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Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Beliefs about Reflective Practice in the English Language Teacher Education Program: A Life History Study

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Abstract. This study examined pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs about reflective practice in the English language teacher education program using a life history study. The study involved seven pre-service EFL teachers taking their master's program in English language teacher education at a private university in Jawa Tengah, Indonesia. The research used a life history study which is a qualitative research design. The research instruments were reflective essays containing the past and present experience dealing with reflective practice, and a life history interview. The findings highlighted more positive beliefs than negative ones. Positive beliefs considered reflective practice effective for increasing EFL pre-service teachers' pedagogical competence, critical thinking, and professional development. The negative beliefs viewed RP as time- and energy-consuming and could be confusing without any focus on writing. As the pedagogical implication, reflective should focus on a particular issue, be guided with practical guiding questions, not be rigorous about how often and how to do it, and provide some alternatives based on the need and conditions of the (pre-service) EFL teachers.

Keywords: a life history study; belief; reflective practice

Introduction

The acquisition of professional competence is pivotal for pre-service EFL teachers to become proficient English teacher educators. Renandya, Hamied, and Nurkamto (2018) mentioned that professional development is crucial in enhancing teachers' English language skills. Moreover, it serves as a requirement for delivering efficacious lessons. In particular, it is believed to continuously improve their language proficiency, pedagogical strategies, and classroom management techniques, ultimately bringing advantage to their students' language learning. In

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this way, professional development highlights the significance of ongoing learning and growth in EFL teaching.

Professional development for pre-service EFL teachers can be undertaken in many ways, including reflective teaching or practice (RP). In language teacher education, reflection involves systematically gathering and analyzing data related to teaching methods (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). This process allows educators to critically examine their teaching practices, identify strengths and areas for improvement, and make informed decisions about instructional strategies. Russell (2018); Cirocki & Widodo (2019) also agreed that reflective practice helps (pre-service) teachers identify and solve problems related to their teaching practice areas of improvement, make informed instructional decisions, and continually enhance their effectiveness as educators. In the field of education, it has been a “(Hall)mark” of teachers’ professional competence (Farrell, 2015) and Gudeta, (2022) and the cornerstone of teacher professional development (cited by Miller, 2023).

However, applying RP to EFL students can pose challenges for teacher educators due to the complexity in implementing and operationalizing reflective practice for language teachers (Mann & Walsh, 2013 in Farrell & Avejic, 2020). In consequence, the lack of understanding of the concept of RP has led to disengagement in reflection and reflective practice among educators, resulting in diminished insight and performance in practical teaching (Mohamed et al., 2022).

The same concern occurs in the research context where RP has been implemented in some courses in our master’s program in English Language education. In this case, the teachers usually use reflective journals as a medium for their students’ reflective practice. In certain instances, teachers may find students’ reflections unsatisfactory, often attributed to the quality of their Reflective Practice (RP). Similarly, students might face challenges in reflecting adequately due to their limited capacity for RP. Addressing this issue requires teacher educators to devise and employ effective strategies for implementing RP.

One way to construct effective ways to enact RP is by cultivating teachers’ or students’ beliefs about RP. Belief can be understood as knowledge based on personal experiences and subjective perspectives (Pehkonen & Pietilä, 2003). Teachers’ beliefs are influenced by various sources: content knowledge, educational materials, formal teacher education, and experience (Shulman, 1987). i.e., the experience as a language learner and as a language teacher (cited by Farrell & Vos, 2018). In the same way, Borg (2003) believed that teachers’ cognition (i.e., beliefs), teacher learning (both through schooling and professional education), and classroom practice are mutually beneficial. He asserted that teachers’ experience as learners through schooling and professional education can inform their beliefs about teaching and learning, which can continue influencing teachers throughout their careers.

Farrell (2008) strongly advocated for the use of reflective practice to uncover teachers’ beliefs. Additionally, several teacher educators have conducted studies on beliefs or attitudes regarding reflective practice (Seitova, 2019; Day et al., 2022; Tohamba, Saliya, & Basri, 2022), revealing insights into teachers’ and student-teachers’ opinions, beliefs, and understanding of RP. However, none of these studies have delved into constructing beliefs regarding more effective RP implementation based on the intensive teaching and past and present learning-

experiences of student-teachers or teachers. Leveraging such relevant experiences to understand teachers' beliefs, particularly concerning RP, is deemed efficacious.

