

Exploring the Reflections of Non-Optionist Polytechnic English Language Lecturers (PELLs) in Identifying Their Professional Development Concerns

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Abstract

The exploration into teachers' reflection in a language classroom context can be considered as an effective tool to investigate their teaching concerns. Hence, this study is carried out to explore three non-optionist polytechnic English Language lecturers' (PELLs) teaching concerns in order to understand the formation of their belief systems. The exhibition of PELLs' belief systems defines their teacher cognition. This element is useful to determine the concerns related to their professional development (PD) in language teaching practice. The qualitative research design was employed to gather the required data through reflective teaching procedures that involved journal writing, classroom observation and informal semi-structured interview. Two main findings have been derived based on the results of the constant comparative analyses: 1) Respondents' reflection reflects that they are reflective teaching practitioners and they shared four common teaching concerns, and 2) The PD concerns to address respondents' need-to-improve should acknowledge their personal pedagogical knowledge base. Finally, a contextual suggestion has been forwarded as a recommendation for this qualitative inquiry.

Keywords: non-optionist Polytechnic English language lecturers, teachers' belief system, teacher continuous professional development (CPD)

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Introduction – Setting the Context

The initial concern of this study is non-optionists' professional development as polytechnic English language lecturers (PELLs). The non-optionist means that PELLs' first degrees were not Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or any other language, linguistics or educational courses. Somehow, after graduation, they had opted for a short preparatory teaching course to get a diploma in education. This act entitled them to join teaching profession and has become qualified PELLs. Most of non-optionist PELLs are fluent in English language but their pedagogical knowledge in language teaching are considered limited due to not formally trained as TESL students. Their professional knowledge is normally derived from experiential knowledge (Wallace, 1991). The knowledge that they gained through their teaching experience.

Other than that, polytechnics are considered as technical and vocational education and training (TVET) higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The courses being offered include diploma and degree in technical and vocational courses. Its mission is to produce semi-professional workers as human capital in developing nation. Hence, its main focus is to equip polytechnic students with the skills and knowledge which have been demanded by the industries. Besides engineering courses, polytechnics do offer other courses such as hospitality, accountancy and, information and communication technology.

Hence, the common research sample focuses on students. Meanwhile, the frequent research interests would be students' employability concern. For instance, Ahmad Yasaruddin et al. (2010) touched on students' language proficiency. The learning gap between the acquired and required English skill attributes contributed to students' inability to communicate well at the workplace. In Mai (2012), the importance of soft skills competency among the graduates had been highlighted to excel in their workplace. In addition, Normala, Abdul Rahman and Yahya (2016) successfully identified seven skills as Employability Skills Based Work Performance Prediction (ESWPP). They placed communication skill as the main skill required. Other than that, ESWPP can be a guide for students to acknowledge other necessary elements needed to meet the future employers' demand.

On the other hand, a few studies on lecturers' professional development (henceforth PD) are found in Malaysian context (Wan Nooraini & Mohd Sani, 2010). Similar claim in PELL's professional development context is stated in Salmiza, Suhaily and Muhammad Zaki (2016). Meanwhile, Sarimah and Sanmugam (2015) also agreed that the studies on PELLs' PD is still considered as scarce. Ironically, in current situation, PELLs face many pedagogical challenges. It is due to several factors such as lacks of resources and supports, insufficient ESP pedagogical knowledge as well as industry revolution (Marwan, 2009; Poedjiastutie, 2017; Salmiza, Suhaily & Muhammad Zaki, 2016; Sarimah & Sanmugam, 2015; Shahiza, 2012; Siti Noridah, 2012). However, none of these studies directly touched on non-optionist PELLs' context. Hence, there is a need to explore the teaching concern in order to investigate their PD concerns.

