Integration of Reflective Practice into a Writing Pedagogical Course at a Teacher-Education Program in Thailand

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Abstract

Teachers are the greatest assets of any education, and teacher-education plays a crucial role in reforming and strengthening the education system of any country. In this practice-based professional learning setting, reflective practice (RP) is considered as an empowering teaching mode. The findings from several studies on this topic, conducted in different EFL teaching contexts, have proved that RP is a meaningful way of learning about teaching and plays a central role in teachers' professional development. In Thailand, despite the commonly-reported problems about the English language education program, a few studies were conducted on how to improve the training for prospective English teachers. Besides a brief review of RP, its significance and classifications in teacher-education, this paper

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will share the integration of this practice into a Writing Pedagogical course at a teacher-education program and its effectiveness to assist Thai preservice English teachers to become reflective practitioners. This paper is thus expected to shed some light on how teacher-educators can improve the quality of Thai preservice English teachers by training them to be life-long learners.

Keywords: English teachers, Reflective practice, Teacher education, Thai students

Definition and Significance of Reflective Practice in Teacher-Education

The notion of reflection or RP started with the seminal work of John Dewey in the early 20th century. According to him, a reflection is a form of personal learning through a systematic inquiry into why things turned out the way they did and what could be done to have a different outcome. His concept became known again in the 1980s with the work of Donald Schön (Schön, 1983, 1987) which stated that those who do not bother to reflect on their work become slaves to routines because their actions are not guided by informed decisions from the conscious inquiry. Although teachers have always been in some way engaged in reflection, it is only during recent decades that the notion of RP has become a well-established theoretical concept in this practice-based professional learning setting (Farrell, 2007, 2018; Loughran, 2002). Furthermore, this notion has recently become the subject of empirical investigations which lead to a better understanding of RP among English language teachers and the active encouragement of teachers in this practice (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019; Farrell, 2018; Nguyen, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). In the literature, RP is defined in different ways, ranging from learning through and from analyzing a single aspect of a lesson, an experience, or a critical incident to considering the ethical, social, and political implications of teaching practices (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019; Larrivee, 2008, 2010). Larrivee (2008) refers RP to as "the on-the-job performance resulting from using a reflective process for daily decision-

making and problem-solving" (p.342). In Cirocki and Widodo's (2019, p. 17) work, RP is understood as "thinking about classroom events, experiences or critical incidents, before, during and after their occurrence in ways that allow for deep introspection and evaluation".

Nowadays, RP has been widely implemented in the language teacher-education programs worldwide because it facilitates teachers' teaching, learning and understanding (Loughran, 2002; Schön, 1987). RP is a process where teachers think over their teaching practices, analyze how something was taught and how the practice might be improved or changed for their students' better learning outcomes (Farrell, 2018). This reflection process involves what is currently being done, why it is being done and how well students are learning. By collecting, analyzing and evaluating the information about what goes on in their classroom, teachers will identify and explore their own practices and underlying beliefs, which may then lead to new knowledge or a new approach that gives meaning to their teaching. Larrivee (2008) states that without the practice of critical reflection, teachers stay trapped in untested judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations. In this reflective approach to teaching in the teacher-education programs, teacher-educators are reflective practitioners who, instead of merely practicing experts' views in their teaching, are encouraged to make sense of different dimensions of their teaching. As a result, instead of transfer of given knowledge and skills of teaching to student-teachers through prepackaged materials, teacher-educators build on student-teachers' prior experiences and personal beliefs and provide them with opportunities for (re)framing their understanding of their professional roles, students' needs, curricular objectives, and so on (Farrell, 2007, 2015). Making a change is the true meaning of education, and RP can mediate the change and transform it into real professional development in the domain of language teacher-education (Farrell, 2015).

Typologies of Reflective Practice

There are various levels, stages, dimensions or types of RP proposed by previous scholars. Schön (1983) categorized RP into *reflection-in-action*,