Leveraging such relevant experiences to understand teachers' beliefs is essential as teacher beliefs may be affected by their past experiences as learners or as teachers, pre-service education experiences and knowledge, students as well as the school where they are teaching (Farrell, 2015; Farrell & Guz, 2019). Furthermore, focusing on teachers' or student-teachers' past learning as a student and their present teaching experiences aids educators in cultivating self-awareness, enabling them to better understand, interpret, and refine their professional practice and development, particularly [in this context in implementing RP] (Wright, 2010, cited in Farrell & Macapinlac (2021, p.2) and Richards and Lockhart, 1994, in Farrell & Kennedy (2020).

This study investigates the beliefs of pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers regarding reflective practice within an English language teacher education program, as revealed through a life history study encompassing their learning experiences and formal education. The objectives of this study are addressed by exploring three research questions. First, what are pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs on reflective practice gained from their experiences after taking the master's program in English Language Teacher Education? Second, what are pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs on reflective practice gained from their experiences before taking the master's program in English Language Teacher Education? Third, what are pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs on the effective implementation of RP drawn from their experiences before and after taking the Master's Program in English Language Teacher Education?

The findings of this study are significant to fostering students' and student-teachers' understanding of the reflective practice so they can reap its benefits for maximizing their reflective skills for their teaching and learning development.

Method

This qualitative study utilized a life history research design. It is a distinct genre within narrative inquiry known for its careful consideration of the social, historical, and cultural contexts that shape individuals' narratives (Tavakoli, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Sunday et al., 2020). In this study, such a narrative inquiry is helpful to elucidate and gain a deeper understanding of individuals' lived experiences, i.e., beliefs about (the implementation) of reflective practice as conveyed through their reflective essays. This design was employed since it is considered valuable for comprehending the intricate nature of learners' beliefs and underlying assumptions regarding the learning process (Tavakoli, 2012).

The participants in this research consisted of seven students taking a master's program in English Language Education at a private university in Jawa Tengah, Indonesia. The selection criteria of participants used purposive sampling. First, student participants had done reflective practices in their master's program in English Language Teacher Education, specifically, in the Introduction to English Language Teacher Professional Development course (Introduction to ELTPD). In that course, they learned the theory and practice of reflective practice. Second, they had experience writing reflective essays. The practice of RP in the introduction to ELTPD course was for writing four reflective essays about four different topics, and one of the topics was reflective practice. Therefore, they were

eligible sources from whom the research objective (revealing beliefs about reflective practice) could be achieved.

As for the research instrument, we used students' reflective essays and a life history interview. The former was done after the participants finished their Introduction to ELTPD class. The latter was conducted after all the data from the reflective essay was collected and analyzed. Four guiding questions guided the reflective essay. First, "What important issue about the topic interests you?" Second, "How did you acquire knowledge about the issue before the class discussion?" Third, "How has your knowledge/understanding of the issue improved or changed after the class discussion and reading relevant sources?" Fourth, "What is your (newly-defined) belief/attitude toward the issue now?". As formulated in the guiding questions, participants were expected to articulate their beliefs concerning reflective practice before (number two) and after (number three and four) attending the Introduction to ELTPD class. The guiding questions responded to the theory of sources of beliefs proposed by Borg (2003) and Farrell & Vos (2018): schooling and professional education (knowledge of the subject matter, the educational resources available, formal training as teachers, and personal experiences).

The other research instrument was a life history semi-structured interview. It aimed to clarify any unclear data from the reflective essay or gather more information about participants' beliefs regarding the changes in their beliefs towards reflective practice before and after taking the Introduction to ELTPD class. What is more, it was used to inquire about the participants' beliefs regarding the most effective methods for reflective practice. The interview design is aligned with Horsdal's idea (2017), stating that the life history interview focuses on the centrality of their experiences, in this case, the experience, perspectives, and interpretations of reflective practice (implementation) in a thorough and organized manner. The organized manner requirement here is reflected through the semi-structured interview, where participants were asked to clarify or explain some unclear information in the essay based on the guiding questions.

