Online Reflective Journaling for In-Service University EFL Teachers

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Abstract

This paper reports on an action research project involving online reflective journaling. The aims of the project were to explore this type of journaling as a form of professional development (PD) for in-service university instructors of English as Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan, and to answer the following research questions: (1) What shared/differing concerns or challenges are experienced by university EFL teachers in Japan? (2) What shared/differing feelings and emotions are experienced by EFL teachers in Japan? and (3) What feelings or emotions do EFL teachers in Japan perceive in their students? For this group of teachers, there are shared concerns regarding classroom management, questioning of one's perspectives/practices, and the importance of relationships and classroom community. In terms of emotions, the participants of this study appear to experience a range of emotions and perceive a range of emotions in their learners. Overall results indicated that reflective journaling can be a viable form of PD for teachers in this context.

Keywords: reflection, reflective practice, reflective journaling, emotions, professional development

1. Introduction

In this short paper, I introduce an online reflective journaling research project that involved members of an intercollegiate professional development group in the Kansai region of Japan. All of the participants were teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at universities in the region and involved in one or both of the following academic societies: Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET). The purpose of this article is to introduce online reflective journaling as a viable method and means of conducting professional development activities for busy teachers, and to consolidate findings from two related papers (Jones, 2015; Jones, in press). I will briefly introduce some of the important published literature on the topics of reflective practice and reflective journaling before discussing the current study and salient findings. Finally, I will argue for involving teachers in this type of reflection with the aim of improved learning outcomes, increased teacher satisfaction and decreased teacher burnout.

2. Background

The professional position of EFL teaching in Japan has come under threat, with several universities outsourcing the teaching of English to private language schools which hire newly-arrived foreign teachers with little or no training and experience. This is troubling in that there is an underlying belief that anyone who speaks the language can teach it. At the same time, it is

important to note that these decisions are often made for financial reasons and not pedagogical. University decision makers are often faculty members and administrators who have little or no background in educational theory or educational psychology, let alone language education. With this in mind, it is important for teachers in this context to collectively and individually pursue professional development activities that positively influence learning outcomes for their learners.

Reflective practice based on ideas espoused by Dewey (1933) has become a central part of teacher-training programs and professional development endeavors for in-service teachers. Farrell (2008) and others have also made a case for including reflective journaling (or writing) activities for teachers in EFL and other second-language teaching contexts. Sellars (2014) describes engagement in reflection as a necessary step toward developing *"the skills and competencies of an expert teacher"* while Robins, Ashbaker, Enriquez & Morgan (2003) describe reflective practice as allowing teachers to *"become skilful in making informed judgements and professional decisions, and is empowering."* In educational contexts, reflection is defined broadly by Sellars (2014) as *"deliberate, purposeful, metacognitive thinking and/or action in which educators engage in order to improve their professional practice."* (pg. 2) The American philosopher and educator John Dewey is often credited for promoting reflection in professional contexts (Calderhead, 1989; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Sellars, 2014). Dewey (1933) saw reflection as the *"active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends"* (cited in Jay & Johnson, 2002).

Donald Schön (1983, 1987) saw the spread of technical rationality as turning a blind eye to human intuition and artistry exhibited in many professions, and made the useful distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action was viewed by Schön as a *"reflective conversation with the materials of a situation."* In this metaphorical conversation, the professional listens to the *"back talk"* or surprises that arise, and *"responds through on-line production of new moves that give new meanings and directions to the development of the artifact"* (Schön, 1987, p. 31). Robins, Ashbaker, Enriquez and Morgan (2003) describe reflective practice as *"a tool that allows teachers, student teachers and teaching assistants to understand themselves, their personal philosophies and the dynamics of their classroom more deeply."* (cited in Sellars, 2014). Engagement in earnest, authentic reflection facilitates teachers' efforts to become *"contemplative,"* to improve their *"professional competencies"* and to identify their *"personal strengths and relative limitations"* as a teacher (Sellars, 2014, pg. 2).

From this perspective, reflective practice should be a worthy professional development endeavor for university EFL teachers in Japan. A related concept is reflective teaching. In his review of existing reflective teaching literature, Calderhead (1989) recognized a wide variation in how researchers and theorists viewed the *process of reflection*, the *content of reflection*, the *preconditions of reflection*, and the *product of reflection*. He also noticed a wide range of ways in which the concepts had been justified in teacher training contexts, and concludes:

"While several idealised models of reflection are prescribed for teacher education purposes, the nature, function, and potential of reflection has yet to be fully explored" (Calderhead, 1989, pg. 49).