Focus of the study

Richard (2005) stated that reflective teaching refers to an activity or a process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in a relation to broader purpose. This involves a thinking process that requires critical self-examination and reflection (Richard, 2005; Wallace, 1991). Via reflective teaching, one can identify the problems pertinent to teaching and learning situations (Wallace, 1991). This covers the aspect related to teacher's belief which is known as an abstract dimension of teaching (Borg, 2012; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Due to that, the explorations of teaching practices should adopt a qualitative case study method. It is expected that the collected information would be able to be compared, contrasted and triangulated to provide in-depth descriptions of the context and lead to rich interpretations to address non-optionists' professional development.

Furthermore, Richard and Lockhart (1996:29) claimed that the primary notion on 'what teachers do is a reflection of what they know and believe, and that teacher knowledge and "teacher thinking" provide the underlying framework or schema which guides the teacher's classroom actions'. The teachers' acts in the classroom could be identified as their teaching concerns. Some of the suggested concerns are focus on the learner, teacher decision making, role of the teacher, structure of the lesson, and nature of language learning activities. Richard and Lockhart (1996) believed that exploring these concerns resulted the understanding of teachers' belief system.

The language teachers' belief system is mapped based on its formation. The formation starts as early as teachers' childhood upbringing and gradually develops as they were student-teachers. Then, it keeps on evolving as they are in-service. As a result, the formative beliefs that held by novice teachers are particularly adaptive in nature (Lavigne, 2014). After some time, the adaptive formation would turn into a solid foundation that rests in teachers' personal pedagogical knowledge (Clandinin, 2013; Suhaily & Faizah, 2013a). The factors that can be considered as sources of English teachers' belief (Lorduy et al. 2009; Richards, Gallo & Renandya. 2001; Richards & Lockhart, 1996) and what types of formation on belief contribute to their belief system (Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Gutierrez, 2004; Lavigne, 2014; Suhaily & Faizah, 2013b) can be simplified as the following figure:

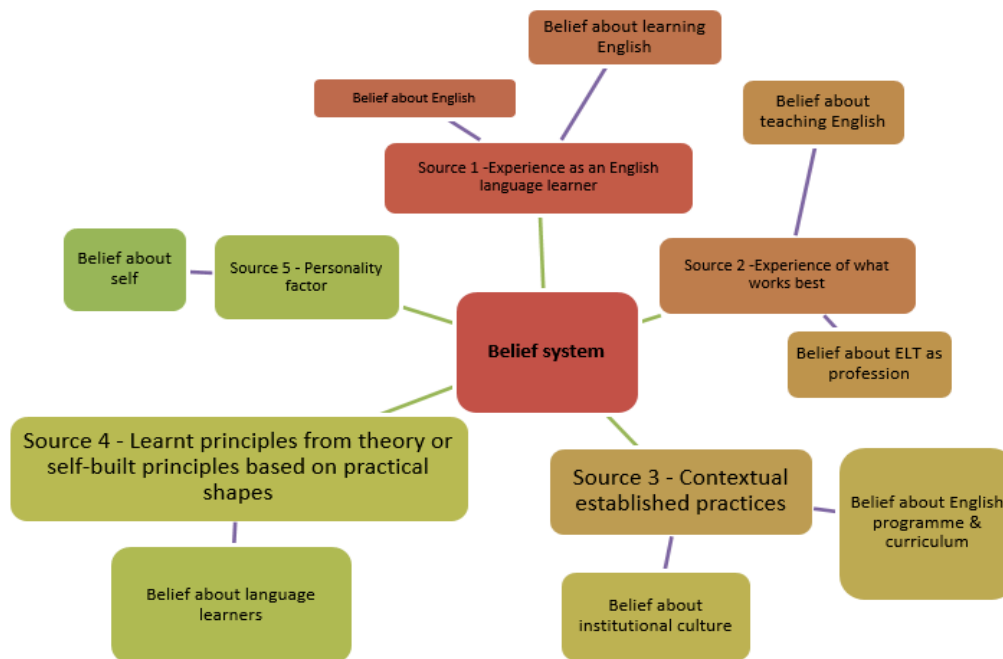


Figure 1: Link between types of teacher's belief, sources of teacher's belief & belief system