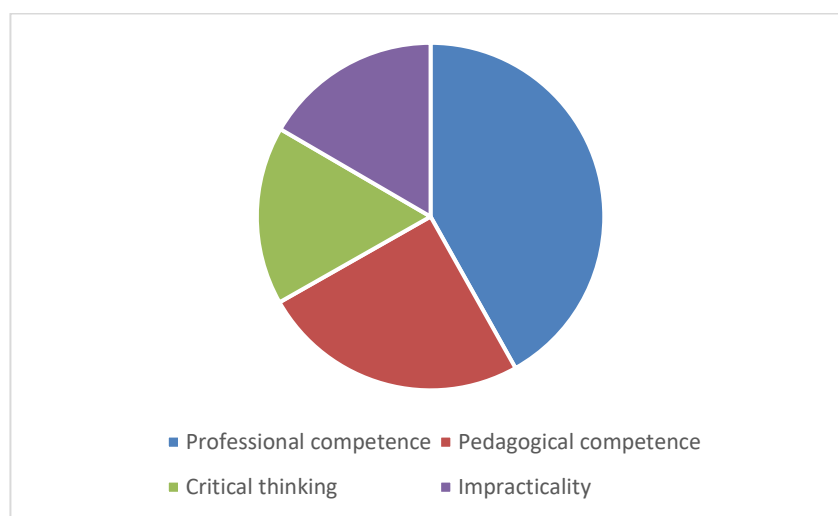
After all the data were collected through the two research instruments, they were then analyzed. Thematic analysis was used for this study. Thematic Analysis (TA) is a method that helps researchers identify and organize patterns of meaning (themes) in a dataset, allowing them to gain insights into collective or shared meanings and experiences by focusing on the overall meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The authors have created three categories corresponding to each research question. The first category accommodated the emerging themes concerning participants' beliefs about RP before they took their master's degree in language teacher education. The second category was used to organize emerging themes regarding participants' beliefs about RP after they took their master's degree in language teacher education. Lastly, the third category identified the emerging themes regarding participants' beliefs about a better implementation of RP. The categories are differentiated based on the themes of the answers provided by the participants. The authors also analyzed the meaning of the overall findings by interpreting the connection between their newly defined beliefs about a better implementation of RP and their experience in implementing RP before and after taking their master's program in English language education.

Findings and Discussion

Pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs on reflective practice gained from their experiences after taking the Master's program in English Language Teacher Education.

From the reflection essays, the authors discovered and categorized the participants' beliefs regarding reflective practice into four themes as presented in figure 1.

Figure 1: Pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs on reflective practice as gained from their experiences after taking the Master's program in English Language Teacher Education

