



P-ISSN 2355-2794
E-ISSN 2461-0275

Lessons from Experience: ESL Student Teachers' Reflection during Practicum through Reflective Journals¹

Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri*
Mohd Hassan Abdullah
Ahmad Jazimin Jusoh

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, MALAYSIA

Abstract

Reflection is a prospective alternative in exploring student teachers' thinking during practicum. The data gained from student teachers' reflection are significant in informing teacher education programs on how to equip pre-service teachers to become quality teachers. It is also crucial in addressing issues and conflicts highlighted by student teachers when they interact with the real context. This study is conducted with six semester seven student teachers undergoing their Bachelor in Education with honors Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program. The student teachers were asked to write reflective journal entries throughout the 14 weeks of their teaching practicum experience. The aim of the study is to identify the focus of the student teachers' reflection and the challenges faced by them during practicum. Data were gathered using the reflective journal entries and semi-structured interviews with all the participants. The data were analyzed according to emerging themes. The findings indicated that the student teachers focus on three main themes in their reflections, which are managing learning, pedagogy and teacher attributes. While the challenges highlighted were difficulty in socializing with members of the institution, lack of professional support and lack of ability to manage a classroom.

Keywords: Reflective journal, reflective thinking, student teacher, practicum.

¹A part of this paper was presented at the 1st English Education International Conference (EEIC) in conjunction with the 2nd Reciprocal Graduate Research Symposium (RGRS) of the Consortium of Asia-Pacific Education Universities (CAPEU) between Sultan Idris Education University and Syiah Kuala University, 12-13 November 2016, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, and is part of the conference proceedings published by Syiah Kuala University.

*Corresponding author, email: safinas@fbk.upsi.edu.my

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Practicum has been described as a crucial component in teacher education as the experience has been reported to have an impact on student teachers' personal and professional development and it supports the development of quality beginning teacher (Crookes, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Starkey & Rawlins, 2012; Wong et al., 2015; Zhu & Zhang, 2014). Practicum refers to the supervised teaching experience student teachers gathered in the real context of teaching and learning to support their entry into the teaching profession. Practicum is regarded as the peak of the teacher education program (Barry & King, 1998; Cameron & Wilson, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2006) as it provides the platform for student teachers to utilize their knowledge and skills about teaching and learning hence bridging theory and practice in the real context (Starkey & Rawlins, 2012; Wong et al., 2015; Yaacob et al., 2014; Zhu & Zhang, 2014).

Student teachers consider practicum as crucial in providing valuable experiences of teaching in the real context. Practicum allows the student teachers to reflect on their beliefs, assumptions and knowledge about teaching and learning and put them in practice (Starkey & Rawlins, 2012; Wong et al., 2015; Yaacob et al., 2014; Zhu & Zhang, 2014).

Hence, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the focuses of student teachers' reflection during practicum?
2. What are the challenges faced by the student teachers?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reflective Thinking

Reflective thinking is considered as one of the key elements in developing quality thinking teachers who reflect on their own teaching philosophy and focus on their pedagogical reasoning skills (Rieger et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2015; Yaacob et al., 2014; Zhu & Zhang, 2014). Reflective thinking in teacher education also has been reported as a practice that promotes student teachers' motivation to improve in their teaching ability and their own profession accountability (Hussin, 2003; Ibrahim et al., 2008).

Reflective thinking is a concept introduced by Dewey (1933, p. 7) and he defined it as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supported form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it tends". He further illustrated that reflective thought "transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious" (Dewey, 1933, p. 195). Dewey (1933) mentioned that two main components are involved in reflective thinking which is the process and the content.

Another influential work in reflective thinking is the framework by Manen (1977) that aimed to assist teachers and educators in reflecting on their past decisions and actions to inform their future interactions in the classroom. Manen (1977) proposed a framework that categorized reflective writing into three hierarchical categories: technical reflection, practical reflection and critical reflection.

Table 1. Levels of Reflectivity (Manen, 1977).

<i>Level of reflection</i>	<i>Features</i>
Technical	The technical level refers to reflections on the methods and strategies employed in teaching. Teachers analyzed the success and failure of the instructional decisions made.
Practical	At the practical level, reflections are on the underlying assumptions made on teaching and learning and the impacts of the decisions on the students learning experience in the classroom.
Critical	Reflections at the critical level consider moral, social and ethical factors that might have an impact on the students' learning experience.