Based on Figure 1, it summarizes the link between types of teacher's belief, sources of teacher's belief and belief system. There are eight types of teacher's belief which are derived from five sources of teacher's belief. The first source is the experience as an English language learner. It influences belief about English and belief about learning English. The second source is the experience of what works best. This experience inspires belief about teaching English and belief about ELT as a profession. Next, the third one is the contextual established practice. It has formed teachers' belief about English programme and curriculum, and belief about institutional culture. The fourth source of teacher's belief is the learnt principles from theory or self-built principles based on practical. It shapes belief about language learners. Lastly, the fifth source is the personality factor. It awakens the belief about self.

In relation to the abovementioned explanation, it is suggested that teachers must be aware of what constitute their beliefs. The correlation between sources of teachers' beliefs and the types of teachers' beliefs (or espoused theories) are closely related to their teaching concerns (or theories-in-use) in shaping their professionalism (Farrell, 2012). In other words, revisiting teachers' belief system provides a systematic exploration into their practice. Their teaching concerns indirectly displays their teacher cognition (Borg, 2012; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). This may pave their growth as language teachers since teacher cognition reflects the professional knowledge of the teachers (Borg, 2003). This element is helpful to examine the on-going supports needed by the teachers to remain relevant in their teaching practice (Salmiza et. al, 2016).

Teacher professional knowledge has been studied in many forms. Shulman (1987) conceptualized teacher knowledge base into three categories. The first is general pedagogical knowledge (PK), followed by content knowledge (CK) and the third one

is pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Among these three, Shulman (1987) suggested that PCK should be emphasized because it signifies the distinctive bodies of knowledge for teaching. On the other hand, Wallace (1991) categorized two types of knowledge which are commonly acquired by educators, i.e. received knowledge and experiential knowledge. The former one is a formal education received by the teachers and the later refers to the knowledge gained through experience while they are in-service. Meanwhile, Clandinin (2013) revealed that the image in one's classroom act defines his or her personal practical knowledge which intimately connected with the personal and professional narratives of teachers' lives. Thus, it is considered as a combination of emotional and moral knowledge. Last but not least, Richards (2008) came out with two knowledge bases which specifically refer to second language teacher education. The explicit knowledge that teachers have about language and language teaching principles is known as 'knowledge about'. In addition, the second one is 'knowledge how' where by it represents the implicit knowledge of language which is influenced from their beliefs, theories, and knowledge (Richards, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to explore non-optionists' teaching concerns in order to acknowledge their professional development concerns. To achieve this purpose, reflective teaching procedures are employed to identify the common teaching concerns shared by the respondents. It is also meant to explore how non-optionists' teaching concerns are formed. Hence, the findings are expected to assist the researcher to determine the specific recommendation for the non-optionist PELLs' professional development.

Research Questions

This study is carried out in order to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the common teaching concerns shared by the respondents in their reflections?
- 2) How respondents' reflections contribute to their professional development (PD) concerns?

Methodology

The research methodology applied is based on the qualitative inquiry orientation. This case study involved three willing non-optionist PELLs in Politeknik Aman as a purposive sampling. The easy access granted to this polytechnic became the main factor why it was chosen as a research site. The modified versions of selected reflective teaching procedures such as critical friend, keeping written journal and peer observation were employed to elicit the required data. Hence, there were three different data resources, namely 1)the interview transcription from the informal semi-structured interview, 2)the entries from the teaching journal, and 3)the notes from the non-participatory classroom observation. These data resources were organized into a proper audit trail. After that, it was analyzed through constant comparative content analysis which was adapted from Creswell (2008) in Clark and Creswell (2010). The analysis steps are as follow (Figure 2):