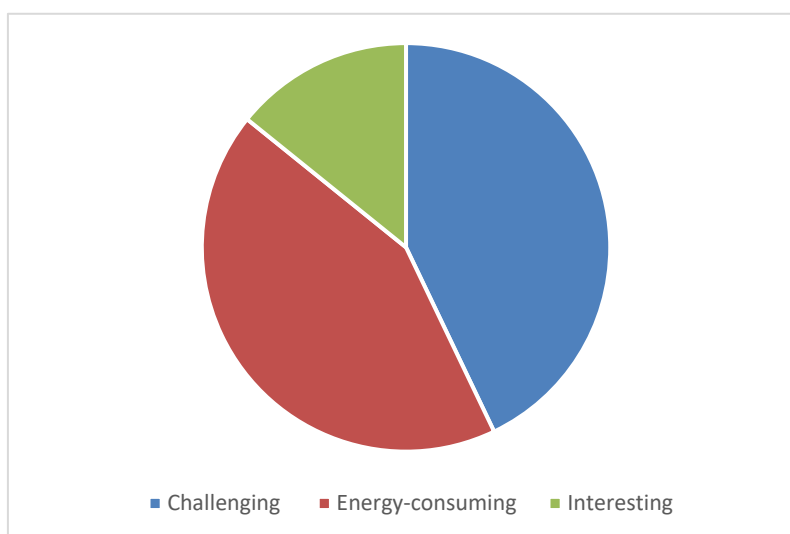


As demonstrated in Figure 1, participants mostly held positive beliefs about RP for increasing teachers' pedagogical competence (25%) regarding classroom practice and teaching skills and, subsequently, professional competence (42%). They also believed that RP could foster critical thinking (16.66%) despite its impracticality (16.66%). In impracticality, participants considered RP time and energy consuming.

Pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs on reflective practice gained from their experiences before taking the master's program in English Language Teacher Education.

Before taking their master's program, the participants' beliefs regarding reflective practice fall into the following categories:

Figure 2: Preservice EFL teachers' beliefs on reflective practice as gained from their experiences before taking the Master's program in English Language Teacher Education



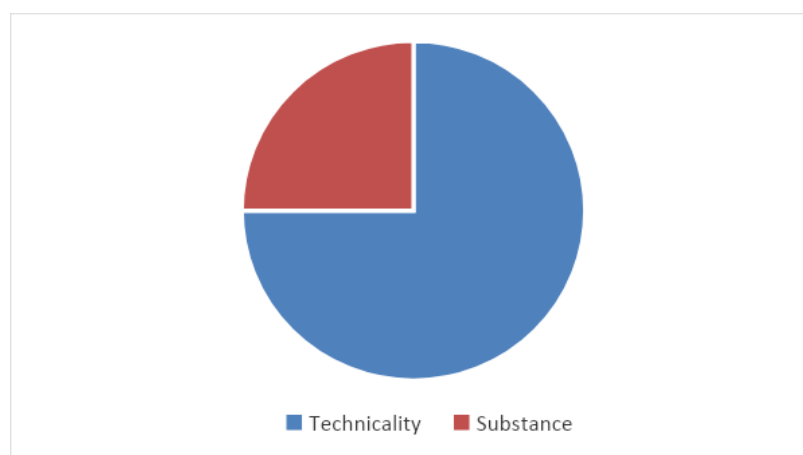
As revealed from figure 2, participants believed that RP is challenging and exciting. It is challenging since some of them (42.9%), in some way, struggled to articulate what to reflect, while the other 42.9% of participants found it time and energy-consuming. Apart from the obstacles, 14.2% of them found it interesting since they intrinsically love writing.

As cited from the life history interview, Participants 1, 2, and 6 recalled their experiences reflecting their learning when pursuing their bachelor's degree. At that time, the instructor asked them to write what they had learned that day. This instruction confused them since reflecting on what they have learned can be many things. As a result, as expressed by Participant 1, he struggled to articulate what to write in his reflective assignment. Another challenge they experienced with RP was the process that required much energy and time. For them, thinking and writing intensively after each class session consumed much energy and time. However, RP is considered an interesting activity for those who love writing.

Pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs on the effective implementation of RP drawn from their experiences before and after taking the Master's Program in English Language Teacher Education

Participants' beliefs about RP experienced before and after taking the Master's Program in English Language Teaching are then used to see the underlying beliefs about the more effective implementation of RP.

Figure 3: Pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs on the effective implementation of RP drawn from their experiences before and after taking the Master's Program in English Language Teacher Education



The findings are classified into two themes: beliefs about the more effective implementation of RP regarding substance (25%) and technicality (75%). Substantially, they believed that RP should focus on particular issues or problems that need to improve or change (participant 7). Besides, RP should describe what has happened, what we feel, evaluate what has been done, and then analyze and conclude what must be improved from our previous teaching practice (participant 4). Technically, first, RP should be done immediately after class. Otherwise, we need to remember the teaching issues that we will articulate. Second, it should be done as intensively as possible—for example, every teaching session. However, If it is impossible due to the teaching load, etc., it can be done weekly and collaboratively instead of individually (Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6).