Reflective practice in teacher education relates to teachers' thinking or cognition about their actions and decisions and their cognition about teaching and learning which is deeply influenced by their beliefs, assumptions, knowledge and experience (Borg, 2008; Woods, 1996).

The Higher Education Sector, Ministry of Education Malaysia has highlighted the importance of bridging theory and practice in teacher education programs (Hussin, 2003). Reflective practice is one of the key elements that has been reported to promote critical evaluation that makes student teachers become more active in reflecting on their behavior, pedagogical decisions and connecting the theories underpinning their decisions (Hussin, 2003; Ibrahim et al., 2008; Yaacob et al., 2014; Zhu & Zhang, 2014). Reflective practice also promotes self-improvement process that develops student teachers teaching quality (Ibrahim et al., 2008; Yaacob et al., 2014). It is also a key exercise that enables exploration of emerging thoughts, deeply held beliefs, changes in beliefs and perceptions, self-awareness of beliefs and principles and show converging patterns and trends (Albakri et al., 2012; Borg, 2008; Collier, 1999; Ismail et al., 2014; Kabilan, 2007; Woods, 1996).

Realizing the importance of reflective practice in professional development of pre-service teachers, all teacher education institutions in Malaysia have put an emphasis on the practice of reflection particularly during practicum. Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) for instance made it a requirement for all student teachers to provide their self-reflection of their teaching after each lesson conducted. The aim of the self-reflection section is to get the student teachers to think about their lessons and how they can improve the lesson to further develop the effectiveness of their teaching.

Several studies however have reported that student teachers reflect at superficial level during their reflective practice (Bean & Stevens, 2002; Collier, 1999; Hatton & Smith, 1995). Therefore, teacher education institutions are encouraged to emphasize on developing trainees reflective skills. Trainees need to be taught on how to write constructive reflection that get them to explore their thoughts, feelings, behavior, actions and underlying beliefs and assumptions (Wong et al., 2015; Yaacob et al., 2014; Yinger & Clark, 1981).

To ensure the reflections done by the student teachers in this study are structured, a four step critical reflection process is used based on the work of York-Barr et al. (2006). The reflection process is presented in the following Figure 1.

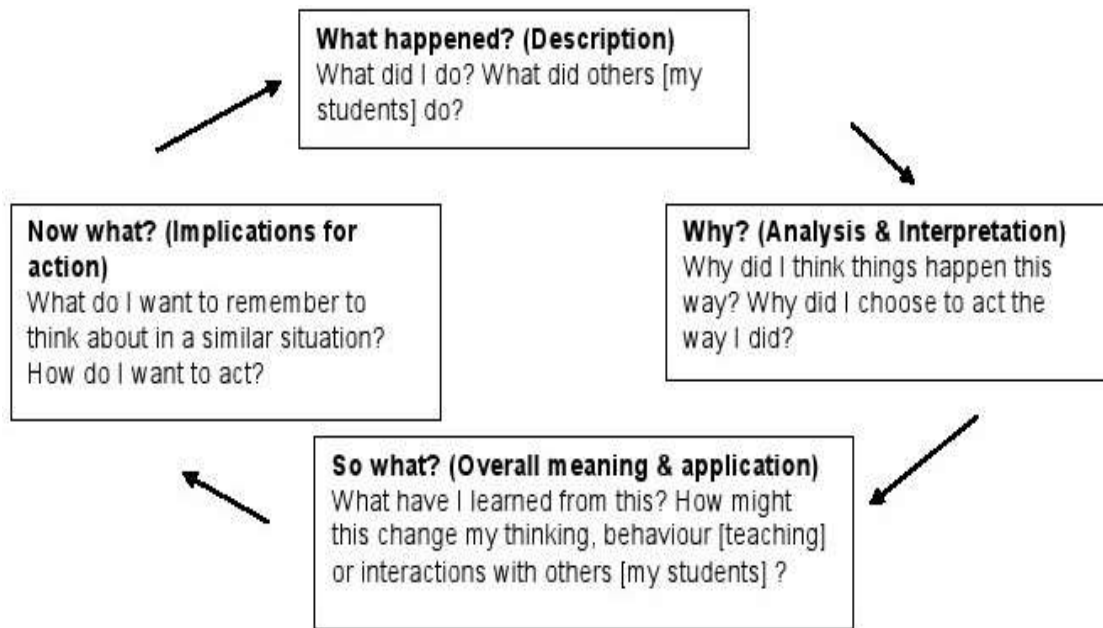


Figure 1. The 4-Step Reflection Process Framework (adapted from York-Barr, Sommers, Ghore & Montie (2006) by NIE, Singapore (2015, p. 58)).

