FROM UNSEEN TO SEEN: OUR EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING ENGLISH CONTENT COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Our study explores our experiences of how we teach English content courses to our students. The content courses are Morphology, English Prose, Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), and Cross-Culture Understanding (CCU). Our exploration takes the form of an autobiographical narrative inquiry in which the data source of our study is our autobiography. Our autobiography focuses on our experiences of teaching English content courses which are critically reflected.

Our study provides a perspective on teaching content courses which is commonly known as bringing conceptual and abstract ideas into contextual and real information. There are stages selected as our autobiography, those are, the beginner teacher, the mature teacher, and the confident teacher. Each stage is presented by systematically starting from the narratives, and followed by the analysis.

At the beginning stage of our teaching experiences, we reflected that deductive and inductive of teaching is the common approaches we used. At the middle stage, we engaged with the product and process approaches to teach content courses. At the last stage of our teaching practice, we are aware of the importance of applying autonomous learning in our teaching process.

Keywords: content courses, autobiographical narrative inquiry

I. INTRODUCTION

The effective and meaningful teaching of English becoming global issue for ELT practitioners, specifically, who teach English as a foreign language. Our own life history has led us to commit ourselves personally and professionally to being a teacher and learner of English. However, our active involvement in teaching and learning of English has not been free from problem as we have to teach both English language skills and content courses. We have found that teaching English content courses such as linguistic studies and literary studies

need extra efforts as we are discussing about conceptual and theoretical bases which are sometimes unseen or abstract for students.

At the university level, we are expected not just being able to teach English language skill courses, but we are expected to be also to teach content courses as well. The mastery of the content courses by the students will lead to their following success for studying English. Our students are those majoring at pure linguistics. They need an exposure to develop their capacity to learn content courses. As we experienced and observed as a learner, we notified that the teaching of content courses was hard. Moreover, the strategies used rarely influenced the students to know well on the materials.

Based on the students' comments on the learning process and situation of content courses, they felt that learning content courses was boring and difficult. They had comments on the teachers' way to teach, that is, the teachers' explanation on conceptual ideas was not clear, and sometimes, confusing.

This research explores our experience in teaching English content courses both linguistic and literary studies. Our exploration takes the form of an autobiographical narrative inquiry, which Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) also call 'self-study' (p. 13). We mostly focus on exploring the experiences which have significantly contributed to both our personal and professional development as an Indonesian English teacher.

We believe that it is helpful for our experiences of teaching English content courses to be compiled and shared with others. The compilation or arrangement of our experiences can then be used as a life lesson. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) state that "teachers embody their knowledge in narrative and this expresses their growing understanding as a part of the move to value teacher knowledge and teacher perspectives, teacher narrative has become a tool for teacher development" (p. 20). We believe that our structured experiences are a powerful way of contributing to knowledge. Specifically, our research should be of benefit to my colleagues, helping them to improve the teaching of content courses in the context of English as a foreign language.

Even if our study does not contribute to changing the large domain of EFL curriculum and pedagogy as currently dictated by government policy, we still hope that our critical personal knowledge as teachers can become a foil and supplement to teach other content/conceptual courses policies and practices in schools (Kooy, 2006). This narrative also supports what has been stated by Clandinin and Connelly (1990; 2000) about the need that personal knowledge to become professional knowledge.

Considering all the ideas, this study aims to answer these following research questions: (1) what teaching experiences have been important to us? (2) how do these experiences shape our understanding of EFL content courses teaching pedagogy? (3) what can we learn about our teaching experiences by writing about them?

We believe that our study is significant in broadening knowledge about the teaching of English content courses taught as EFL in Indonesia. Our inquiry provides a fresh perspective on teaching content courses as meaningful intellectual activity. The knowledge also provides a perspective on our teaching practices, and hopefully allow us to be better teachers. It is also the place to have academic dialogue with other EFL practitioners in Indonesia, therefore, among us can do a deeper reflection about what we did, what we are doing, and what we are going to do.

Our inquiry reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of our teaching practices. We are sure that the more we explore our teaching practices, the more we become aware of facilitating the students to meaningful content courses teaching. Teaching English content courses needs an extra effort to make something unseen becoming something seen for the students. Through this study, we hope to get a powerful means of (re)interpreting and (re)connecting our understanding of our own shifts in teaching as we (re)consider our life experience across time and place (Shields, 2005).

Conducting our research by using autobiographical writing is not free from some ethical issues even though it is a study about the self. There two crucial issues that should be taken into account to make sense of my stories.

