

Collaborative reflection on shared journal writing to foster EFL teacher CPD

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Abstract

Despite the importance of Continuous Professional Development in the EFL context, a limited research has been done on EFL teachers' collaborative reflection on teaching. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of teachers' reflection that is fostered and enhanced by the collaborative written exploration of practice using an online-shared teacher journal in a Saudi tertiary context. To achieve this, the study adopted three theoretical foundations: the characteristics of the online teacher professional development, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and the constructivist theory of learning. The level of reflection in the teachers' journal is analysed by using the discourse semantics approach, namely, systemic functional linguistics. Besides, a semi-structured interview is used to collect the qualitative data. They strongly suggest that maintaining an online-shared teachers' journal will support and augment teachers' reflection, enhance knowledge and improve teaching performance.

Keywords: Continuous professional development, reflective practice.

1. Introduction

In many teaching contexts, EFL teachers display an extremely varied and heterogeneous profile. This implies that they come from varied education and training levels and backgrounds. It is also true that, in many teacher training settings, the mode of training does not empower teachers with the skills that can enable them to pursue Continuous Professional Development (CPD), as Wallace (2001, p. 29) defined that training the teachers is ‘a matter of unthinking tradition’. Moreover, the dynamic nature of language classrooms presents a daily challenge for teachers, who find themselves having to deal with challenging situations. However, teacher educators believed that such a challenging situation can be constructively turned into professional growth and development experiences by applying reflective practice methods and techniques (Schon, 1993). Many researchers [e.g., Schon (1993), Smyth (1992), Wallace (2001)] agreed that reflective practice is the most vital tool of professional competence for teachers. Whilst it can be an individual activity, research has shown that meaningful teacher reflection stems from the exchange of teachers’ personal knowledge, beliefs, practices and goals for student learning (Parke & Coble, 1997; Schon, 1983; Yavas Celik & Yavuz, 2020). Furthermore, interaction with peers and experts may deepen and/or challenge the teachers’ reflections (Borko, 2004).

1.1. Reflection on teaching

Moon (2004) broadly defined reflection as the skills and abilities, which would enable teachers to have a critical point of view about their teaching. A more specific definition of reflective teaching is provided by ‘the teacher’s thinking about what happens in the classroom lesson, and thinking about alternative means of achieving goals or aims’, as cited in Richards and Nunan (1990, p. 202). This definition invites teachers to question and evaluate their instructional practices, i.e., they could think of ways to improve teaching and thus provide optimal opportunities for learning to take place. Such a procedure would enable teachers to grow and develop professionally.

Teachers enter the profession with their own life experiences, hopes, aspirations, expectations and ideologies (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001). As teaching is complex in nature, these characteristics do not considerably help teachers to overcome their job challenges. Therefore, they need to embrace the ways and methods to unravel the complexity of teaching and to continue learning and developing through practice; otherwise, frustration may force them out of the profession. Schon (1983) proposed reflection (i.e., teachers’ evaluation of their teaching practice) as a means for teachers to be empowered and experienced enough to be able to deal with such settings of highly dynamic nature (Wallace, 1991) as classrooms and a profession that is highly complex as teaching. More specifically, reflection requires teachers to examine, analyse and challenge their teaching in order to modify and improve their own classroom practice. Hence, teacher training and certification programs put a considerable emphasis on reflection not only as an essential practice but also as an important component of professional development.

Recently, technology has been used to aid teachers’ reflection. For instance, an online teacher journal (OTJ) is a rich avenue that can be used by teachers to aid the collaborative reflection and foster collegial support. As OTJ is the major tool of this study, it will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

1.2. Online teacher journals (OTJ)

As previously pointed out, writing teaching journals is widely used as a major part of teacher education and training worldwide. This may stem from the notion that is widely spread in the literature concerning the nature of writing. Writing is characterised as being exploratory in nature, which is an idea that keeps being reinforced by many advocates of writing not only as a channel of communication but also as a way to self-examine and self-evaluate one’s own thinking, attitudes and practice for the purpose of change and improvement. Many teacher educators, such as Bailey et al.

(2001), Bolton (2010), Burton, Quirke, Reichmann, and Peyton (2009) and Wallace (1998), consider teacher's writing of ideas and reflections as 'a lifelong learning resource, a powerful tool in any form of inquiry-based teaching, such as reflective practice, capable of providing professional support and stimulus to teachers in any teaching circumstances' (Burton et al., 2009, p. 6).