3. METHODOLOGY

Six student teachers participated in this case study. The participants are UPSI semester seven student teachers from Bachelor in Education with honours Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program. During the study, the participants were undergoing teaching practice for 14 weeks in secondary schools around the state of Perak and Selangor.

The participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study to further facilitate data collection procedure. Prior to their teaching practice, the participants were briefed on the reflection. The participants were also given samples of reflection to familiarize them with the format and to give them a general idea on how to write their reflections.

The participants were asked to write a reflective journal entry every week. A total of 63 reflective journal entries (RJE) were gathered for analysis. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with all the participants to gather detailed elaborations and clarifications of the reflective entries they submitted. The interview also aimed to gather data on the issues or challenges they faced during their practicum experience. The interviews were recorded and the data were transcribed for thematic analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study aimed to explore the focus of students' reflection during practicum. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the reflection is based on individual's experience, beliefs, knowledge, assumptions and it is heavily influenced by the context (Albakri et al., 2012; Borg, 2008; Borko & Putnam, 1996; Ismail et al., 2014; Woods,

1996). Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the reflective journals which are managing the learning environment, pedagogy and teacher attributes.

The first theme, managing the learning environment, is one of the main focuses of the student teachers' reflection. It relates to the trainees' specific context and their familiarization with the school structure and the community. Managing the learning environment also involves building relationship with the students, teachers and staff and understanding the learning context, the needs and preferences of the students.

All of the students reflected on how to manage the learning environment and adapt to the school culture and learners' behaviour at the beginning of the practicum experience. The student teachers were more concerned about developing a learning relationship with the students in their respective classes. After several weeks, the student teachers' thinking is dominated by selecting appropriate strategies. After week seven, the student teachers showed development in their understanding of the context and were able to make more strategic decisions to manage the learning environment and employ multiple strategies.

Pedagogy is the second theme that emerged and being reported by all of the participants. The theme centers around pedagogical reasoning and actions based on the interaction with the context and what worked and did not work in the context. Understanding what the students know and how they learn and how these informed the selected instructional strategies is a generic subtheme reported by all the participants. The reflection showed evidence of evaluation, assessment and awareness and understanding of teaching among the participants (Isikoglu, 2007; Starkey & Rawlins, 2012).

The third theme, teacher attributes concerned development of qualities and dispositions of a teacher, understanding and connecting to the role as a teacher and relating to individual beliefs, assumptions and views about being an English language teacher. The participants' exposure to the real context has given them the opportunity to explore their own identity and notions as a teacher. They learn to resume their position of authority and their feeling of being accountable for students' learning increased as their interaction with the context grew.

These findings support previous studies on pre-service teacher reflection during practicum that indicate student teachers' focus on managing their classes, improving their teaching, understanding the context and how to teach, stimulating their awareness of their beliefs, assumptions and values about teaching and learning (Isikoglu, 2007; Starkey & Rawlins, 2012; Subramaniam, 2012). The data also provides evidence that the student teachers converge in their focus of reflection during practicum hence showing their concern as collective issues that need to be addressed by teacher training institutions.

Data from the reflective journal entries and interviews have highlighted three primary challenges faced by the student teachers throughout their practical teaching experience. The first challenge highlighted by the student teachers is the difficulty in the process of socializing with the members of the institution. This refers to the mentor, teachers, staff and the principal. The participants related the difficulty in building interpersonal relationship with the school community as they lack the exposure and skill in communicating with senior teachers particularly. Hence, they find the process of adaptation quite challenging at the beginning of their practicum. Some of the subthemes under this category are teachers' attitude and response, trainees' lack of communication skill and lack understanding of the culture of the school.