Zeichner and Liston (1996) describe reflective teaching as entailing *"a recognition, examination, and rumination over the implications of one's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and values*

as well as the opportunities and constraints provided by the social conditions in which the teacher works" (p. 20). Despite the lack of agreement surrounding the term, we have here several lenses through which to view teachers' approach to reflecting on their practice.

The topic of reflective journaling has also gained prominence, and this type of journaling is now promoted as an important developmental tool for both teacher training contexts and for use with learners. Francis (1995), for example, describes a reflective journaling project for preservice teachers where they reflect on four clear themes: (1) teaching plans; (2) reflective writing about workshop content, strategies, and issues; (3) a professional diary documenting events which make an impact on personal view of teaching; and (4) a critical summary of professional reading.

One early example of a study aimed at comparing depth of novice teacher reflective journaling and teaching ability is reported in Gipe and Richards (1992). As part of their teacher preparation studies, these novice teachers were required to keep a reflective journal throughout one 15-week term. Their entries were evaluated on the depth of reflection and compared to their teaching ability ratings during the same term when they were involved with their practicum. Despite the limitations of this study, the authors reported a positive relationship, with higher teacher ratings being associated with deeper reflection.

In EFL contexts, Farrell (2008) has provided a comprehensive introduction to reflective journaling, and believes reflection through writing enables teachers to *"step back and take stock of their thoughts because they can see them on paper or screen"* (pg. 82). Farrell (2013) also seems to be advocating reflection and journaling as a way for teachers to pursue PD individually and in groups, and to maintain a positive outlook while avoiding burnout.

Taken together, these and other published studies on the topics of reflective practice, reflective teaching and reflective journaling have encouraged me to pursue this line of inquiry in my specific teaching context, e.g. university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings in Japan.

English is considered a key element in most university programs (despite limited contact hours and a lack of accountability), and most entrance exams in Japan, for both public and private universities, include English as one of the key subjects. The Japanese government has also established policy to promote English at the university level (MEXT, 2014), with a focus on both communication skills and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The term EFL has been used to describe English taught in context where students do not have ready access to the language outside the classroom or pressing need to function in the language in their daily lives.

3. Current Study

Professional development has gained attention in a broad range of teaching contexts over the past several years, and some reports on PD efforts in EFL programs in Japan have been published (Jimbo, Hisamura, Oda, Usui & Yoffe, 2011). However, there is still a need for further empirical studies that explore the concerns of teachers in these programs as well as the related topics of professionalism (see, for example, Hargreaves, 2000a) and teacher expertise.

In designing this action research project, I was interested in both the cognitive and emotional side of teaching in this context. Specifically, I was interested in (1) What shared/differing concerns or

challenges are experienced by university EFL teachers in Japan? (2) What shared/differing feelings and emotions are experienced by EFL teachers in Japan? and (3) What feelings or emotions do EFL teachers in Japan perceive in their students? At the same time, I hoped to answer the following question: Is reflective journaling a viable form of professional development for EFL teachers in Japan?

To address these questions, I solicited participants for a reflective journaling project, which would involve weekly reflective writing over one 15-week semester and semi-structured interviews at weeks eight and fifteen.

Two of my major concerns in designing the study were to link the project to existing PD pursuits and to minimize the burden on any participants. To address both of these concerns, I approached teachers at two universities in western Japan who are part of an inter-collegiate PD group and who expressed interest in action research and joint research. Candidates were all active members of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) and/or the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET), and are current or former colleagues of the researcher. Candidates were presented with a detailed Participant Information Sheet and the researcher explained that participants were encouraged (but not obligated) to collaborate on related projects beyond the scope of the initial study.

The participants included seven male and three female teachers with a range of experiences. The two most experienced teachers have been teaching ESL or EFL for more than twenty-five years, the least experienced has seven years of teaching experience, and the average for the group is thirteen point nine years. Nationalities represented were American (5), British (1), Canadian (1), Malaysian (1), Japanese (1) and Japanese-Algerian (1).

Participants were asked to fill in a short online questionnaire after each class meeting (once or twice a week) for one of the courses they are teaching, and encouraged to spend approximately fifteen minutes at each sitting. Participants decided themselves which course they wanted to reflect on, with most teachers opting for a course they were teaching for the first time or one which they were struggling with. The questionnaire included three prompts and help text as follows:

Prompt (1) Reflection in practice (What adjustments or accommodations did you make to your lesson plan during today's lesson? Describe as many as possible, in as much detail as possible)
Help Text - Reflection in Action is described as 'thinking on our feet'. It involves looking to our experiences, connecting with our feelings, and attending to our theories in use. It entails building new understandings to inform our actions in the situation that is unfolding.

Prompt (2) Reflection on practice (What worked? What didn't? Explain in as much detail as possible.),
Help Text - Looking back on the class (and the various encounters). The act of reflecting-on-action enables us to spend time exploring why we acted as we did, what was happening and so on.

