to-time verification of the data through discussions with the participant.

CASE STUDY

Teacher of this present study (Teacher T) teaches English in a degree college in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India. The college is known for its innovations in English language teaching. She has a Masters degree in English, a bachelor's degree in education and a postgraduate certificate in the teaching of English from the Central Institute of English and Foreign languages (now EFL University), Hyderabad. She has taught English for 32 years, of which 18 years were at the school level. She has attended six national seminars and one international seminar.

When this researcher approached Teacher T for taking her consent to participate in her study, she readily gave her acceptance as she felt it to be an opportunity to improve her teaching skills and for journal writing.

In the following section, the reflections of Teacher T are organized and analyzed as follows:

- a. The teacher's beliefs about various aspects of ESL teaching, as ascertained by the researcher through an informal interview;
- b. Her reflections through journal writing with an analysis of the reflections; and
- c. An analysis of her post-reflection discussion with this researcher.

FINDINGS THROUGH AN INFORMAL INTERVIEW

In an informal interview conducted by the researcher, the teacher expressed her personal opinions about various aspects of ESL teaching.

(a) Reflective practice

The idea about reflective practice is given by CIEFL while I was doing PGCTE. It is strengthened when I was reading ELT Books, looking at the experiences stated in the books. Further information is provided by Dr. P. Ramanujam in the department. The actual reflection is done when I am asked by Madam Samrajya Lakshmi to state my reflection on paper precisely. This kind of practice helps me to improve my way of teaching which is definitely useful to the students to learn the language.

(b) Teaching strategies followed

Often I divide my class into groups of 5 or 6 depending on the strength of the class and give them tasks. I keep guiding them when they are doing their tasks. Later, I combine the class and ask students to share their experience to others. I make it a point to ask them to speak in English even when their English is not so fluent.

(c) Use of bilingualism

Very rarely I shift to mother tongue. Mostly I use very simple words and encourage students to use only English.

(d) Type of questions used

Initially the questions are related to the topic. Later the questions are to draw the comprehension details of the lessons. Finally, the questions help them to summarize the sub-topics in order to recall what they have studied.

(e) Teacher's attitude towards her student's learning English

My students feel that English can also be learnt in a way they are learning other subjects like physics and chemistry, which are related to factual information. They are sometimes disappointed when I ask them to read their lessons independently. Till they come to degree classes they were used to lecture method and notes given by the teacher. To motivate them to learn the language is great burden for me.

(f) Opinion of the teacher on English as spoken language

They don't speak English at all outside the classroom as they know little English which may not help them to perform tasks. Inside the class they speak English related to lessons. In other words, they answer the questions related to their lessons.

(g) Teacher's approaches to ESL instruction

A belief inventory of the teacher was made by administering a questionnaire (Appendix A). The teacher identified the following as her beliefs:

- i. Language can be thought of as meaningful communication and is learned subconsciously in non-academic, social situations.
- ii. If ESL students understand some of the basic grammatical rules of the language they can usually create lots of new sentences on their own.
- iii. When ESL students make oral errors, it is best to ignore them, as long as you can understand what they are trying to say.
- iv. When ESL students make oral mistakes, it helps to correct them and later teach a short lesson explaining why they made that mistake.
- v. ESL students usually need to master some of the basic listening and speaking skills before they can begin to read and write.

(i) Teacher's reflection on her own experiences in language learning and their impact on her teaching practice

I was taught grammar through substitution tables. My vocabulary is very less as I have studied only Telugu medium. Later I improved my language through reading newspapers and books. I believe reading helps to learn the language. So I encourage students to read at least for half an hour everyday in English.

REFLECTIONS THROUGH JOURNAL WRITING

Teacher T prefers compact discs and pictures as teaching aids to explain the English lesson effectively. Very often, she prefers her personal experiences as examples to compare and contrast the situations given in the lessons.

The teacher often prefers teamwork in her classes. She considers herself a trainer guiding the students in their learning process. She makes students interact and share their experiences with one another and insists on their speaking in English.