Discussion

The discussion begins with participants' newly defined beliefs about more effective implementation of RP (as the answer to research question 3) in terms of substance and technicality as grounded from the life history approach. Then, it is connected to their belief experienced before and after taking their master's degree in language teacher education program, i.e. the Introduction to language teacher professional development Course (research questions 1 and 2).

Regarding RP substance, first, the pre-service EFL students believed it should focus on a particular problem or issue that needs to be solved or improved. The phrase "particular problem or issue" is identical to the term "critical incident" or particular situation (Tripp, 2011, as cited in Machost & Stains, 2023). Tripp

believed RP should identify a critical incident to ignite reflection or foster more profound thought. The participants' newly defined belief was derived from their experience dealing with RP before taking their master's degree in a language teacher education program.

Extract 1:

- I had a limited understanding of how to engage in reflective practice (participant 5, source: reflective essay and life history interview).
- I got confused about what to write so I was very reluctant to do it (participant 3, source: reflective essay and life history interview).
- I got confused about choosing the correct methods and practice (of RP) and I did not see the significance of doing reflective practices (participant 4, source: reflective essay and life history interview).
- I struggled to articulate and convey my teaching practice and lacked the ability to leverage reflection as a tool for enhancing my pedagogical skills and processes (participant 1, source: reflective essay and life history interview).

They often felt perplexed and struggled hard to figure out what to write or reflect. Consequently, they failed to see the significance and interest of doing RP for their learning and teaching development. Wallace (1991) also considered the lack of focus in the discussion as a problem in reflective practice. In conjunction with the experience, Suphasri & Chinokul (2021) also observed that this kind of reflection process can create disengagement in reflection. The focus in RP is believed to leverage reflection.

The second newly defined belief is that RP should be guided with some guiding questions.

Extract 2:

- Providing practical or simple guiding questions or documents, I think, will help teachers do their reflection (participant 6, source: reflective essay and life history interview).
- The guided questions should cover "What has happened, then what we feel, then evaluate what has been done, then analyze and make a conclusion from what must be improved from our previous teaching practice" (participant 4, source: reflective essay and life history interview).

This belief is connected with the problems conveyed by participants 1,3, and 4 in extract 1 (i.e., the confusion on what and how to reflect). Participant 6, in the interview session, also observed this phenomenon and came up with the idea of giving guiding questions as the solution to the problem. The guiding questions can use simple or operational words. This idea was derived from his experience in the Introduction to "Language teacher professional development" course offered in his master's program. In that course, students wrote some reflective journal entries (reflective practices), and assisted with guided questions.

The participant's belief about guiding questions for a more effective RP, stated in extract 2, is aligned with the reflective-cycle model proposed by Gibbs (1998). The cycle includes some components: description of the experience, feelings, and thoughts of the experience, evaluation of the experience, analysis to make sense of the situation, conclusion about what has been learned and what could have been done differently, and action plan for how to deal with similar situations in the future, or how to come up with appropriate changes. More concisely, Jasper (2001) classified the cycle into three "What?" "So What?" and "Now what?"

The third newly constructed belief about RP's substance is that RP can promote critical thinking. As witnessed by Participant 4 in Extract 2, the guiding questions for reflective practice covered "what" and "why" questions: what happened? why did it happen? and "what should be done for better teaching and learning." In this way, a teacher not only does his/her teaching routines ("how to") but also critically observes, analyzes, and evaluates what happens to their teaching and learning, what causes the problems, and what to do to solve the problem and perform better teaching practice. Such a process can enable student-teachers to become critically reflective teachers (Participant 4, source: reflective journal and life history interview). This belief bears a resemblance with Richards' and Nunan's argumentation (1990). They urged that "becoming critical means that as teachers, we have to transcend the technicalities of teaching and think beyond the need to improve our instructional techniques." In the context of becoming a critically reflective teacher, they suggested teachers think beyond by moving away from the "how to" questions in the teaching and learning process to the "what" and "why" questions. When RP is believed to promote critical thinking, it also promotes teaching ability (Participants 1 and 3) and subsequently for a teacher's professional development (Participants 2, 4, 5, and 6). As Miller (2020) and Wallace (1991) argued, reflection is closely connected to continuing professional development.