The first ethical issue is about honesty. Autobiographical narrative research challenges our honesty, particularly, academic honesty. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) give guidelines for self study, arguing that "self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand to make a successful personal essay" (p. 17).

The second issue is about how we construct ourselves as a narrator. All narrative involves some degree of "exaggeration or falsification" (Stahl, 1989 in Swidler, 2001, p. 120). It would be easy for us to be trapped into presenting ourselves as a 'romantic hero' who are capable of resolving any teaching problems that we have faced (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). To promote a more realistic, complex, and complete narrative, we need to balance the themes, characters, and plot lines of the tragic, ironic, and comedic hero in our story because those are promising and powerful means for telling our tales (p. 18).

II. METHOD

According to Johnson and Christensen (2004) "qualitative research aims to describe, explore and discover realities that are subjective and personal, as well as socially constructed" (p. 31). Our experiences in teaching EFL content courses are deeply subjective and personal realities for us, although we are also mindful of the fact that they occurred within specific social settings, and hence lend themselves to a social interpretation. We are the key instrument in collecting and analyzing the data of our experience which are in the form of words. Specifically, we use narrative inquiry as 'interpretive device' to understand our experience in learning and teaching EFL (Lawler, 2002).

This chapter explores narrative inquiry which underlies our study. Firstly, we explain about the reasons why we use narrative inquiry. In a subsequent section, we describe how we collect and analyze the data. Finally, we explain how our study makes a contribution to research and practice on the teaching of EFL content courses.

Recently, there is a growing interest in the potential of narrative inquiry as a research approach. Canagarajah (1996) argues that "narratives are gaining

prominence in research publications because they represent holistically the local knowledge of the communities studied" (p. 327). In the field of education, narrative inquiry is of a great value for the way it shows how teachers' narratives shape and inform their practice (Bell, 2002, p. 208). Ritchie and Wilson (2000) state:

> We argue that the development of a professional identity is inextricable from personal identity and that when personal and professional development are brought into dialogue, when teachers are given the opportunity to compose and reflect on their own stories of learning and selfhood within a supportive and challenging community, then teachers can begin to resist and revise the scripting narrative of the culture and begin to compose new narratives of identity and practices. They can begin to author their own development (p. 1)

This does not mean that we necessarily seek to resist 'the scripting narratives' of our culture or that we want to quarrel with the dominant narratives or stories that circulate within our culture. Nevertheless by writing our own narrative about our education and specifically our growth as a teacher of English content courses, we are constructing an alternative narrative against which to test some of the claims made by research and policy on the teaching of content courses.

The capacity of narrative to value both personal and professional experiences has also driven us to use it in our study. Bell (2002) states that "narrative allows researchers to understand and thereby learn from experience" (p. 209). Our aim is to use narrative inquiry as a device to recollect and reconstruct our experience in teaching English content courses. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the crucial role of experience in narrative inquiry as the way to construct knowledge into the following terms:

> Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social (p.2)

Our experiences of English language learning provide us with a rich perspective on our experiences as a teacher. By using narrative inquiry to explore our experiences as an Indonesian teacher of English content courses, we try to understand those experiences holistically in all their complexity and richness (Bell, 2002).

Narrative inquiry also promises to empower our voice as Indonesian teacher of English content courses as someone who has a story to tell. This means amongst other things, that narrative inquiry lets us see ourselves as practitioner researchers, not simply researchers who are investigating the teaching of English content courses. Narrative is thought to be suited to capturing the complexities of professional identity. Doecke (2003) argues "practitioner research is not only a powerful means by which to maintain a professional culture, but an essential element in a democratic society where there is a free exchange of views and a recognition of the importance of critical inquiry and alternative perspectives" (p. 153).

Another important reason for using narrative is that it provides a tool for doing self-criticism about the challenges, the conflicts as well as the complexities of teaching English content courses that we encounter everyday. Doecke (2003) explains about the value of reflexive self-study in the form of narrative as enabling him to explore his sense of conflict with existing policy and curriculum and to scrutinize his habitual practices as a teacher educator.

Writing a narrative remains a challenging experience for us because of what Kamler (2001) describes as the difficulty of creating a 'critical' and 'spatial' perspective. This entails both a 'linguistic' and 'theoretical' challenge (p. 3).

The data source of our study are our autobiography. Yet our life as it has been lived escapes any attempt by us to write about it. In constructing our autobiography we are not proposing to tell our story from beginning to end. Any narrative is selective. As Dewey (1938) reminds us, "we select the kind of experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (p. 25). Therefore, our stories focus on our experiences of teaching English content

courses, Morphology and English Prose. We focus on our experiences of teaching English content courses most notably our engagement with the theoretical bases.