Richards and Nunan (1995) listed three reasons why writing journals should be a part of teacher education, preparation and training. The first reason has to do with the nature of writing as a discovery process. The second is also related to the nature of writing as an activity practiced by a professional as a channel of communication with other professionals in the same field. Being so described in Richards and Nunan (1990, p. 227), journals enable the creation and maintain the groups of 'discourse communities who would write to and get a response from each other'. The third reason is related to journals as effective CPD tools. It is founded in the current trend of many teacher educators, who call for learning, as a human activity, to be viewed as a 'process' rather than a 'product'. It is claimed that such a view will support teachers' involvement in the process of their learning and enable them to be active agents in their own learning and development (Richards & Nunan, 1995).

Bailey et al. (2001) approached the teacher himself/herself as a source of learning and improvement. They encourage self-awareness and self-observation, which provide teachers with opportunities to learn and develop. They also promote tools that support and enhance self-improvement, such as diaries and journals. They maintain that these tools can add depth to the teachers' reflection. Bailey et al. (2001, p. 48) noted that 'the act of writing begins a reflective, analytic process that helps the writer view teaching more clearly'.

Due to the geographical restraints, peer-to-peer journals can make the best use of technological advances as these can facilitate teachers' interaction and collaborative reflection. Benefits gained from technological advances vastly facilitated teachers' interactions with each other (Burton et al., 2009). Many types of online discussion boards, emails, blogs and electronic journals have been used to increase the interactivity and connectivity amongst professionals of the same field (Burton et al., 2009). Some of the teacher training educators have recently started advocating for e-portfolios as a tool used by teachers to keep track of their professional progress and share their classroom experiences with peers (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). Therefore, the online-shared teaching journals can be, considerably, effective and successful in promoting and supporting the reflective practice and so providing invaluable learning and development opportunities to language teachers.

Burton et al., (2009) described that writing and sharing teaching experiences and reflections can help teachers' growth in many ways. They point out that the creation of a group of reflective writers, who can adapt to the professional needs of the group participants can take place from different geographical regions. This means that participants in such communities do not have to be physically in the same place.

Reichmann (Burton et al., 2009, p. 51) described how reflective writing and sharing discussions aided her professional development. She (Reichmann) also summarised that the way collaborative journaling has 'enhanced my (her) self-confidence, sense of ownership and meta-cognitive skills'. Research in teacher education and development has shed a light on the benefits of using technology to support and foster teachers' CPD via online reflection. It is evident that online reflection brings a wider community of language teachers' close and facilitates collegial interaction and growth. Hence, this study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. How do teachers at the English Language Institute (ELI), King Abdulaziz University, conceive of reflecting on teacher journals as a means to question the quality of their teaching and challenge their weaknesses?
2. How do the teachers conceive of sharing online teaching journals with their community of teachers? Do they ask for and provide collegial support as means of CPD?

3. What are the teachers' experiences in sharing online journals with their colleagues, and by thus doing, do they get and provide support and learning opportunities to one another?

2. Theoretical background

This section discusses major theories that have attempted to explain how learning occurs in humans for decades. It particularly reviews four theories that have been shaping that the way knowledge is explained and acquired to date. They include behaviourism, mentalism, constructivism and socioculturalism.

Many studies have attempted to explain how learning occurs in humans. For instance, Schunk (2014) reported that behaviourism looks at learning as a change of behaviour that is conditioned to rewards and targets. However, the cognitive theory prefers to consider learning as a process of memorisation and so puts a great emphasis on the human memory. The constructivists consider what is already known by a learner, and therefore, the process of knowledge construction is scaffolder to them. All these theories have a great emphasis on the individual learner at their core, without giving consideration to peer learners, and the great effect that they can have on each other's learning. Through their reading, the researchers have come to realise that, perhaps, the only two theories of learning, which give such a consideration, are the sociocultural perspective of learning and the social constructivism theory that has been promoted by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978). Johnson (2009, p. 1) stated that 'unlike theories of human learning, a sociocultural perspective argues that higher-level cognition in humans has its origins in social life'. This means that the sociocultural perspective and the social constructivism theories necessitate and emphasise the existence of social interaction amongst individuals for learning to be enhanced and developed to very high levels and that an individual cannot reach these levels of highly developed learning through acquiring knowledge and skills on their own. Hence, teacher training and development programs use such theories as frameworks, on which various aspects of learning and development are based.