Besides the substance of RP, the student participants believed that technically RP should be done as flexibly as possible. If for example, they cannot do it immediately after class, they can do it every week. If they cannot do it individually, they can do it in pairs or in groups.

Extract 3:

- RP should be done weekly (participant 1 & 5, source: reflective essay and life history interview).
- RP should be done directly (participant 4, source: reflective essay and life history interview).
- While reflection is individual, I believe that it is also possible to be followed up by more collaborative techniques (participant 6, source: reflective essay and life history interview).

Such newly created beliefs were gained from participants' experiences dealing with those problems before taking their master's degree in English language education (i.e., Introduction to ELTPD course). They observed and experienced that many teachers lacked time for reflective journals or essays. The problem of lack of time was also unveiled by Miller (2020) and Hixon & So (2009), cited by Suphasri & Chinokul (2021). Similarly, If individual work on RP is also time and energy-consuming, teachers can do it collaboratively. This reflective practice can facilitate an individual lacking experience and time to work together, offering and gaining convenient access to alternate perspectives (Briscoe, 2017).

To sum up the discussion, the newly created beliefs about the more effective implementation of RP can be used to promote or foster reflection literacy (Martínez, 2012, cited in Chand & Lee, 2021) to EFL teachers in the way they can increase their ability to reflect cognitively (through their experiences), to express their thoughts and emotions through the way that they prefer, and to understand reflections as both an assessment of their teaching and as learning media for their professional development.

As the pedagogical implication of the study, substantively, EFL teacher educators should facilitate learners with practical but meaningful guiding questions

that focus on improving particular aspects of their (learning) teaching, the ones that can promote someone to become a critically reflective teacher. The guiding questions should cover “What” (what happened?), “Why” (Why did it happen?), and “Now what” (what should be done to make better teaching and learning?).

Technically, teacher educators should see the learners’ capacity to do reflective practice. If they are too overwhelmed with their teaching and/or learning load, we should not burden them with intensive RP. We can also provide an alternative like a collaborative RP where they can work in pairs or groups. Farrell (2015, p. 14) suggested “critical friendship” as a collaborative RP. A critical friendship is “a collaborative arrangement between two teachers in which one teacher gives advice to the other, as a friend rather than a consultant, in order to develop the reflective abilities of the teacher who is conducting his or her own reflections”. Under the critical friendship, team teaching can be done, from which the RP can also be done in pairs or groups.

The last implication in this context is that EFL learners or pre-service EFL teachers (especially novice reflective teachers) should be psychologically and cognitively at ease when doing reflective practice. In this way, their reflective practice can work effectively (through systematic guiding questions) and maximumly (in fostering critical thinking).

Conclusion

The study aimed to examine pre-service EFL teachers’ beliefs on reflective practice (RP) in the English language teacher education program as constructed from their experiences using a life history study. Participants showed more positive beliefs about RP than negative ones. The Positive beliefs considered RP effective for increasing EFL pre-service teachers’ pedagogical competence, critical thinking, and professional development. Besides, RP was also considered exciting and motivating for those who love writing. The negative beliefs address the limitations of RP, such as time- and energy-consuming, especially for teachers who have already had an overwhelming teaching load. The summary of beliefs experienced and observed from practices was then used to define beliefs about better reflective practice implementation in English teacher education programs.

Regarding the content, participants then agreed that reflective practice should be guided by a particular issue or problem (i.e., critical incident) and “What,” “Why,” and “Now what” guiding questions that can foster teachers to become “critically reflective teachers.” Regarding practicality, they believed that RP should not be rigorous for the frequency of doing and how to do it. Some alternatives need to be offered based on the needs and conditions of the learners (i.e., pre-service EFL teachers). For example, weekly instead of daily reflective practice, collaborative instead of individual-only reflective practice. The findings, however, are limited by the lack of information, such as examples or details that can elaborately describe participants’ beliefs. Further work needs to do more careful research-instruments piloting or account for the varying research instruments to get more thorough data.

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