We reflexively engage in interpreting our autobiographical writing as this is an important dimension of any narrative inquiry. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue that "such reflection plays am important part in achieving what a self study should do, namely to promote insight and interpretation" (p. 16). We will also interpret our narrative with its socio-cultural contexts. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue that "quality of autobiographical self-studies attends carefully to the contexts or settings of a person's life" (p. 18).

Our study will be beneficial for us and other EFL teachers in trying to understand the complexities of teaching English content courses involving both linguistic but also cultural dimensions. Our everyday teaching experiences are used as an 'intellectual resource' (Kooy, 2006) for me and other EFL practitioners. Goodson (1998) argues "the value of autobiographical writing about classroom experiences in teacher education, contending that stories about professional lives is an important step in viewing and understanding the self as an emergent and changing social identity project" (p. 26).

We hope that other EFL practitioners can learn from our struggles of teaching English content courses as a pathway to gaining success in EFL teaching and as a strategy to enhance the EFL students' understanding. We hope that the result of our study are widely known and used by other EFL content courses teachers as a possible alternative solution in coping with problems in teaching content courses. Furthermore, our knowledge is an important contribution to enhancing EFL teachers' performance as well as EFL teacher' knowledge about the issue of bringing the abstract material into very concrete material.

We do not want to be over ambitious and claim that our narrative is able to solve the problem in global EFL teaching context in Indonesia, but we are confident that our narrative makes a contribution to the teaching of English content courses in EFL context. When we reflect on our experiences as teacher, this provides a perspective for our teaching and our work as facilitator of teaching

and we hope that other teachers also appreciate the importance of the teaching experiences as we share.

III. ANALYSIS

This part presents about the narratives and the analysis of the researchers' experiences in teaching content courses. The experiences are divided into three parts. The first part is the time when the researchers became new-experienced teachers of content courses. The second part is the time when the researchers became mature teachers of content courses. The third part is the time when the researchers became confident teachers of content courses. At the beginning of the narratives, we give the detail description on the content courses we analyze. It is to give deep understanding on the substance on the content courses, the materials we teach, and the activities we conduct in our classroom.

At the first stage, that is, being new-experienced teachers, we were totally blank to teach Morphology, TEFL, English Prose, and CCU. Our more than 6-year-teaching experiences were dominated by teaching English language skills such as Reading Comprehension, and Writing. It influenced the way we approached English subjects. Teaching language skills did not required my deep understanding on the topic of discussion and our ability to make students active. We are teachers who are not busy with long preparation on understanding the concept, but the preparation will be on how to arrange interesting classroom activity in which we do not have difficulty in doing this. It is influenced by our educational background that facilitates us much on the approaches and methods of teaching English.

The situation we faced was also influenced by the characteristics of content courses that require more intensive reading and deep understanding on the abstract concepts about the language. Morphology is the study of basic forms in language (Yule, 2006) is a study which discusses about internal structure of a word. The discussion on a word involves morphemes, word formation, and morphological types of language. The major topic of discussion is on analyzing a

word from many angels starting from its smallest meaningful unit (morphemes), its formation (popular with word-formation processes), types of language, etc.

As we teach my students starting from the theory and exercises, we realized about different ways of teaching, those are deductive and inductive way of teaching. Deductive way of teaching emphasizes on teaching from something abstract to something concrete. The easiest way to explain is from theory, example, to exercise. This approach emphasizes more on teacher-centered approach. This means that the teacher gives the students a new concept, explains it, and then has the students practice using the concept. For example, when teaching a new grammar concept, the teacher will introduce the concept, explain the rules related to its use, and finally the students will practice using the concept in a variety of different way. According to Bob Adamson (2003), "The deductive method is often criticized because: a) it teaches grammar in an isolated way; b) little attention is paid to meaning; c) practice is often mechanical." This method can, however, be a viable option in certain situations; for example, when dealing with highly motivated students, teaching a particularly difficult concept, or for preparing students to write exams.

This approach was commonly used by new-experienced teacher as it is the most feasible to do, specially, for teaching grammar and other formulaic courses such as writing, content courses (pure linguistics: morphology, syntax, and phonology), and Cross-Culture Understanding, and also English Prose. It promises the possibility about running on the track smoothly. Based on my experiences, Morphology is kind of course that the pattern/rule is clear. It is a matter of right or wrong. Through deductive approach, the teaching process will not jump far away from its substances.

