

Reflecting to become an effective teacher: An autoethnography of a vietnamese EFL teacher

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Abstract: This autoethnography follows a Vietnamese EFL teacher's journey over fourteen years, reflecting on personal experiences in learning English and teaching. Insights from this narrative highlight the dynamic process of becoming an effective EFL teacher, advocating for contextually relevant practices and empowering learners with effective skills and resources.

Keywords: autoethnography, continuous professional learning, effective EFL teacher

1. Introduction

Teaching is an art and the teacher is an artist. Becoming a successful teacher, which is the desire of most teachers, is a very challenging job. Teachers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors can be considered as some of the factors that demonstrate teachers' effectiveness (Stronge, 2018; Quan, 2022). While individual views of effective teachers in different contexts may differ, wherever they are, teachers are always asked to elevate themselves during their professional life. This is indeed a challenging task which has different influences on teachers. This autoethnography shares my personal experiences in the process of learning and development towards the goal of becoming an effective EFL teacher.

2. Research content

2.1. English learning experiences

Coming from a rural area in the Mekong Delta, I was exposed to English quite late. I started learning English when I was eleven. My lessons at that time were designed following traditional teaching methods focusing on grammar, vocabulary, repetition and translation. Every class, I was provided with a list of new words and their meanings in Vietnamese. We listened to the teachers' modelling and did repetition. Then, we did reading comprehension exercises and translated the sentences. For grammar section, we were explained the rules and did a lot of related exercises and translations. Grammar and reading comprehension exercises took up a lot of study time because they were what would appear in our test. Speaking was usually designed in the form of dialogues and substitution exercises. The teacher read dialogues to us as models and then we repeated.

My learning went on by that way. Assessment of learning results focused on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Although teaching as knowledge transmission is often claimed to be ineffective, I felt happy with this because I always got good results in most of the tests. Therefore, I believe that the method was not the main account for the learner's results but teachers' behavior. My English teachers were always friendly and kind to students, especially the ones with financial difficulties, which made me love and respect our teachers. Consequently, I was more diligent in English learning as I did not want to have a poor performance, make the teacher disappointed and sad. Diligence helped me achieve good results which motivated me to keep trying.

Drawing from my own experience with learning English, I believe that learning English can be enhanced by three main factors such as good relationship between learners and teachers, learners' positive views on their own learning as well as teachers' explicit instructions which influenced the way I teach later.

2.2. Experiencing teaching in different contexts

After graduating from university, I got a full-time job at a vocational college and a part time job at language centres. Working at two educational organizations brought me chances to work with different kinds of learners and inspired me to think about various teaching approaches.

2.2.1. Teaching low- motivated vocational students

At my vocational college, I was in charge of teaching general English to students majoring in vocational subjects. Most of my students had very

low level of English. A few had no background of English learning because they did not study English at high school. The inequality of students' level was one of problem I had to face in my teaching. In addition, their attitudes toward English learning was not very positive. A common belief that many students share was that English should not be included in their program as they would not use English in their future jobs. Another problem that negatively affected my students' learning was their lack of confidence in their ability to learn English. Many students shared that they could not learn English, so they refused to invest into English learning.

During my first class, I was so frustrated. I tried my best to make my instructions clear and simple so that the students could follow easily. In addition, I enthusiastically supported them so that they could produce the language. However, many of them could not understand my explanations and some even did not concentrate on the lessons. Sometimes, I tried to convince them to study hard for a better future. Sometimes, I felt angry and stopped teaching to teach the students moral lessons. These did not work. I shared the problem with my colleagues and asked for some advice. Instead of giving me some suggestions, my colleagues said that I should not invest more efforts. They explained that for general subjects as English, what I should do was just to simplify the content and the tests as much as possible so that students could pass the final exam.

As my ultimate goal is helping my students improve their English, I started to think about what my students need and came up with the final decision of using traditional teaching approaches. To ease students' understanding, explicit instructions in Vietnamese were mainly used. Teachers with richer language skills and experiences can provide the clearest, most concise explanations possible, helping learners understand the target content quickly. Although using learners' first language has several problems, it still has its own values and own benefits (Savran-Celik and Aydin 2018). For learners who have low language proficiency, giving lectures in English completely makes learners frustrated and give up on following the lesson because they do not understand it. I believe that these methods will help learners less stressed than using the communicative approach which requires learners to produce the

language in real-life situations. Moreover, they are more suitable for learners, whose study is to pass exams, rather than to communicate.