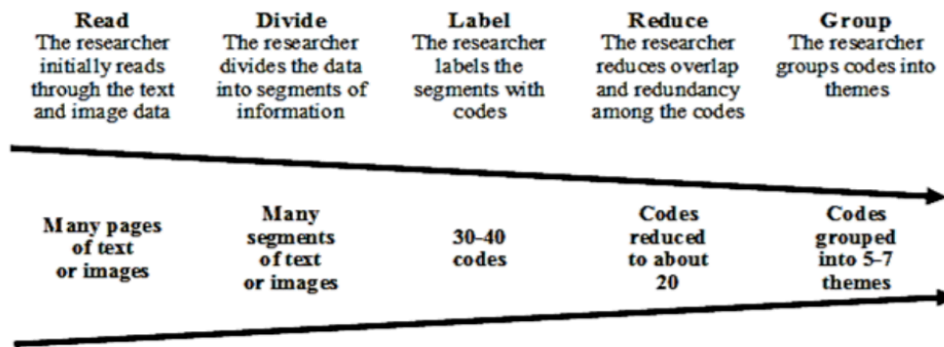


Figure 2: Content Analysis (Adapted from Creswell, 2010 in Clark & Creswell, 2010)

The specific codes were assigned for each theme to represent the common teaching concerns being shared by the research respondents. Other than that, the trustworthiness issue particularly in term of credibility and comfirmabilty were addressed through several processes. The first two is through members' checking and prolong at the site. Then, the triangulation process was conducted through constant comparison of the results across the data resources. Lastly, the inter-rater reliability was carried out. The Cohen's kappa value between two raters yielded at 0.61- 0.80 which is equal to 'moderate' whereby the degree of agreement at > 0.81 was interpreted as 'near complete agreement' (McHugh, 2012; Zamri & Noriah, 2003).

Results and Discussion

This qualitative case study is meant to address the professional development concerns among non-optionist PELLs. The coded data were explored and analyzed so that the anticipated common teaching concerns can provide the link to determine the teachers' belief systems. The belief system can be defined as a reflection of respondents' teacher cognition. It signifies the current state of their professional knowledge base. Thus, any immediate requirements needed can be prepared to address their PD concerns. The results and discussions are made based on research questions are as follow:

Research Question 1

The common teaching concerns shared by the respondents was determined by looking at the coded details (labelled as categories) across the data resources of the cross-sectional cases. Based on the summarized data recorded (refer Table 1), the coded details were grouped based on four different themes. Consequently, these themes reflect the respondents' shared common teaching concerns which featured as 1)concerns about learners, 2)concerns about pedagogical aspects, 3)concerns about self, and 4)concerns about institutional matters.

Table 1: *The common teaching concerns shared by respondents*

Themes	Category	R1		R2		R3		T	GT
		I	J	I	J	I	J		
Concerns about learners	a)Attitude	1	5	7	3	1	3	20	61
	b)Proficiency	3	2	3	2	2	1	13	
	c)Performance	-	11	-	5	-	6	22	
	d)Learning preferences	3	-	2	-	1	-	6	
Concerns about pedagogical aspects	a)Teaching approach	12	13	6	8	5	10	54	112
	b)Classroom management	-	10	-	7	-	9	26	
	c)Teachers' decision making	9	8	7	-	5	3	32	
Concerns about self	a)Seen aspects of self as teacher	7	5	6	4	8	5	35	94
	b)Personal values & belief about teaching	14	-	4	-	5	1	59	
Concerns about institutional matters	a)Supports	7	8	6	5	10	7	43	59
	b)Constraints in policy implementation	4	-	1	-	-	1	6	
	c)Constraints in teaching within community of practice	3	2	3	-	2	-	10	
Total	12 categories	61	64	45	34	39	46		
Grand Total		171		79		85			

To begin with, the most frequent concern being shared is related to the respondents' pedagogical aspect. One hundred and twelve (112) coded items were identified as the identical details which were categorized as teaching approach, classroom management and their decision making. As untrained language educators, this situation seems quite normal for the respondents to 'overly' concern about their roles as PELLs. Through the informal semi-structured interview and journal entries, the researcher found that respondents were cautious with what they planned and carried out. That is why their responses mostly illustrated the teaching approach, classroom management, and decision making.