reflection-on-action and *reflection-for-action*. In his terms, the first two reflection types are about dealing with problems as they happen in the classroom, and looking back on and learning from what occurred in the teaching-learning process, respectively. *Reflection-for-action* is described as teacher thinking about future actions which aim to improve or change the current practice. However, as argued by Cirocki and Widodo (2019), these three constructs are separated and not placed on a continuum to reflect their place and role in teachers' teaching practices. In fact, teaching is a process with a series of coherently connected units or lessons, so reflections are expected to be a continuous process of reviewing the teaching and learning in order to enable teachers to make connections between experiences. To draw teachers' attention to the important role of reflection in the effective teaching from lesson-planning to lesson-execution, Cirocki and Widodo (2019) proposed a four-component typology of reflection: *reflection-before-lesson*, *reflection-during-lesson*, *reflection-after-lesson* and *reflection-beyond-lesson*. While the second and third types of reflection in their framework correspond to Schön's (1983) *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*, respectively, their first type focuses on reflection before classes, which is often neglected in the literature. They explained that *reflection-before-lesson* is essential as teachers think critically to make decisions about the lesson objectives, learning outcomes, teaching approaches and methods, materials, activities, and classroom management. Such reflection before class enables them to structure the lesson, anticipate challenges, and consider students' needs and how to integrate them all into the teaching-learning process. The final type in their reflection typology, *reflection-beyond-lesson*, is complicated because teachers are expected to explore the moral, political, and social issues affecting their teaching practices. At this stage, teachers need to make use of the three preceding types of reflection and share their classroom experiences with other practitioners and school administrators for the collaborative reflection. This in-depth group reflection helps individual teachers to relive their classroom experiences, find deeper meanings and understanding, and question their own beliefs, assumptions, values and interpretations through social interaction, which often leads to a mindset shift and changes in perspectives (Farrell, 2018; Loughran, 2002).

In teaching RP to preservice teachers in America, Jay and Johnson (2002) developed a typology of reflections with three dimensions (*descriptive*, c*omparative* and *critical*). The *descriptive* dimension refers to determining the matter for reflection while the c*omparative* level is about thinking about the matter for reflection in alternative views and different perspectives. The last dimension is to make a judgement or a choice among several alternatives or to integrate what has been discovered into a new and better understanding of the problem. From an ecological perspective, Larrivee (2008) divided RP into four stages, namely *pre*-reflection, *surface*-reflection, *pedagogical*-reflection and *critical*-reflection. At the pre-reflective or non-reflective level, teachers take students and classroom situations for granted and with no conscious consideration of alternative responses. The *surface*-reflection is similar to the *descriptive* level of reflection in Jay and Johnson (2002) because at this level teachers focus on strategies and methods to achieve the predetermined goals without taking their values, beliefs and assumptions into consideration. Like the c*omparative* dimension by Jay and Johnson (2002), p*edagogical*-reflection involves teachers' reflecting on their instructional theories and approaches, and connections between theory and practice in order to understand their theoretical knowledge for classroom practice and the consistency between what they believe and what they actually do in the classroom. At the *critical* reflection level, teachers examine both their personal and professional belief systems and the consequences of their classroom practices on students. This type of reflection is a systematic and cyclical process of self-observation, self-awareness and self-evaluation that allows teachers to question, evaluate and problematise their teaching beliefs, knowledge, practices, assumptions and expectations they have of students. This critical self-dialogue is believed to lead to transformation and (re)construction of teachers' professional knowledge (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019; Farrell, 2007).

The final framework of five different levels (*philosophy*, *principles*, *theory*, *practice* and *beyond practice*) for teachers to reflect on their practice was proposed by Farrell (2015). This framework provides a holistic approach for teachers to reflect not only on the intellectual, cognitive, and meta-cognitive aspects of practice but also the inner life of spiritual, moral, and emotional

non-cognitive aspects of teachers. *Philosophy*, the first level of this framework, is "considered to be a window to the roots of a teacher's practice" (Farrell, 2018, p. 3) because teachers' background (ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background, family, and personal values) influence who they are as language teachers. Reflecting on teachers' philosophy of practice involves examining teachers' foundational perspectives and reasoning which guide their thinking about teaching. When teachers write and think about their past experiences, they will become more mindful and self-aware of their past, which enables them to know what has shaped their basic philosophy of practice. *Principles* is related to the *comparative* dimension and *pedagogical*-reflection by Jay and Johnson (2002) and Larrivee (2008) respectively as it includes reflections on teachers' assumptions, beliefs, and conceptions of teaching and learning, which subconsciously formulate teachers' instructional decisions and classroom actions. The third stage of the framework is to reflect on *theory* or "the hidden aspect of teaching" (Farrell, 2018, p. 8). Reflections at this stage include considering all aspects of teachers' planning, choice of techniques, activities and methods for teaching particular skills. The fourth level of this reflection framework (*practice*) is reflecting on teachers' observable actions and students' reactions or non-reactions in the class. The reflection at this stage can be done when teachers are teaching (*reflection-on-action*), after they teach a lesson (*reflection-in-action*) and/or before they teach a lesson (*reflection-for-action*), as termed by Schön (1983). The final stage of Farrell's (2015) framework entails teachers' reflecting *beyond practice*. Reflections at this stage are identical to the *critical* dimension in Jay and Johnson's (2002) and Larrivee's (2008) and *reflection-beyond-lesson* by Cirocki and Widodo's (2019) frameworks because teachers explore and examine the moral, political, and social issues and values that impact their practices both inside and outside the classroom. This type of reflection helps transform teachers' practices in a way that responds to the needs of students and society.