Inductive instruction makes use of student "noticing". Instead of explaining a given concept and following this explanation with examples, the teacher presents students with many examples showing how the concept is used. The intent is for students to "notice", by way of the examples, how the concept works.

Using the grammar situation from above, the teacher would present the students with a variety of examples for a given concept without giving any preamble about how the concept is used. As students see how the concept is used, it is hoped that they will notice how the concept is to be used and determine the grammar rule. As a conclusion to the activity, the teacher can ask the students to explain the grammar rule as a final check that they understand the concept.

At the second stage, that is, being mature teachers, implementing the product approach and deductive way of teaching is mostly influenced by our previous educational contexts. As novice teachers of English writing who are new to the system and teaching itself, everything around us is unfamiliar including the program, course, and testing (Kooy, 2006). Therefore, as a safeguard we use the experience we had when we were a student. This situation is clarified by Miller (1991 in Kooy, 2006) who states that teacher identity is a social process of negotiation strongly shaped by your experiences as student. We completely imitate what our teacher did.

Even though it has been known that the product approach was in fact introduced by Western Colonial regimes, the influential factor in the dominance of the product approach to ELT (English Language Teaching) in 'peripheral communities' like Indonesia is also shaped by the social, cultural and practical contexts of teaching which inform and shape the ways teaching is practiced (Kooy, 2006). Canagarajah (1999) mentions three learning practices which were commonly used in the communities; monological, dialogical, and informal learning method (p. 108-109). In the monological learning method typically the teacher passes on the knowledge orally and students have to listen and memorize accurately. This method definitely focuses on forms. The dialogical method is typically based on explanatory exchanges between the guru and the shisya. In informal method the learners live with the family of the teacher and pick up knowledge and skills (Canagarajah, 1999).

The dominance of the product approach also has been influenced by "economic and material factors" (p. 109). The students' financial capacity to purchase the textbooks is limited and the photocopying machine is not freely

accessed. Therefore, the effective way is writing down a model on the whiteboard for the whole class. The big class size (around 30 students) has been another classical problem that can pressure teachers to adopt a teacher-centered, oral, didactic, and deductive pedagogy (Canagarajah, 1999).

Our product approach content class is mostly focused on producing a perfect product, perfect summary, perfect textbook's oriented answer. And yet, perfection is not the point. Facilitating the students' development through awareness is obviously more important. Arousing students' awareness can occur through our academic dialogue on the substances on the courses and the contextualization of the conceptual ideas.

My decision to change the way we teach writing is mostly influenced by our belief that teaching content courses is not just asking students to read, to summarize, and to ask questions. Rather, teaching content courses means teaching students how to understand the substances, develop ideas, how to relate to daily situation, and how to contextualize the concepts, etc. Kamler (1994) points that "most teachers have the wisdom to know that local knowledge of their particular sites is central to the way they adopt any writing pedagogy" (p. 15). We believe that the process approach provides a pathway to make our students aware of the complexities of content courses.

Adopting a process approach definitely draws on communicative language teaching (CLT) ideas. CLT promotes the idea that meaning is predominates over form (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). The activities employed, even though not all of them, in my writing class try to follow the track of CLT. This is not to say that the process movement has been able to replace traditional pedagogy completely with a new set of pedagogical practices (Matsuda, 2003), but it has nonetheless had a decisive impact on the teaching of content courses.

At the last stage, that is, being confident teachers, our better understanding of the teaching of writing is the result of my professional development. As we explore diverse ways of knowing, perspectives, and practices in the teaching of content courses, we begin to improve students' learning, then, we translate other

EFL practitioners' knowing, perspectives, and practices into effective classroom practice (Kooy, 2006).

At last stage of our teaching experiences, we try to place students as partner in learning process with their capacity as independent/autonomous learners. Using this point of view really liberate both of us, teacher and students. Schwartz in Holec (1979:3). He states that autonomy is defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning. Furthermore Maculewicks (2000) accepts the definition of "autonomy" as a situation in which the learner is totally for all the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions. From those definitions, we can point out that the learners must be an independent learner under the teacher's guidance. The students should have a clear view of the whole learning, the aim of learning, the way of learning, and the choice of materials in learning.

In the autonomous learning the teacher's role is quite different from the teacher's role in the old way of teaching. The old of teaching method tend to use the teacher-focused approach (Maculewicsk, 2000). This approach emphasizes transmission of knowledge from an expert teacher to inexpert learners, and the teacher's task is to get it across. The condition made the teacher's privileged and centered position in teaching being challenged in the autonomous learning.