This reflects the shared beliefs that being hold by the respondents. The beliefs that are influenced by lacking of pedagogical skills as English language educators and current institutional environment. Similar points were found in Lorduy et al, (2009) where by the former one was referred as '*the experience of training*' and the latter one was known '*the experience with the schooling*'. In this context, this belief system is derived from three main sources namely experience of what works best, contextual established practice and self-built principles based on practical shapes (Lorduy et al. 2009; Richards, Gallo & Renandya. 2001; Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Next, the common item shared is concerns about self. The lack of formal training or received knowledge may lead to this scenario. The respondents were not trained as ESL teachers so it is logical for them to keep on questioning their credibility as PELLs. Thus, it could be the factor why their responses covered the seen aspects of self as teacher and the personal values. There were about ninety-four (94) details were successfully coded under this theme. As non-optimists, it is inevitable not to compare themselves to the colleagues who were formally trained as TESL student-teachers. This is because '*what teachers know and how they use their knowledge in classrooms are highly interpretative and contingent on knowledge of self*' (Johnson & Golombek, 2002: 2). In this context, personality factor can be considered as the main source of respondents' teacher's belief system.

Furthermore, respondents also shared their responses on concerns about learners (61 coded details) and concerns about institutional matters (59 coded items). In these case studies, respondents viewed students as their main clients. As a result, they kept on discussing about students' attitude, proficiency, performance and learning preferences. Some of them treated the students as opposed to how they were being treated as language learners in schools and universities. They were more emphatic towards their students. In addition, they also acknowledged the contextualized issues on supports, constraints in policy implementation and constraints in teaching within community of practice. The shared concerns are derived by respondents' teacher belief on their roles as the non-optionist PELLs at the research site, Politeknik Aman. Hence, in this context, the sources of their teachers' beliefs are derived from experience as an English language learner, contextual established practice and self-built principles based on practical shapes.

Last but not least, based on the overall data, R1 was considered the most responsive respondent who has shared related information to the required data. The total of 171 coded details was found in his interview transcriptions and journal entries. One of his reflections was classified as 'deeper reflection' where as he described about the changes made in order to alter his approach in subsequent class after experiencing a failure in his earlier class. This is considered as an evaluative decision to improve the teaching approach that matches the Zeichner and Liston's (1996) *research and re-theorizing and research* stage. Most of his other coded details are classified as 'surface' and 'moderate' reflection. The responses feature the characteristics of *review mode* and *reflection-in-action* level (Schon, 1987; Zeichner and Liston, 1996). Same goes to the other two respondents, R2 and R3. Their responses are considered as 'surface' and 'moderate' level. This has concluded that, even though the respondents were not formally trained as English language teachers, they have shown a characteristic of reflective practitioners.

Research Question 2

The formation of teaching concerns was derived from respondents' belief system. As discussed earlier, the sources that shape their belief system encompasses five different elements, namely 1)experience as an English language learner, 2)experience of what works best, 3)contextual established practice, 4)self-built principles based on practical shapes, and 5)personality factor. The identified common teaching concerns reflect respondents' teacher cognition which signifies the state of their current professional knowledge bases. This is because teacher cognition refers to that what teachers think, believe and do (Borg, 2003) and personalizes the actions, experience, thoughts and values which are mostly guided by their own reasoning (Wallace, 1991). Consequently, the identified professional knowledge base facilitates the process to determine participants' professional development concerns.