The teacher rarely uses the mother tongue. She claims that, to the maximum extent possible, she explains the lessons in simple English, such that the learners feel no difficulty in understanding her language.

The teacher often uses topic-based questions in order to make the learner call back his/her past experiences related to the topic concerned while introducing the topic. Later, in the course of the lesson, she uses questions, which would test the comprehension skills of the learners. Towards the end of each class, the teacher prefers to ask questions, which would help her sum up the sub-topics already discussed in the class.

The teacher feels that, though English was taught from childhood as the second language, learners find it difficult to speak in English, as there is no English language atmosphere both on the college campus and outside. There is no compulsion on the learner to use English in oral communication. Even if they were asked to do so, the linguistic capabilities of the students might not cater to their needs.

From the statements chosen by the teacher from the inventory, she seems to believe in providing students opportunities for exposure to real life situations so that they can learn to communicate in English. She prefers to teach grammar rules to improve her student's language skills. She believes that errors are inevitable but can be corrected in oral communication, and gives more importance to clear communication of messages than accuracy. She believes in skill-based, rule-based, and function-based approaches to teaching English.

Eight extracts from her journal entries with an analysis of each extract are given below:

Extract I: *After a week I asked the students whether they have finished reading the book. None of them have opened the book and read. They are suspicious whether the questions from those books be given in the exams. In addition, the next doubt was why they should read on their own, when they have a teacher to explain the text... After I discussed the blurbs, the students showed interest in reading the books. This is an opening up activity I used which worked to a certain extent. I need to learn many more strategies which are helpful to students motivating them to read independently.*

Through one of her experiences, the teacher realizes that her students were reluctant to read the text on their own when she asked them, just because they were taught in a traditional way. Then the teacher made some introspection and searched for a better method of making them independent readers. She then realized that she had not motivated her learners enough to read independently. She, therefore, set about developing strategies for motivating her learners in different ways.

Extract II: *While I was teaching letter writing and writing resume, I thought that a model will be sufficient. Later I realized there need not be a perfect model. Each of us can create our own model provided we give a thought to our mind 'why we need to learn these things at all?' This thought helped me to think about descriptive resume in the place of tabular form.*

On reflection, the teacher decided to be experimental in relation to resume writing. She deviates from the current fashion of writing resumes in tabular form and decides to experiment with what she calls, 'descriptive' ones.

Extract III: *In our college, we have a particular section, which is from purely Telugu medium background. They find it difficult to read any level material prescribed for them. I wondered what I could do about this problem. Then I decided to use the 'Reading 400 programme', which*

is meant for school children. This is not part of the syllabus. Yet, I asked them to read these cards and do the exercise provided after the story to build their confidence... As they have too many exercises after the passage they found it difficult to complete but they studied the passages independently and prepared notes on their own.

The teacher's reflection led her to the realization that the texts set on the course were above the linguistic level of her students. She, therefore, decided to experiment with materials which were linguistically at a lower level with illustrative pictures aiding comprehension. The students' success with the alternative texts motivated them to read independently even texts at a higher level and led them to read the texts prescribed on their course. It was the teacher's reflection that helped her effect a smooth transition from the familiar to the not-so-familiar by giving the students a taste of success.

Extract IV: *I taught prescriptive grammar simplifying it in tabular form with beautiful titles. For example: When I wanted to teach tenses, I prepared a table like this:*

<i>Tense</i>	<i>form</i>	<i>structure</i>	<i>meaning</i>
<i>Present</i>	<i>Simple Present</i>	<i>am is + main are verb</i>	<i>We use this form to discuss regular, repeated actions</i>

I thought this is the best way of teaching because my students brought me 100% results. Later, I realized that these so-called students do not use same sentences when it is necessary for them to speak English, so, I changed my way of teaching. Instead of introducing grammar item, I started asking them to describe the functions they do regularly. After they described, I write and discuss what they did was good but a few mistakes they made which could be corrected easily. Then I discussed the rule and name of the grammatical structure, which we are using in that particular context. This was more useful than the other way of teaching.