Prompt (3) Emotional Aspects (What emotions did you experience? What emotions did you perceive in the learners?)
Help Text - Specific emotions as well as general moods during today's lesson.

Semi-structured interviews were scheduled for the middle (week 8) and end of the semester (week 15). A core list of prompts was prepared for the interviews (Jones, 2015), but emphasis was placed on getting the participants to share their stories and concerns.

I must acknowledge that there are issues associated with conducting insider research (Floyd & Arthur, 2012) as all of the participants are current or former colleagues. I thus emphatically assured participants that participation in the project was completely voluntary and that raw data would not be shared with anyone or be used for any other purpose than the study.

In analyzing the data, I wanted to gain a balanced view (zooming in on detail and backing out for a wider view) as prescribed by both Richards (2009) and Hatch (2002). My approach was to read through entries or transcripts, coding portions (using NVivo software) that seemed particularly worthy of further analysis. While coding, I would bracket any personal ideas that came to me regarding direction for the project or other considerations. After all of the journal entries and interview transcripts had been coded, I reviewed my coding decisions with a view toward consolidation and consistency.

4. Findings

To facilitate analysis, all data from the journal entries and interviews was entered into NVivo, and findings, analysis and interpretations are presented in Jones (2015) and Jones (in press). Some of the more salient findings related to my research questions are outlined below.

Shared/Differing Concerns and Challenges

In terms of shared concerns, we can recognize three major themes. First, these teachers seem to expend a great amount of time and energy thinking about classroom management issues such as activity sequencing, gaining and keeping attention focused on learning, and continued work toward course goals. This group of teachers also appears to continuously question their own perceptions and/or practices. Collectively, these teachers reflect on (a) whether or not they are correctly reading their learners' behaviors and levels of engagement, and (b) how their instructional approaches and classroom practices might be improved. A third theme that comes through is the central role of relationships and classroom community. Teachers recognize the value of a positive social setting in learning, and much of the frustration that comes through in the entries and interviews is related to breakdowns in this area.

Adjustments to lessons mentioned in the journal entries (especially time-related adjustments) were initially judged as superficial and lacking in reflection. However, deeper analysis revealed that many of these adjustments were made intuitively to benefit the learners. Several participants mentioned in both the journals and in the interviews that they noticed learners either really struggling with something or gaining deeper levels of learning on something else, and that the time adjustments were made intentionally to accommodate the needs of the learners. I realized that it wasn't a question of time, it was a question of priorities.

Shared/Differing Feelings and Emotions

Analysis of journal entries and interview transcripts revealed that the participants of this study experience a range of emotions, both positive and negative, and that the predominant emotions of

disappointment and frustration are related to a lack of student effort or unfulfilled expectations. On the positive side, these teachers experience joy and fulfillment from student success or engagement, at both the individual and group level.

A framework of emotional intelligence, emotional geographies and emotional labor was used to facilitate analysis (Jones, in press). The constructs of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Mayer, DiPaolo & Salovey, 1990; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Mayer & Salovey, 1997), emotional geographies (Hargreaves, 2000b) and emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) seem especially relevant to our study of the emotional side of EFL teaching in Japan. The following discussion is structured around these constructs.

Emotional Intelligence. Analysis (Jones, in press) centered around five basic emotional competences identified by Goleman (1995): self-awareness, managing emotions, empathy, self-motivation, and handling relationships with others.

Self-awareness. Several of the excerpts revealed a certain level of self-awareness, with participants commenting on how their own feelings, mood or emotions influence the flow of class, success of activities and student learning.

Managing emotions. Some participants appeared to be more skilled than others in managing their emotions and those of their students. This competence is hinted at in the overall findings, and stressed in several of the excerpts.

Empathy. Empathy was not overly expressed and might be an area for professional development for this group of teachers. The majority of journal entries dealing with the student emotions were limited to surface level observations and only a few expressed a deeper level of involvement.

Self-motivation. The predominance of entries and comments related to teacher emotions, both negative and positive, hint at a range of self-motivation strategies. The source of this motivation seems to be predominantly interactions with students, and helping students in their language learning efforts.

Handling relationships with others. This group of teachers seem to spend a tremendous amount of time and energy trying to promote a positive classroom environment, and building positive relations with individual students as well as at the group level. We also see in some of the excerpts evidence of teachers trying to repair relations when they are damaged.

Emotional Geographies. The complex relations between teacher and students as well as among students is revealed in both the journal entries and interviews. These various relationships and the overall classroom environment emerged as a central concern for this group of teachers. Participants mentioned (a) the challenges and rewards of establishing rapport and trust, and (b) the various influences on classroom dynamics.

