STUDENT TEACHERS’ REFLECTIVE THINKING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON COLLABORATIVE TEACHING OF EXPERIENCED AND INEXPERIENCED EFL STUDENT TEACHERS

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Abstract
The purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of collaborative teaching between inexperienced and experienced student teachers on their reflective thinking and how different teaching experience varied the ability to reflect. The study was conducted in a natural context where the inexperienced student teachers were paired with the experienced ones to co-teach as part of the requirement of a practicum course. The participants were seven EFL student teachers who enrolled for an MA program in one Thai university. Data were collected from pre- and post-teaching interviews, written journals, and classroom observations. Reflections prior to and after teaching practices were compared to determine the extent to which collaborative teaching led to changes in levels of thinking. Degree or levels of reflective thinking were categorized as recall (R1), rationalization (R2), and reflectivity (R3) levels.

Data revealed that reflections of the student teachers at the end of teaching practices were at higher levels than reflections prior to teaching practices. The changes in reflections were depicted by four indicators which were 1) changes in perspectives about effectiveness of teaching, 2) changes in perceptions of approaches to solve problems, 3) changes in perceptions of self and others, and 4) changes in perspectives to accept others’ feedback. In addition, teaching experience significantly affected the ability to think reflectively among the participants. The inexperienced teachers were found to reflect at R1 level prior to co-teaching, and then extended their thinking to R2 level after co-teaching. The experienced teachers reflected at R2 level before teaching period, and changed to R3 level after teaching period. Data showed that the inexperienced and experienced student teachers reflected and developed their thinking differently depending on teaching topics.

The findings suggest that EFL teacher educators should incorporate collaborative teaching into teacher training program in order to enable student teachers’ self-evaluation, problem-solving skills, concerns for others, and open-mindedness.

Keywords: Student teachers’ reflections, reflective thinking, collaborative teaching, teaching experience
1. Introduction

For decades, Thai teacher education has been criticized for failing to prepare prospective teachers who have a full mastery of knowledge of subject matters, as well as an understanding of the scope of teaching concept and contexts where education takes place (Lueboonthavatchai, 1994). Rather than adequately applying theories learnt in teaching education programs, they imitated how their teachers taught them when they were in schools in their actual classrooms without a sense of creativity or adaptability to suit each different social-cultural teaching setting. In response to this critical situation, Teacher preparation programs in Thailand have adopted the concept of reflective thinking to encourage student teachers to look back on as well as to systematically examine their teaching experience (Guaysomboon, 2004). By doing so, they could recognize strengths and weaknesses in their teaching practice, search for rationales undergirding their actions, and provide appropriate solutions to their individual teaching problems.

1.1 Reflective thinking

Reflective practice is considered as a central paradigm to improve language teachers’ performance (Farrell, 1999; Kullman, 1998). It is a determined attempt of English Language Teacher Education to help future teachers change from being technicians to reflective practitioners who learn from thinking reflectively about their teaching experience as a basis for self-evaluation. Such a thinking process has been considered necessary to good teaching since it is a source of significant changes in language teachers’ performance. Dewey (1933) described reflective thinking as a mode of thought which is a basis of problem-solving skills. Generally, reflective thinking involves careful considerations and active examination of one’s own practice for the purpose of its improvement (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

The goal of English language teacher education is not only to familiarize student teachers with the concept of reflective thinking, but also to encourage them to reach higher levels of their thinking. To do so, researchers (Reiman, 1999; Schön, 1987) have recommended that social interactions among colleagues are the promising technique to foster reflective practice. According to Vygotsky’s (1978), learners can develop a wider range of thinking skills under adult guidance or collaboration with more capable peers. Freese (1999) recommended that a practicum program be designed based on reflective practice in which student teachers learn through collaboration and interaction with a colleague.

2. Objectives

The present study aims to explore whether collaboration between EFL inexperienced and experienced student teachers influences their reflective thinking. Furthermore, this study intends to investigate the relationship between previous teaching experience and degree of reflective thinking. Specifically, the present study is conducted to address the following two research questions.

1. To what extent does collaborative teaching affect the student teachers’ levels of reflective thinking?
2. To what extent is the degree of reflective thinking related to student teachers’ experience?
3. Methodology

The researcher employed qualitative data collection methods including interviews, written journals, and personal tutoring experience, and the others had no EFL teaching experience at all. As part of the practicum course requirements, all students had to teach EFL undergraduate classes. An inexperienced student teacher was paired up to co-teach three actual classes with an experienced student teacher.

The process of data collection began when the pre-interview (adapted from Bullough’s et al, 2003) was conducted to find out the participants’ reflective thinking prior to actually working with partners in teaching actual classes. Following this stage, the researcher as a spectator visited to observe three actual classes of each pair of student teachers. During the observation, the researcher focused on the participants’ teaching behaviors. Once the students finished each class, they were required to write their teaching reflective journals, and then submitted the journals to the supervisor and the researcher. When the respondents completed their teaching requirement, each of them was interviewed using the post-interview questions (the same with those of the pre-interview). This was to explore if there were any changes in their reflective thinking obtained from the process of collaborative teaching.