The teacher was initially found to be imitating her own teachers' strategy of teaching grammar, i.e., the deductive method where grammar was taught through rules and examples. Later, after reflection over her students' difficulty in understanding the lesson, the teacher changed her practice from the deductive method to the inductive method, i.e., by deriving rules through known information, which, she found was interesting and easy for the students.

Extract V: *I never knew a poem has a structure and we need to know the approach to it. Later, when I reflected, I understood that a poem has a structure- beginning, middle and conclusion. Questions related to introduction, main action, and concluding part of the story helped students to comprehend the poem.*

The teacher's experience with her poetry class made her reflect on her difficulty to teach it, which gave her the way out to make it an easy task for the teacher as well as the students. While reflecting on her problem of teaching the poem, she hit upon an idea that she might ask questions related to the beginning, the middle, and the end of the event related in the poem, and the technique worked. Through her evaluative skills, she could investigate the problem and made decisions appropriate to the context.

Extract VI: *In our discussion, the kind of questions asked to students made them think how they should divide the material into different paragraphs while they are participating in essay writing competition. The students not only learnt the main points of the essay but they also came to know the technique of creating an essay.*

Through one of her experiences, the teacher says that she was successful in making her students read and reflect on their own prose lesson, and thus could bring about a change in her teaching strategy, while improving the effectiveness of her prose class by making it more interactive and student-centered. She has brought a fresh air of interest into an otherwise prosaic class.

Extract VII: *While teaching a story today, I found my students, struggling to understand the meanings of the words they are reading as the description is not at their level. I thought for a while. It struck me that I might provide the clues asking them to find out whether the given description is related to a person or a place. They said it is a person. I asked them to recall to their mind what kind of a person. Of course I used my mother tongue to name that person. Immediately the picture came to their mind.*

While making her students read and comprehend a story, the teacher found them struggling to comprehend and then decided to give clues for her students to understand the story. In her reflection, she realized the need for using the students' mother tongue to take the story into their minds.

Extract VIII: *I asked my nephew today to read a story. He sincerely started reading it on his own. I noticed that he is taking more than half an hour to read a page. I decided that most of my students do the same. Then the thought came to my mind, "How can these students sustain their interest so long to comprehend the story?" "What shall I do to make them read fast?" These questions made me think to do something. I asked my students to set time for reading. At the beginning and towards the end, I asked them to note the time. This will show the speed they are maintaining in their reading. Another strategy I thought of making them to pick up their speed while they read. They should read each sentence with proper stress and rhythm, which will make them understand what they are reading, and to improve the speed in their reading.*

The teacher was found to bring in her home experience to renovate her strategy of reading practice in her classroom. She found that when students took a longer time in reading a passage, she/he could not sustain the interest in the activity; as such, it would be a mere waste of time. While reflecting-on-action, she devised a method of asking the students to be time conscious while reading the passage. Through repeated practice, the students were trained to read faster with greater understanding.

POST-REFLECTION DISCUSSION

The researcher had a 15-minutes discussion with Teacher T. When she was asked to respond on the importance of journal writing, she expressed her satisfaction because she was confident that it raised her self-consciousness about her own teaching.

Journal writing, though I hadn't maintained regularly, definitely helps us in becoming a better teacher. Whether consciously or unconsciously, I used to reflect about my teaching as I had the habit of checking each work I do is good or bad. When I am asked to do diary entries, I do feel that I become more conscious about what I have been doing in the classroom. And whether my teaching is effective or totally useless. To be honest, I felt guilty of not preparing for each and every class and started doing it now. I feel if I continue to maintain this journal writing, I'll be a far better teacher than before. So, I suggest the experts who dealt in this kind of research should continue to help other teachers by conducting workshops and seminars periodically.