Besides traditional teaching methods, I sometimes used communicative teaching approach with a desire to help learners use the knowledge they have learned to communicate at the most basic level. My students were given the opportunity to discuss and make conversations in a number of everyday situations, negotiate the form of language to be used and time to practice. Then, students made dialogues and listened to feedback. I employed a variety of strategies to motivate students' learning by task, by reward, by achievement and so on (Reid, 2007). I encouraged them to participate by giving bonuses to those who performed the task well. Learning tasks whether focus on form or meaning were adjusted to fit learners' level. The activities were arranged from the simple to the complex. I think when learners experience a sense of success in simple learning activities, they will be more motivated to complete more difficult activities. It also helps students overcome the prejudice that they cannot learn English.

Building good relationships with learners is also my consideration. I myself have learned better thanks to the help of my teachers. Therefore, I always want to build the image of a friendly and helpful teacher, so that my students can confidently share the difficulties they encounter in the learning process with me. When students made mistakes, I usually gave suggestions to help them correct them, but rarely complained because I didn't want to make them unconfident. However, I sometimes felt very sad when some students were indifferent to their studies, or got bad results. I often wondered why the result was so poor even though I have put so much effort into teaching. This forced me to continue researching to find a more suitable method. Gradually, I realized that each learner has their own goals and learning styles, which I need to accept. When learners have a need to learn, I can help to promote their learning through my teaching methods and motivation. On the contrary, when learners have no learning need, I cannot interfere with their learning. As my perception changed, my enactments changed. I no longer hold the rigid idea that good teachers must involve all students in learning activities. I spent more time finding ways to maximize the positive impacts of

individual differences on students' learning. Thanks to readings about methodology, I learned to design a wider variety of activities. Especially when the Internet has become more popular, I integrated more technology into my lectures to make them more attractive to my students. Thanks to this change, learner engagement has been improved markedly although some students remain apathetic.

2.2.2. Teaching high- motivated students at foreign language centers

The main teaching approach I used at foreign language centers is the communicative teaching approach because these learners need to master all four English skills. Learners were given many opportunities to produce English in real-life situations. In order to maximize the opportunity to be immersed in the language, the predominant language used in the classroom was English. To create excitement for learners, games were also integrated into the learning tasks. However, from my own observation, gamification appeared to have insignificant impact on learning. In fact, many students did not master the main content I wanted to convey through the game despite their active participation. That makes me feel skeptical about the effectiveness of gamification.

Besides gamification, I also concerned about learners' mistakes. I've noticed that many students have made mistakes with basic grammar points, such as the present simple or personal pronouns. These are very basic grammar points, which students are taught from the first days of learning English and have chances to encounter many times in the learning process. As suggested by experts, learners' mistakes should be ignored if it does not cause difficulties for communication. In the event that a correction is required, it can be done implicitly. However, in an EFL contexts where learners do not have opportunities to immerse in English to passively acquire it, how to help them use the language properly is what worries me. If learners are not informed that they are using inappropriate language, they will continue to make these mistakes and similar ones later as some mistakes could be fossilized if they were not corrected (Naimi, 2018). To solve this problem, I changed the way of giving feedback. On the one hand, I pointed out learners' mistakes to raise their awareness of the accuracy of their language use. On the other hand, I encouraged learners to participate

in the mistake analysis and giving feedback. Many students reported that through that activity, they could learn from their classmates and avoid similar mistakes. I believe that giving feedback to classmates can make students think more about the language. The transition from teacher's feedback to peer feedback is also a necessary change in line with the learner-centered teaching approach.

3. Conclusion

The autoethnography describes my professional life as an EFL teacher. After fourteen years of teaching, I have realized that there is no single best method of teaching. Each teaching method has its own advantages and disadvantages, so each has its own contribution in specific contexts. Teachers must be responsible for considering learners' differences in order to choose appropriate teaching approaches. Teaching approaches should be used in harmonious combination to maximize the strengths of each approach. Following a learner-centered approach (Nunan, 1991), I have changed my teaching frequently based on learners' differences, which has brought about some positive impacts on my students' learning.

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