The online professional journals are one of the prominent CPD activities. in which social interaction benefits are utilised to facilitate the collaborative teacher reflection and development. Online-shared journals are defined by Reichmann (Burton et al., 2009, p. 50) as an 'open-ended collaborative project construing a learning community of practitioners focused on reflective journal writing and professional renewal'. Tites (Burton et al., 2009, p. 72) identified three types of journals that can be used to construct learning: the 'solitary journals' that are kept by students, the 'dialogue journals' that are means of communication between teachers and students and the 'peer-to-peer journal' that allows peers 'to incorporate a constructivist approach to learning, in which peers build on their knowledge through interaction'.

The collaborative type of reflective teacher journal is based on the constructivism theory of learning. This is described as 'an approach to teaching and learning based on the premise that cognition (learning) is the result of 'mental construction'. Historically, peer-to-peer journal was inspired by the development of Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) which depends on learning through peer-to-peer thinking of problem-solving skills (Leki, Cumming & Silva, 2000). ZPD enlightens that 'through interaction with more capable peers, the individual progresses from an actual development level to a potential development level' (Reichmann in Burton et al. 2009, p. 50). Following the same line, Reichmann (2009, p. 50) added that 'Vygotsky was convinced that learning itself is a dynamic social process and that high-order cognitive functions original in the social environment'. This principle has far reaching consequences for the use of OTJs. For instance, Burton et al. (2009) listed the ways, in which learning through communities of shared peer-to-peer journals takes place. They state that peer-to-peer journal participants 'take initiative and are active, invested and engaged in the learning process, assuming the responsibility of their own learning (development of), a stronger sense of self-awareness, critical and collective reflection, enhanced problem-solving and increased motivation and social bonding' (2009, p. 73).

According to Smyth (1992, p. 285) and Richards and Lockharts (1996), reflection is a process that is multidimensional, and it incorporates many levels. Each of these levels critiques and questions the professional practice at a certain level. Hence, Smyth proposed a model of assessing the depth of reflection in written texts. Each level of reflection asks a question to provoke the process of questioning and evaluating practice. Therefore, it incorporates the following:

- i. What actually happened?
- ii. What is the meaning of the action/s that had happened? How can they be interpreted in reference to teaching and learning theories?
- iii. What do my practices reveal about my beliefs about teaching? What are the consequences of my teaching practices?
- iv. How can I do it differently?

Smyth's model is used in this study to analyse the level of reflection in the teachers' journals. Another theory that is used in this study is the discourse semantics, which is one of the major branches of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday in the 1960s. Through the SFL approach, Halliday questioned the writer's purpose of writing and emphasised that 'great importance is placed on the function of language, such as what language is used for, rather than what language structure is all about and the manner by which it is composed' (Almurashi, 2016, p. 72).

3. Research methodology

On deciding the type of methodology to adopt for this study, the researchers have considered two factors: the nature of the research context and the sample used for data collection. The former refers to the ELI at King Abdulaziz University, where expats from various parts of the world get recruited to work as language instructors. The second factor refers to the ethical rights of the research participants. Such as being the case, data with qualitative nature were collected via semi-structured interviews with the teachers who participated in the online teaching journal. The online teaching journal was shared on Google Drive, and then, the depth of reflection was analysed by using the SFL framework. According to Eggins (2004, p. 2), SFL is a 'useful descriptive and interpretive framework for viewing language as a strategic, meaning-making resource'.

3.1. Ethical considerations

The institutional consent was granted by the ELI Vice Dean, who was also given an information letter and a consent form. The information letter gives a description of the research topic and the potential advantages of the study to the ELI. Furthermore, the letter provides information on how the respondents' rights of anonymity and confidentiality will be given full consideration and the method/s followed in data collection. Therefore, the participants were requested to sign a consent form to confirm their willingness to participate in this study.

3.2. Research population

The research population are 150 EFL teachers who work for the ELI at King Abdulaziz University. They have varied professional, educational and cultural backgrounds. Most of them come from countries, where English is not a native language and where various modes of language teacher training are followed. Their training and professional knowledge is reflected in both their mode of practice and their attitudes towards many aspects of the profession. They are faced with numerous challenges ranging from lengthy teaching hours to many other duties pertaining to the nature of their work.

3.3. Sampling

A sample of 10 teachers was randomly selected for the two stages of data collection in this study: first, the analysis of the depth of reflection in their shared teacher journal, and second, the follow-up interviews to be conducted with teachers at an individual level. The teachers participating in this study work in the same location as the researchers, and access to them is facilitated.

3.4. Data collection

Two tools (or instruments) were used to collect the data for this study. First, the participants contributed research information through reflections, insights and ideas about their teaching on an online journal that was shared with them on Google Drive. Second, the participants were interviewed to discuss the reflections that formed the backbone of the information provided in the online journal.