The second challenge described by the student teachers is lack of professional support from the experienced teachers. Some student teachers mentioned that they did

not receive structured mentoring and coaching during practical teaching. Comments were not constructive and feedbacks include little suggestions for improvement in teaching. The data echoed data from past studies on the concerns and conflicts faced by student teachers regarding mentoring and feedbacks during practicum (Goh & Matthews, 2011; Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999).

Some participants highlighted that the mentor was unavailable to provide them support and some mentioned that the mentor teachers gave conflicting advices. Several also responded that the mentor teacher lack pedagogical skills in relation to technology and innovation hence unable to give the appropriate feedback to the mentees. The data shows that the trainees clearly need coaching and guidance in enhancing their teaching and make their experience meaningful.

Classroom management is another challenging factor mentioned by the student teachers. They described the beginning of the practical teaching involves managing students and it was difficult as they have never been exposed to the real teaching context. They also expressed that they received little guidance on the decisions and actions to be taken when resolving conflicts in the classroom such as misbehaved students. Classroom with more than thirty students also pose as a challenge to the student teachers in terms of class control.

Based on the data gathered and analysed on the main challenges faced by the student teachers, some issues occurred because the student teacher receive lack of exposure and coaching on how they present themselves in the context of the school. The student teachers' lack of maturity and experience communicating with senior teachers may create conflicts in building good relationship with the teachers. Lack of exposure in the real context of teaching also may cause difficulties in their pedagogical reasoning and understanding of the students' behaviour and needs hence caused the mismatch in selection of strategies and materials.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has identified significant insights on the focus of professional learning among pre-service teachers during practicum. Clearly, the student teachers share collective focus during their practicum particularly at the beginning of practicum experience. The insights form a significant basis to revise the content of teacher education program and the practicum structure to address student teachers preparation for practicum. School orientation is clearly crucial in preparing the pre-service teachers prior to placing them in the real teaching and learning context. The institution needs to revise the structure of the program and include school orientation, teacher assistantship and internship to provide the trainees with opportunities to develop interpersonal skills and familiarity with context. They will then be better prepared for their practicum.

Mentor teachers have to be trained and coached to provide more constructive feedback and structured mentoring practice on the student teachers. Guidelines have to be prepared in mentoring pre-service teachers to enable clear focus on the elements that contribute to the professional development of student teachers. A manual can also be developed to promote standardized and structured mentoring.

Student teachers also require strengthening in skills and strategies to manage the classroom and diverse learners. They need to be exposed to ways to resolve classroom conflicts and resume the role of the person with the authority in the classroom.

Issues and conflicts experienced by pre-service teachers during practicum need to be addressed with more partnerships with schools that will enable selection of good mentor teachers and more opportunities for school exposure and teacher assistantship. The student teachers will have the platform to interact with the real context and learn from the engagement through observation and experience.

In addition, student teachers need to be exposed to reflective thinking. They need to be guided and coached on how to reflect critically and they need to be equipped with critical reflective skills to promote critical reflection. Proper scaffolding has to be injected in assisting the student teachers to reach a higher level of reflection. Reflective journals can be a good practice to be employed in some of the courses during teacher training to promote reflective thinking from technical and practical level to critical reflection level. The higher level the students achieve in their reflective thinking, the more they develop their understanding of teaching and learning from the surface level of reflection to a more integrated analysis and understanding of teaching, learning and teacher attributes.

REFERENCES

- Albakri, I. S. M. A., Ismail, N., Omar, A., Harun, R. N. S. R., & Janan, D. (2012). Malay pre-service teachers' conceptions of ELT materials for language classrooms. *Journal of Malay Civilisation*, 7(1), 51-68.
- Barry, K., & King, L. (1998). *Beginning teaching and beyond* (3rd ed.). Tuggerah, N.S.W.: Social Science Press.
- Bean, T. W., & Stevens, L. P. (2002). Scaffolding reflection for pre-service and in-service teachers. *Reflective Practice*, 3(2), 205-218.
- Borg, S. (2008). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. London: Continuum.
- Borko, H., & Putnam, R. T. (1996). Learning to teach. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 673-708). New York: Macmillan.
- Cameron, R., & Wilson, S. (1993). The practicum: Student teacher perception of teacher supervision styles. *South Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 21(2), 155-167.
- Collier, S. T. (1999). Characteristics of reflective thought during the student teaching experience. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 50(3), 173-181.
- Crookes, G. (2003). *A practicum in TESOL: Professional development through teaching practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(x), 1-15.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company.
- Goh, P. S. C., & Matthews, B. (2011). Listening to the concern of student teachers in Malaysia during teaching practice. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(3), 92-103.
- Hatton, N., & Smith, D. (1995). Reflection in teacher education: Towards definition and implementation. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 11, 33-49.
- Hussin, H. (2003). Professional development through reflective practice among matriculation university lecturer. Paper presented at *The Conference of The Professional Malaysian Matriculation Lecturer*, Terengganu, Malaysia.