From the post reflection discussion, the researcher could notice the teacher's confidence in the usefulness of reflective practice, if followed regularly. She is confident that journal writing definitely helps the teacher, if done regularly. She realizes the importance of a thorough

preparation after making self-introspection through journal writing. She expresses her hope of becoming a better teacher if she continues to reflect upon her classes on a regular basis. She suggests that experts in this field should conduct workshops and seminars periodically with a view of helping ESL teachers with guidelines to improve their classroom teaching.

The case investigated in the study point to the role that reflection on, and inquiry into, classroom practices can play as a mechanism for change in teacher's classroom practices as well as a forum for professional development over time. His reflective practice through journal writing created what Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 42) call "a new sense of meaning and significance" which brought a new sense of meaning and significance to their classroom works.

The case also shows that the teacher constructed her own explanations of teaching derived from her own practices, and the explanations (or "knowledge") were socially negotiated and restructured within her classrooms. This is in keeping with both socio-cultural theories that emphasize the fundamentally social nature of learning (Neaman, Griffin, and Cole 1989; Vygotsky 1978) and theories of situated cognition that maintain that knowledge entails lived practices, not just accumulated information (Chaiklin and Lave 1996; Lave and Wenger 1991).

It will not be wide of the mark to conclude from above that the teacher's reflective practice involving the processes identified in the introductory paragraph of this paper indicates her progress towards being producer of legitimate knowledge out of her own lived realities as professionals who is capable of constructing and sustaining her own professional development over time.

The reflective practice of the teacher's tend to add force to the emerging "new scholarship" (Anderson and Herr 1999) which promises to alter the traditional knowledge base of teacher education consisting of generalizable knowledge about good teaching and good teachers produced by educational researchers who are outsiders to classroom life, and infuse it with "insider" knowledge.

Lastly, the implications of this research for ESL teacher education need to be pointed out. It is evident from the foregoing that reflective practice has considerable potential for the ongoing professional development of teachers in general and ESL teachers in particular and that it is usable and effective factors which will be valued by academic staff education systems. After experimenting with reflective practice, the participant became confident the usefulness of this process. This confidence was the direct outcome of the significant gains she had made in her personal and professional development. She perceived reflective practice as a process that would raise her awareness of her practice as a teacher, improve her teaching practice resulting in improved learner outcomes, and give greater confidence in her own ability to organize her development.

However, they expressed some concerns also which need to be recorded here. One concern was the amount of time that the process of self-evaluation demanded, though they conceded that the gains far outweighed the demand.

Reflective practice has led Teacher T to prefer CD, pictures, and often her own experiences as teaching aids. She believes through her exploratory experiences that reading newspapers and books in English improves English language communication. Her reflection led her to the conclusion that using a textbook meant for school children would work better with her own students. She made grammar easier to her students by presenting 'tense sequences' in a tabular form. She learnt through her experience and through her discussion with her senior colleague that the best way of making students comprehend a story/poem is to allow the students discuss the content freely. The freedom provided would not only bring in an air of freshness, and

confidence but make them learn more while sharing their thought. She started using the 'Reading 400' programme, meant for school children, in order to teach comprehension skills to her tertiary level learners. She found that the reading cards, especially the vocabulary level of the texts, were within the level of her learners. In order to teach 'vocabulary' for describing a person, Teacher T used its parallel in her students' mother tongue, so that they could understand and remember it better. Teacher T, by making her students answer simple questions activated them to learn comprehension skills. The teacher taught tense sequence in the form of a table, such that it became easy for her students to understand and create sentences on their own. Teacher T used the 'Reading 400' programme meant for school children, in addition to the prescribed text, which was found to be difficult to comprehend, and attempted to effect a smooth transition from the easier to the more difficult by giving the students a taste of success in reading. Teacher T, by choosing interesting stories which the students could enjoy, created interest among the students in her classroom. By presenting comical situations, Teacher T ensured her students' attention. She realized the significance of activity – based teaching and the need for using additional resources in the classroom. She was found using different sources of authentic material to supplement the textbook materials. She adopted inductive teaching of grammar and learned to avoid explicit descriptions, explanations, and technical term. She stated that she was optimistic about the usefulness of reflective practice for her professional development.

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The Criterion