As a result of the change in the teacher's role, the students' role in classroom teaching has also changed. In autonomous learning, the students should be active learners rather than passive receivers. They must know what to do and where to go under the guidance of the teacher. They must be able to consult the reference books of surf on the internet so as to gain some knowledge on their own. In line with this, Maculewicsk (2000) adds that the students should be active participants or performers in the class. It means that they are required to show themselves and to give a full attention to their abilities. Those conditions will encourage the students to improve their skill and it also motivates them to perform better.

IV. CONCLUSION

This part presents several points we have learnt from writing my narrative. Writing this narrative has given me a deeper understanding about the act of teaching content courses as an abstract subject. We have been able to understand the value of teaching unseen materials in my literacy development and my understanding of the nature of content courses. Specifically, we have understood more about the complexity of content courses in English. Our understanding, then, will be expected to continuously help to shape and to improve our EFL content courses practices.

Writing this narrative has allowed us to experience the recursive nature of making better teaching practice. The recursive process we have passed through has been reflected in the way we have continually revisited parts of our study and asked ourselves what we are trying to mean. We have directly experienced struggling with going back and forth stages until we have been able to teach in better ways, even not the best ways. We know what will be the appropriate way of teaching for our students.

This means through this narrative we have become more sensitive to our own needs as a teacher. We need to be facilitated with an encouraging and stimulating learning process, specifically, in the availability of teaching resources, and stimulating forum to share our teaching problems. And also, we have become more sensitive to help students find ways to construct meaning from the materials studied to be related to their real situation as students of English. The more we can bring them to understand deeply, the more ability they have. We do hope that my sensitivity to my own needs will help me to be more sensitive to my students' needs.

Writing this narrative has enabled us see our ups and downs in our journey of teaching English content courses. We have seen ourselves as a teacher who is always in the process of becoming, and who always needs to develop. Writing my narrative has also liberated me to explore the values and beliefs I hold in relation to teaching content courses. We have found that there have been significant changes about how we value content courses.

Through this narrative, we have reflected that as a teacher we have to be ready for any development and change in teaching content courses. We cannot close our eyes to promising teaching approaches, even if to employ them requires a deep understanding and a readiness to face any obstacles. We are definitely sure that changing from deductive to inductive, process to product, and dependent to independent has positively and negatively impacted on our students' understanding. To be sure, the impacts are also both encouraging and discouraging; however, bringing a fresh teaching approach becomes a must for a teacher who expects better teaching performance.

Doing narrative inquiry has given us a wonderful chance to critically analyze our pedagogical practices in the teaching of content courses. We have had the opportunity to view our teaching practices. We have had the medium to explore the strengths and the weaknesses of our strategies to teach content courses. We do expect that we can use this exploration of all aspects of our teaching practices as the departure point for our own and other EFL practitioners' teaching advancement. We are not suggesting that our teaching experiences can solve the whole problem of the teaching of content courses. However, we have the hope that what we have written will contribute to EFL teaching.

This narrative has allowed us to engage in self-reflection so that we could change our orientation towards the teaching of content courses. Teaching content courses is more than just giving a book, asking the students to read and to summarize, and giving marks for their answers on quizzes or tests. Teaching content courses is like bringing down the unseen to seen. We have to liberate our students to explore any ideas they have, and give them enough chances to feel the process of discovering meaning and understanding the substances in real way. We have to give them enough opportunity to feel the real process of learning something abstract to something real. Our tracing of our history as a teacher of content courses has shown that the more the students experience and contextualize the materials, the better students' understanding and mastering will be.

Writing this narrative has also heightened my sense of appreciation of the art and essence of teaching the abstract materials, and challenged us to be able to

contextualize the learning process. The contextualization is really meaningful way to help students relate the materials to their real life situation as they will be language learners who are required to have high sense of sensitivity toward the linguistic phenomena around them.

This narrative has been fully about ourselves and our experiences. This means that we have had our own space to share our story as a learner and teacher of English. We have had freedom to explore our experiences, and to identify those which are significant for this study. We have been thinking about the possibility of building and improving effective and meaningful teaching at the early stage of content courses literacy.

Furthermore, writing this narrative has inspired us to place personal writing as an important writing activity in our teaching practice. Writing our narrative has become a fundamental step in our process of becoming, becoming a good teacher of content courses. It has been a fundamental way to deepen our understanding of the nature of content courses as well as the way to teach them all. Doing this narrative has given us a rich perspective about how we see the world of English differently.

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