In general, the literature on RP tends to focus on three levels of reflection: 1) a basic level focusing on teaching functions, actions or skills, generally considering teaching episodes as isolated events; (2) a more advanced level

considering the theory and rationale for the current practice; (3) a higher-order level where teachers examine the ethical, social and political consequences of their teaching, grappling with the ultimate purposes of schooling. Teachers who reach the high-order level of reflection (*reflection-beyond-action, critical-reflections, reflection-beyond-practice)* are likely to succeed in improving students' learning (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019; Larrivee, 2000, 2008). Besides these frameworks of reflection, previous scholars (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019; Farrell, 2015, 2018; Larrivee, 2008; Loughran, 2002; Nguyen, 2020a) also indicate some traits teachers need to possess in order to be successful reflective practitioners. These characteristics include basic knowledge of teaching, ability to reason, open-mindedness for critiques or comments and willingness, skills to discuss and learn from others and more importantly their commitment to action.

Acknowledging the great significance of RP and its various frameworks in teacher-education, this paper will first share some reflective activities which were integrated in the curriculum of a pedagogical course of an English language teacher-education program in Thailand, and some key successes of this integration in promoting the reflective ability of Thai preservice English teachers will also be presented.

Integration of RP in the Curriculum of an English Teacher-Education Program in Thailand

The integration of RP shared in this paper was repeatedly employed in a Writing Pedagogical course of 14 weeks, meeting for 180 minutes weekly, with different batches of fourth-year prospective English teachers at a university in Thailand, whose English proficiency level was pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate. The aim of this course was to introduce key theories, approaches and techniques in teaching English with a focus on teaching EFL writing, including lesson planning, creating teaching materials, and assessing and evaluating learning activities. These students were following the five-year bachelor's degree program with a minimum of 24 credits in pedagogy courses and one year of practicum as set by Teachers Council of Thailand (Ingersoll et al., 2007; Scholz, 2014).

Before their one-year full-time practicum in the fifth year of study, the students were required to take pedagogy courses on teaching the four macro-skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). Based on the course objectives provided by the university, the course content was developed by teacher-educators who were responsible for teaching them. The score for this course includes 5% of their class-attendance, 45% of assignments allocated by the teacher-educator, and the other 50% is from midterm and final tests (20% and 30%, respectively). In this course, the 45% class assignment was divided into two parts: 15% for class discussion and 30% for their micro-teaching and reflections on week 12-14 of the course.

Integrated Activities

To develop these preservice teachers' mindset, skills and manner for reflection at the early stage of their professional training so that they can maintain to be reflective teachers in their profession, the author engaged them in acts of reflection in most learning activities during the pedagogical course and their practicum. The following integrated activities have been proposed by the author:

1. In Learning Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (PCK)

To help these preservice English teachers with PCK and skills to teach English writing, instead of lectures, discussion on each teaching point was conducted in English with the teacher-educator's questions and students' answers, and students were divided into groups. Because of the low level of Thai prospective teachers' English proficiency level, before the class, the required reading for each teaching lesson was done in groups at home. In class, before answering teacher-educator's questions, students had another chance to read and discuss their understanding of the materials with their assigned groupmates. To encourage their prior reading at home and active participation in class, grades were given to each group who shared their understanding of the reading materials. Sometimes, students were required to show their understanding of a teaching technique/approach through their mini-teaching (2-5 minutes), and grades were also given for their decent performance. When students performed such teaching, feedback on their

instructions, gestures and class management were be provided by the teacher-educator and peers. This approach of reflective teaching would not only train Thai prospective teachers to be active and responsible for their learning but also introduce and familiarize them with the benefits of working and learning from their peers, which found to be a challenge for Thai teachers.