The participants’ reflective thinking were analyzed and categorized Lee’s (2005) reflective thinking scheme associated with Hunt’s (1976) theory of conceptual levels. According to Lee, the degree of reflective thinking is categorized into three levels: Recall (R1) level, Rationalization (R2) level, and Reflectivity (R3) level. The explanations of each level are as follows:

- **Recall level (R1):** interpreting situations by recalling from past experience without looking for explanations
- **Rationalization level (R2):** developing thinking concept into more abstract levels, examining and interpreting teaching situations with rationale
- **Reflectivity level (R3):** forming abstract thinking concept, providing solutions to teaching problems, and approaching experience with the purpose of improving such experience.

4. Results and Discussion

The research findings reported four topics of teaching that the participating student teachers reflected upon. These were 1) the concept of teaching, 2) the process of collaborative teaching, 3) the attitudes towards the collaborative teachers, and 4) the management of roles and responsibilities. Both the experienced and inexperienced student teachers developed their reflective thinking over the co-teaching period. Contents and depths of their later reflections could be categorized into higher levels at the end of their collaborative teaching practices. The participants from both groups reflected independently according to each topic of teaching. Their levels of thinking were also found to change differently from different points of time. Following is four teaching topics that the participants reflected upon.

**Concept of teaching**

categorized at lower levels than those of the experienced student teachers. However, the findings revealed that inexperienced participants were found
to change their thinking on this issue more than the experienced participants.

**The process of collaborative teaching**

Reflections of the inexperienced and experienced participants on the process of collaborative teaching were categorized at the different levels in the beginning of the teaching practice period. The inexperienced participants started to reflect on this topic at recall (R1) level while the experienced participants began to reflect from rationalization (R2) level. The results showed that the inexperienced teachers held the overoptimistic view on the collaborative teaching method and attempted to follow the process without any doubts about its advantages or disadvantages. In contrast, the experienced participants were more able to evaluate the process of collaborative teaching both positively and negatively in the beginning. Based on these evaluations, they identified benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching to the process of teaching and learning. These findings clearly revealed how different teaching experience differentiates the student teachers’ levels of thinking.

After the co-teaching period, all the experienced participants’ thinking and that of two inexperienced participants was categorized at reflectivity (R3) level whereas the thinking of the other two inexperienced teachers was be at rationalization (R2) level. From these findings, it seems that the experienced student teachers reflected at higher level than did the inexperienced student teachers upon the process of collaborative teaching. This was because all of them not only continued to evaluate their own teaching and teaching situations from various perspectives, but they also came up with feasible solutions to what they identified as problems. This result indicates that the experienced teachers were more capable of evaluating their teaching using various judgment methods. They, consequently, became better problem solvers than the inexperienced teachers.

**The attitudes towards the collaborative teachers**

Before teaching practices, almost all the participants’ reflections on how they thought of the collaborative teachers were categorized at recall (R1) level. Later, two of each group were found to change from thinking at recall to rationalization (R2) level, one inexperienced participant changed from thinking at recall to reflectivity (R3) level, and one experienced participant changed from thinking at rationalization to reflectivity level. The major difference in reflections between the two groups of participants on their attitudes towards the co-teachers was the contents rather than the levels of thinking. The experienced student teachers purposefully interpreted their peers’ teaching behaviors with the attempts to understand why their peers took particular actions while they were teaching. They also compared their previous experience with those of their inexperienced partners. By doing so, they did both peers’ evaluation and self-evaluation. For the inexperienced student teachers, they seemed to overestimate their peers’ teaching performances. They focused on what they expected to learn from their co-teachers to improve their teaching knowledge and instructional skills. With such estimation and expectation, they purposefully observed their peers’ teaching and tried to search for any rationales behind those teaching performances in hope of following such performances.

**The management of roles and responsibilities**

In the beginning of the study, most of the experienced participants’
reflections on the management of roles and responsibilities were categorized in rationalization (R2) level because they paid attention to the application of theories about teaching. The inexperienced participants were found to reflect on this topic at both recall (R1) and rationalization (R2) levels. Those who were at recall level only mentioned what exact roles they had planned to perform with their co-teachers without further explanations. From these findings, it might be able to claim that teaching experience varies degree of the participants’ thinking about the management of roles and responsibilities in the initial stage. After the teaching practice, the changes in reflections of the experienced and the inexperienced participants were clearly revealed. All the experienced participants’ reflections were categorized at reflectivity (R3) level while only one inexperienced participant extended her thinking from recall to rationalization level. The reflections of the majority of the inexperienced student teachers were not considered moving up. These results unveiled that, in the later stage, the teaching experience brought about different changes in reflections of the experienced and the inexperienced teachers upon the management of roles and responsibilities.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed to determine the influences of the collaborative teaching method on reflective thinking of the second-year graduate student teachers studying in an EFL teacher training program in one Thai university. The results showed that reflections of the participating student teachers at the end of teaching practices generally were found to be higher than the reflections prior to teaching practices. The content of reflections on all teaching topics was also found to noticeably change. The results of the study also showed that there was a significant relationship between teaching experience and the ability to think reflectively. It was found that the experienced student teachers initially reflected at the higher level than those without experience. In other words, in the beginning of teaching practices period the experienced student teachers reflected at rationalization (R2) level whereas the inexperienced student teachers reflected at recall (R1) level. Those with experience tried to search for rationale behind their own teaching performances and interpreted teaching situations using multiple perspectives. On the other hand, those without experience held the over-simplistic points of view about the co-teaching practice they were engaging and were unaware of the complexity of teaching. This finding is consistent with the propositions of some cognitive theorists (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky proposed that one’s thinking developmental stages varied according to one’s experience.

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7. References


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