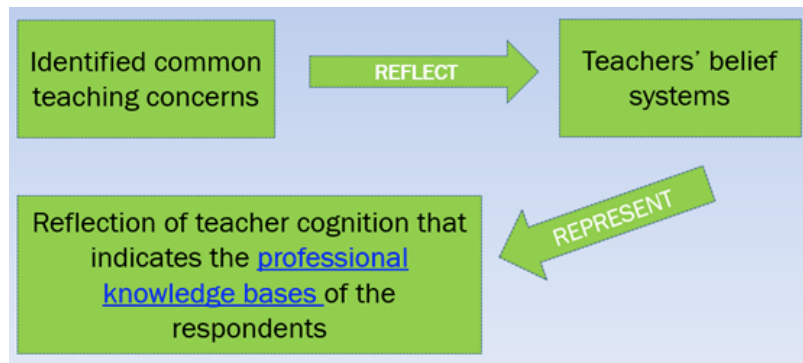


Figure 3: The path that link how exploring reflections related to identifying professional development concerns

Figure 3 depicts the link on is how exploring respondents' identified teaching concerns contribute to their professional development concerns. Based on these case studies, the identified professional knowledge bases are derived from subject/content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. The combination of the identified professional knowledge bases can be characterized as relevant to the requirements as the experienced language educators. It means that non-optionists' credibility as PELLs should not be interrogated even though they were not formally trained as language educators. The input from their short preparatory teaching training merged with their in-service teaching experience contributed to the development of their experiential knowledge.

Additionally, the respondents could be characterized as reflective practitioners. They hold positive attitudes towards their struggles to teach English language courses in English as a Specific Purpose (ESP) context. Their challenges are considered greater than their optionist colleagues. This is because the optionist PELLs also experienced similar difficulties to teach English language in ESP context. This is one of the main challenges in teaching English language at higher technical institutions (Marwan, 2009; Poedjiastutie, 2017; Salmiza et. al. 2016). The main reason is due to the fact that teaching ESP requires a special training that is based on need analysis in a specific scope or context.

Not forgetting, the non-optionist PELLs' knowledge base can be considered as a contextual formation. It reflects their current state of practice. It is expected because the conceptions of personal pedagogical knowledge (PPK). Respondents' PPK ought to address the complexity derived from the interactions between making sense of their particular teaching context and students at a particular time, the identity that fix their teaching, and the pedagogical choices they have decided (Clandinin, 2013; Salmiza et al, 2016; Shulman, 1987).

In relation to that, respondents' performance would not be as promising as what have been displayed in their present practice even though they are the self-driven individual. This is due to lack of specific supports received for their on-going professional development. It may exhaust them to continuously generate their self-efforts to work on what is best for them in less resources in terms of skills and knowledge as an ESP instructor. Hence, a drastic effort to support them should be made in assisting their PD concern before it affects their resilience to stay as PELLs. It may be applicable to the optionist PELLs' situation. This is because teachers'

retention embedded with emotion factor that is prone to be fluctuate depending on their immediate surroundings (Lavigne, 2015). Thus, bottom-up support to specifically address respondents' PD constraint particularly the improvement of their personal pedagogical knowledge as an ESP practitioner.

Conclusion

All in all, it can be concluded that the respondents' teaching concerns have been shaped by the experience of what works best in their current situation as non-optionist PELLs in Politeknik Aman. Hence, their self-efforts to stay survived reflects the development of their professional knowledge base apart of not properly trained as ESL lecturers prior to join the teaching service. The experience of what works best is considered as a primary source of respondents' belief system. As a result, teaching concerns that most respondents shared in common are basically centred on '*what they do*' or their decision makings in teaching. It is actually anticipated by '*who they are*' as language educators. Furthermore, their experience as language learners and their personality factors trigger their professional learning regardless of their status as non-optionist PELLs. It can be seen that their experiential knowledge influences the engagement towards their professional practice. Being complacent or sticking to a routine are likely to be absent in their daily routines. Other than that, the findings prove that respondents are always in the state of conscious of their existence as they are considered as reflective practitioners.

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