2. In Applying Theories into Practice

After learning the theories, teacher-students were given an opportunity to put the knowledge and skills learned in the course into practice, and the reflection was tailored in micro-teaching and teaching practice contexts, where they taught lessons selected from elementary, secondary or high-school English textbooks. Before their performance, the criteria for evaluating their teaching on lesson planning, teaching and classroom management was provided for them to refer to in preparing their lessons. Their lesson plans and all teaching materials were submitted for the teacher-educator's reference, and their teaching was video-recorded. Following the provided criteria and using the same evaluation form, peers (in their assigned groups) and teacher-educator evaluated the teaching performance right after each group finished teaching. After the feedback forms were collected, oral feedback from the teacher-educator and peers was conducted. As voluntarily offering feedback is uncommon in Thai cultures (Nguyen, 2019, 2020a; Scholz, 2014), grades were provided for those who have good comments on their peers' teaching. Then, all written feedback forms were given to the teaching group for them to evaluate their own teaching by watching the recorded teaching video at home, using the same evaluation form. Besides the evaluation, they were asked to write their reflections on two guiding questions: 1) *What were your strengths and weaknesses about your teaching?* and 2) *What would you do differently if you were teaching that lesson again*? All feedback forms and reflections were submitted to the teacher-educator for grading in the following class.

Another way to integrate reflection into the curriculum via micro-teaching was to ask prospective teachers to teach the same selected lesson twice: one at the beginning of the pedagogical course and the other after they learn

theories about teaching (lesson-study method). The aim of the first teaching (T1) was for these teacher-students to show how they taught their selected lessons with their prior knowledge about teaching (unstructured teaching) while the second teaching (T2) is for them to modify their T1 by applying the knowledge and skills learned in the course (structured teaching). Both teaching performances of each group were video-recorded and evaluated in the same written and oral feedback formats as in the first micro-teaching scenario described above. For theory-building between the two teachings, the same reflective teaching approach as described above was employed in class. However, questions for their group reflections on the two teachings were different. While prospective teachers were required to reflect on their strengths, weaknesses and plans for improvement of T1, these three guiding questions were used for their reflections on T2: 1) *What changes have you made to your T2 (compared with your T1)*?, 2) *What changes made your lesson better and what changes made your lesson worse*? and 3) *What changes will you make when you teach this lesson again*?

3. In Doing Teaching Practicum

Besides micro-teaching, these preservice teachers were encouraged to practice RP in their whole fifth-year learning the job of a teacher under the supervision of their school mentors and university teacher-educators (Nguyen, 2019, 2020a). Reflection was infused with the evaluation process during this practice-based learning period. First, in observing their mentors or peers' teaching, these teacher-students were asked to share what they thought worked effectively and what did not. This was in group discussion with people involved after the observation. Likewise, they were often asked to regularly share their practicum experiences in small groups. Second, like their Indonesian counterparts in Cirocki and Widodo (2019), these Thai preservice teachers were required to reflect on their own teaching through video-based journaling (e.g., writing a reflective journal after watching their recorded teaching videos) and photo-voicing (e.g., documenting a moment of their teaching by digital photography). In order to engage them in sustained reflection, they were asked to connect their theoretical knowledge to such teaching or classroom events, and rationale for what occurred in class was also included in their reflection. Finally, Thai preservice teachers

were encouraged to keep a journal (handwritten or online) during their practicum. This journal consisted of various topics related to their practicum, ranging from what they did in the classroom, how well they did it, and why they did it the way they did to their daily frustrations, critical incidents, unanswered questions, solutions to identified problems, beliefs about teaching, and interaction with students. In making journal entries, they were also advised to think about themselves and their teaching with feelings and emotions (*critical reflection, reflection-beyond-lesson & reflection-beyond-practice*) (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019; Farrell, 2015; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Larrivee, 2008) so that they could find personal meaning of their teaching profession and prevent depression. As grades play a crucial role in these teacher-students' education (Nguyen, 2019, 2020a), journal writing was made as compulsory tasks and graded in certain forms to ensure that these novice teachers did it in a regular and systematic manner.

Discussion on the Effectiveness of the Reflective Activities Integrated into the Curriculum

These reflective activities are basic and technical levels of reflection, where these Thai beginning teachers recalled their experience, pondered it, evaluated it and eventually planned for changes. They were achievable and did not overwhelm them like those at the high-order levels which require their awareness of political, ethical, and moral values, beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, the types of reflection in their initial training proposed here are *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*, which required their spontaneous decisions in response to unexpected classroom events, making instructional decisions and modifying their lessons. Such frequent reflections integrated in the micro-teaching activities and during their practicum would slowly engage them into reflection as a platform for their learning to teach and their teaching to learn (Farrell, 2015; Kuswandono, 2012).