3.4.1. The shared OTJs

In this study, reflective writing in teaching journals and sharing of these journals with colleagues using Google Drive was proposed as a tool for ELT in-service teachers' collaborative reflection and continuous professional development. The participants' journal entries are collected within 6 weeks and analysed for their depth of reflection using Smyth's (1992) five levels of the depth of reflection in written texts. These are (1) description of an experience, (2) informing, (3) confronting, (4) deconstructing and (5) evidence of collegial learning and development. Moreover, the participants were asked to use a code name, such as a name of colour, e.g., red, blue, or yellow. The parts of the teacher's reflective journals are analysed for the depth of reflection and evidence of change and collegial collaborative learning.

3.4.2. The interview

In this study, a short semi-structured interview was conducted in five teachers, who have participated in the online collaborative journal writing. The aim was to find out their conceptions and experiences with such a tool as a means and a channel of professional growth and collegial support. They were asked four questions, and participants' answers were given as follows.

The interview contained the following questions:

- A. Do you think participating in online writing has helped you explore the areas of your teaching you had not thought of before? What are these areas?
- B. Has participating in the online journal helped you gather information about your teaching? Can you provide some examples? How are you going to use this information?
- C. Have you changed any area/s of your teaching as a result of participating in writing this journal? Can you give some examples? How do you think your participation has helped you with this?
- D. Have you learnt anything from the other teachers' reflections on the online journal? Can you give some examples? How are you going to implement this new knowledge?

4. Data analysis and findings

This section analyses the study data and reports the findings. The first part gives information about the data with respect to a collaborative and reflective online teaching journal that was shared on Google Drive with the participants. Participants' journal entries were collected, classified and coded. A framework used in analysing data in this part contains four levels of reflection in teachers' written texts. A fifth level was added to the framework, which sought to find evidence of learning and development as a result of sharing reflection with colleagues. In other words, the researchers sought to find out whether evidence of collegial support could exist and reflect any level of professional development for language teachers.

The second part deals with the form of qualitative data collected via a semi-structured interview. This seeks to find out the change in the teachers’ perceptions and experiences after having shared them with their colleagues on the shared OTJs.

4.1. Data obtained via shared OTJs

The journal entries were analysed for both the depth of reflection and development resulting from collegial and collaborative support and advice, which is based on Vygotsky's ZPD (1978). This was used to trace evidence of teachers’ collaborative reflection and learning from other teachers’ entries. The five reflection level indicators were coded. The coding system is detailed as follows:

- (A) Description of an experience: what actually happened?
- (B) Informing: what is the meaning of the action/s that had happened? How can they be interpreted in reference to teaching and learning theories?
- (C) Confronting: what do my practices reveal about my beliefs about teaching? What are the consequences of my teaching practices?
- (D) Reconstructing: how can I do it differently?
- (E) Evidence of Collegial Support: have I learnt anything new, modified my thinking about my teaching practice as I am reading my peers’ reflective entries?

Table 1. The findings of teachers’ reflections based on five levels

Evidence of Reflection Indication Journal participant	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)
T. Green	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
T. Orange	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
T. Purple	Y	N	Y	Y	N
T. Blue	Y	N	Y	Y	N
T. Pink	Y	Y	N	Y	N
T. White	Y	N	Y	Y	N
T. Indigo	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
T. Red	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
T. Brown	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
T. Orange	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Total of Y	100%	60%	80%	90%	30%
Total of N	0%	40%	20%	0%	70%

Table 1 shows that 100% of the TJ entries contain parts that are descriptive in nature (A). Teachers in these parts give accounts to actual classroom experiences. The table also displays that 60% of the journal entries show evidence of reflection pertaining to how to relate the classroom incidents to the pedagogical concepts and teaching theories (B). Evidence of a more advanced level of reflection in (C) also shows in the teachers’ written entries (80%). Moreover, Smyth’s most advanced and sound level of reflection in (D) is evident in the teachers’ journal entries (90%) although the added level of collegial support and learning from peers’ reflections is lacking in most of the entries.

4.2. Data obtained via participants’ interviews

The semi-structured interview sought to find out evidence of change in teachers’ perceptions and practice of utilising technology in sharing OTJs for professional growth and development. The following is a summary of the interview findings:

- i. All participants agreed that contributing their reflections on a shared OTJ aided them to see the areas of their teaching that they needed to rethink and evaluate. An example of that is what one of the participants said,

I have always thought of technology as an effective tool inside my classroom, but, lately, I noticed my students get bored too soon in my lessons, I must have overused technology in my classroom.