- Ibrahim, N. H., Arshad, M. Y., & Surif, J. (2008, 25-27 November). Persepsi bakal guru terhadap model RIKaS. Paper presented at *The Seminar Penyelidikan Pendidikan Pasca Ijazah 2008*, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Johor.
- Isikoglu, N. (2007). The role of reflective journals in early childhood pre-service teachers' professional development. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 7(2), 819-825.
- Ismail, N., Albakri, I. S. M. A., Ismail, N., & Hussin, S. (2014). Pre-service teachers' reflection on the use of self-developed English language teaching materials for English as a second language students. *The International Journal of Pedagogy and Curriculum*, 20(4), 35-51.
- Kabilan, M. K. (2007). English language teachers reflecting on reflections: A Malaysian experience. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), 681-705.
- Kyriacou, C., & Stephens, P. (1999). Student teachers' concerns during teaching practice. *Evaluation and Research in Education*, 13(1), 18-31.
- Manen, M. V. (1977). Linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6(3), 205-228.
- National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore (2015). *Practicum handbook*. Retrieved from https://www.nie.edu.sg/docs/defaultsource/td_practicum/practicum_handbook_2015.pdf?sfvrsn=2
- Rieger, A., Radcliffe, B. J., & Doepker, G. M. (2013). Practices for developing reflective thinking skills among teachers. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 49(4), 184-189.
- Starkey, L., & Rawlins, P. (2012). Student teacher learning during practicum experience. *Teian Journal*, 4(1), 1-19.
- Subramaniam, M. (2012). Journal writing as a tool for teacher trainees: Reflection on teaching. Retrieved from <http://www.ipbl.edu.my>
- Wong, Y. M., Mansor, R., & Samsudin, S. (2015). The challenge of producing progressive teachers in Malaysia: A case study of reflective writings among UPSI student teachers. *Geografia Online Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 11(7), 21-32.
- Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yaacob, A., Walters, L. M., Md-Ali, R., & Walters, T. N. (2014). Reflecting on Malaysian teacher trainees' journals. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 11, 1-21.
- Yinger, R. J., & Clark, C. M. (1981). *Reflective journal writing: Theory and practice*. East Lansing, Mich: Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University.
- York-Barr, J., Sommers, W. A., Ghere, G. S., & Montie, J. (2006). *Reflective practice to improve schools: An action guide for educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Zhu, H. M., & Zhang, X. L. (2014). Understanding the process of pre-service EFL teachers' reflective thinking on classroom interaction. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 11(3), 171-182.

THE AUTHORS

Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri is a senior lecturer attached to the Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia. She is an experienced teacher educator and has been training pre-service teachers taking under Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program. She has worked as an English language teacher and teacher trainer for about twenty years. She is also the Director of the International Affairs Division, UPSI. She has a Degree in Teaching English as a Second Language and Master in English as a Second Language from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). She gained her Doctorate degree in Education from University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, in 2011.

Mohd Hassan Abdullah is an associate professor in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). His area of expertise is Music Education and he is attached to the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts. His career started as a Music teacher in 1987. He became a lecturer of Music in 1992. He graduated with a Degree in Arts (Music) from University of Southern Illinois in Carbondale, USA. His Master Degree was from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and he gained his Doctorate Degree from New Castle Upon Tyne University, United Kingdom, in 2005.

Ahmad Jazimin Jusoh is a senior lecturer affiliated to the Faculty of Education and Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia. His area of expertise is Guidance and Counseling. He completed a Bachelor Degree and Master Degree in Guidance and Counseling in 1998 from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). His Ph.D. in the same discipline was gained from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2008.