The success of this integration of RP into the pedagogical course at a Thai university was also reported in two studies (Nguyen, 2019, 2020a), but some key points will be summarized here. First, this teaching approach helped

shifted my Thai prospective teachers' wrong mindset about learning through activities, discussion and reflections. As recorded in the teacher-educator' notes, at the beginning of the course the students were strongly against this way of teaching by reporting to the Department chair that that the English reading materials she selected were too difficult for them to understand, and they wanted to have materials in Thai. Moreover, they even said that the teaching method the teacher-educator used was 'strange" to them, and they expected to have this subject taught in Thai by a Thai lecturer. Their expectations and negative reaction to this reflective teaching at the beginning of the course were understandable. It was partly due to their low levels of English, passive-learning styles and they were used to teacher-centered approaches. That was why they initially did not accept to "discover" the knowledge by doing the reading or joining group discussion. However, at the end of the course, besides the high mean-scores, more than 75% of them showed their positive attitudes to all surveyed items. Another reason for the success of my integration of RP into the curriculum is these Thai prospective teachers' active participation into the instructional tasks. Despite their initial resistance, my students later undertook the learning smoothly through their prior reading of the materials, class discussion for their PCK and group discussion for improving their lessons. Their engagement in the activities also showed in the presence of more instances of their oral comments and written reflections on the 2nd teaching, as compared to the 1st one. These findings showed the potential of reflective teaching approach and MLS in encouraging them to be active although they were reported to be passive and used to old teaching approaches. Besides their positive attitudes and active participation in the course, it should be admitted that it was challenging for my Thai student-teachers to fully gain the PCK to teach English writing because they were not taught English writing as a subject at their secondary schools. In fact, they began to learn English writing for the first time in their third-year of study at the university. Acquiring something completely new would take novices a lot of time, so it was difficult for them to visualize and thoroughly understand theories on different teaching approaches, activities and techniques, and selecting appropriate approaches to teach a specific writing task was difficult for them. As recorded in my notes, they merely taught grammar instead of

writing although in their lesson plans, the objective was to teach a specific writing task. However, the good thing was that they knew their weaknesses, reported them in their reflections and made plans for improving them in their new teaching. Besides this, their gaining of PCK was also seen in the absence of irrelevant and surface comments (on gestures, language use), and they focused their comments on PCK on their 2nd reflection.

Besides the relative growth in their PCK about teaching English writing, I also found that my teacher-students developed necessary skills for being an effective teacher. They became more confident and knew how to analyze and revise their teachings, learnt to think critically about their teaching, and learnt to make choices from different suggestions for improving their lessons. Also, as written in my notes, these prospective teachers were successful in engaging their students' participation in their teaching. That promises a positive change in their future performance in the Thai context where, as reported in the literature, the concept of learner-centeredness has not been well-accepted among teachers of English in Thailand. These findings tend to suggest that when teachers with PCK knowledge are provided with opportunities to reflect, their reflective ability can be facilitated. The final success of my integration of RP into the curriculum is to promote the reflective ability of my Thai teacher students. This was shown in their reflections on their Plans to Revise (PTR). My students had a logical revision plan over the weaknesses in T2. It means the more weaknesses they had, the more plans to revise they made. Even without weaknesses identified in T1, they still had plans to make their lessons better. These findings can serve as a positive indicator of the possibility of integrating RP into the curriculum in order to develop Thai pre-service English teachers' reflective ability.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper attempts to share the effective reflective activities which were integrated into the pedagogical course for pre-service English teachers at a university in Thailand. As critical reflection does not come naturally to most teachers (Farrell, 2018), teacher education programs need

to inspire preservice teachers with a good practice of reflection in a way that would maintain their reflective habits when they are teachers. By doing that, preservice teachers are trained to become thoughtful students of education, rather than just proficient teaching technicians. This would help them to become autonomous, qualified and self-directed teachers later. However, it is generally known that for the success of RP, teacher-educators themselves should be reflective and committed to promoting meaningful learning for their teacher-students which is relevant to their own teaching contexts. This paper thus does not plan to prescribe the reflective activities for all teacher-educators, but rather shares the reflective activities which received positive feedback and attitudes from a group of Thai preservice English teachers.

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