Moreover, most of the participants agreed that, as they were writing about their classroom experiences, they managed to remember small details that they could not have remembered otherwise.

- ii. Many participants stated that they changed some of their classroom teaching aspects as a result of contributing on the shared OTJ writing. One participant said,

I used to leave my classroom thinking about the next one I have to teach. Now, I have learnt to think backwards and think about the lesson I have already taught and see what changes could have made it better for my students.

- iii. The participants agreed that contribution to the shared OTJ writing is a strong tool for continuous professional development as can assist them to learn from their own teaching, instead of having to attend formal training to improve professional practice. A teacher responded,

'It has opened a new door for me'

A number of participants said that they had learned something new as they got some teaching tips from their OTJ peers. Few participants believed that they got tips and advice on how to organise work on the whiteboard.

- iv. The participants agreed on continuing to use the shared OTJ for writing their reflections and share their classroom experiences as they could see some benefits of doing so.

5. Discussion and recommendations

Teacher's CPD can take many shapes and forms and be achieved via various routes and channels. Teachers' choice of what CPD activity is appropriate can be determined by many factors. Examples of these are teachers' finance, family commitments, ability to be away from work, immigration rules and policies and many more. Questioning, evaluating and investigating own practice for the purpose of enhancing the professional strengths and improving the weaknesses, by embedding reflection in teachers' daily practice, are declared, in research, as one of the most effective tools. Wallace (2012, p. 4–5) pointed out that 'one of the qualities that we should expect in the strategies that we consider for professional development is that these strategies should help us to turn the problem in our professional careers into positive rather than negative experiences'.

The findings reveal that although the majority of participants conceive of the OTJ writing as important for their CPD, only very few wrote or maintained one. OTJs require a considerable amount of time and commitment that teachers in many settings struggle to find. Furthermore, teachers perceive that sharing OTJ with their community of teachers can aid their CPD by helping them to see their training needs and get teaching tips and advice on how to improve their classroom practice. However, participation on the shared OTJ, used in this study, showed little evidence of such perception. Many of the antidotes were descriptive rather than reflective in nature. This can be justified by the fact that sharing reflection on OTJs involves some element of exposure and insecurity. Sharing reflections with colleagues requires a great deal of open-mindedness and transparency that can be lacking in some teachers. This can be enhanced by having a type of institutional culture that supports the communities of reflective practitioners

Based on the study findings and the literature reviewed, the researchers can conclude that creation and maintenance of shared OTJs support and enhance the teachers' reflection and development in many ways. The findings can be summarised in the following points:

- I. Wallace (1991) criticised the traditional mode of teacher training that follows the Craft model. According to this model, an experienced teacher is used as a model to follow in practice by the teacher trainees. The trainees are not to question or criticise the experienced teacher's techniques and follow them as the best classroom practice. The obvious drawback for such a model is that, on starting teaching, trainees are to be faced with the dynamic nature of classrooms and come to know that the fixed ways that they learnt from the experienced teacher will not always work. Therefore, teachers' training and development programs should incorporate the modes of training that empower trainees with the essential skills to empower them to deal with the daily challenges of teaching and ensure their ongoing CPD.
- II. The reflective model of teacher training provides trainees with opportunities and skills to be able to question their practice and all the elements surrounding the teaching and learning context, for the purpose of change and improvement.
- III. Writing is exploratory and reflective in nature; therefore, it is the best tool for recording teachers' reflections, thoughts and ideas and can be well utilised by teacher educators. Teachers can also use writing to share their reflections with their peers through well-established and convenient channels of communication.
- IV. Combining the reflective model and Vygotsky's ZPD can take the form of collaborative and shared reflection and maximise the opportunities for CPD.
- V. According to Burton et al. (2009, 37), online teaching journals have to be established by peers and not by administration or some form of authority as it is very important for participants to feel safe enough to be candid in their discussions.
- VI. Advances in technology can be utilised by teachers in creating an effective platform for sharing OTJs in a secured manner.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study are limited to some contextual factors. First, the sample of the study population is relatively small. The geographical nature of the institute, where the study took place, is limited as it is dispersed over three campuses. Second, for cultural considerations, the male population is inaccessible for any form of data collection. Third, on the nature of the shared TJs as they involve a great deal of open-mindedness and exposure, understandably, many professionals experience a level of insecurity when describing their classroom experiences, commenting and reflecting on them. Finally, two variables in relation to sharing OTJs do not cover in this study. These include the teachers' level of education and years of professional experience whether that can impact their conceptions and practices of writing and sharing TJs. Therefore, further studies can be done to give due considerations to such points.

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