Emotional Labor. Findings from this study stressed for me the deep emotional investment that these participants continue to make in their work. There is clear evidence that these teachers do work themselves into emotional states that are not necessarily genuine. Most often this seems to be

teachers expressing excitement and enthusiasm in an attempt to promote learner engagement. One teacher in particular discussed how he expresses frustration, disappointment and even anger to students that is not genuine. He describes this as part of the persona he wishes to convey to students, and how he does this in a playful manner.

The above three concepts together provided a useful framework for exploring the topic of emotions in the current context. Abstracting from the findings, it is apparent this group of teachers take their work seriously, and that often this work involves emotion.

Perceived Emotions in Students. It is clear that these participants also perceive a range of emotions in their students (both positive and negative) and that these emotions are strongly influenced by the teacher and other students. There was also evidence of emotional intelligence on the part of students, as expressed in the following excerpt:

> But today, just—I had a very exhausting week—just drained. So today, I was a little bit—a little more sluggish, a little tired. And they could tell. They're like—asked me, "[Teacher's Name], is everything okay today? Are you okay? Did anything happen? You want to tell us something?" Like, "No, no. I'm okay." So they can tell that, when I come in and I'm a little bit not as [upbeat], not as excited. They almost get concerned. They're like, "What's wrong with you today?"

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the study was somewhat successful in answering the research questions. For this group of teachers, there are shared concerns regarding classroom management, questioning of one's perspectives/practices, and the importance of relationships and classroom community. These topics may offer a springboard for further PD pursuits. Although this study does not make any claims at generalizability of findings, teachers in other programs likely have some or all of these concerns and can benefit from the type of reflective journaling described in this paper or other related PD efforts.

In terms of emotions, the participants of this study appear to experience a range of emotions and perceive a range of emotions in their learners. The predominant emotions of disappointment and frustration are related to a lack of student effort or unfulfilled expectations. The framework of emotional intelligence, emotional geographies and emotional labor also appears to offer useful perspectives on the emotional side of EFL teaching in Japan. In addition to answering our research questions, I feel that getting participants to reflect on emotions seems to have heightened their awareness of the emotional side of their own teaching. In this sense, EFL teacher training and professional development programs might benefit from this type of reflective journaling on emotions. One pedagogical implication is that teachers and students in these contexts would likely benefit from working together over an extended time, which is not always possible in most programs at Japanese universities, where teachers often meet students for ninety minutes once or twice a week for a fifteen-week term.

As to whether or not reflective journaling is a viable form of PD for teachers in this context, I believe a qualified yes is in order. Although several participants in this study stressed the value of this type of reflective journaling, it was pursued and prioritized by only a few. Although not

overwhelmingly successful, I am encouraged by Sellars (2014) who claims that *"teachers are more likely to be able to successfully engage with the cycle that constitutes reflection-in-action as a result of prior engagement in the reflection-in-action process."* In other words, just participating in this action research project may help these teachers toward those metaphorical conversations described by Schön (1987) in which the professional listens to the *"back talk"* or surprises that arise, and *"responds through on-line production of new moves that give new meanings and directions to the development of the artifact"* (p. 31).

Sellars (2014) stresses that the reflective process is *"an intensely personal practice"* and warns against reflective practice that is *"overly dominated by prescription to any ideology, imposed values or academic evaluation"* (pg. 8). The limited success of the current project might be attributed to this. On the other hand, some comments hinted at a need for more structure. As one possibility, Sellars (2014) uses the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1994) as a framework for a personal model of reflection which includes the identification and description of an event for reflection (What?), an analysis of the event based on one's own experiences and understanding (So What?), and exploration of possible actions or follow up (Now What?).

One promising finding from the current study was that this type of reflective journaling appears to make teachers more sensitive to their decisions during class and more reflective after class. Two benefits of this action research project involving reflective journaling were that it (1) allowed teachers an opportunity to explore their own professional identities, including their characteristics, values and beliefs, and (2) helped teachers recognize and value the amazing things they do in the classroom. These benefits alone help us toward that goal of increased self esteem and job satisfaction mentioned at the outset of this paper.

One final general impression was that many of the entries were rushed, forced and lacking in depth. There may be a need in this type of pursuit to prepare a prompt that elicits more critical reflection of one's own perspectives or practices. This group of teachers might need to be reminded to question their own assumptions and approaches.

Returning to the goal set out by Calderhead (1989) of clarifying the nature, function and potential of reflection, I believe the current study and further empirical investigations can go a long way in raising the standing of our profession and help teachers in my context toward increased job satisfaction and self esteem while avoiding or reducing teacher burnout.

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