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Understanding own teaching: becoming reflective teachers through reflective journals

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ABSTRACT

Reflective journal facilitates teachers to reflect on their teaching and then generate feedback for the improvement of their classroom practices. This study examined how in-service English teachers in a MA Linguistics program at a US Mid-Western University perceived the influence of reflective journals toward their teaching attitudes. At the time of the research, participants were 25 years of age or older. The findings generated from interviews indicated that most participants were convinced that reflective journals help them become reflective teachers. It also found that most in-service teachers regard reflective journals as an effective tool to increase teaching awareness, and thus improve their performance during teaching.

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Reflective journal; reflective practitioners; teacher education; effective teaching

Situating the terrain

Reflective practices, defined by Dewey (1933) as a deliberate and persistent way to think about one's actions, represent strategies that respond to the need to find ways to improve teachers' classroom practices (Cirocki, Tennekoon, & Calvo, 2014; Garza & Smith, 2015; LaBoskey, 1994; Lee, 2008; Thompson & Pascal, 2012; Toom, Husu, & Patrikainen, 2015). Such an idea has been used in educational setting known as reflective teaching. Reflecting on one's teaching can be conducted in various ways, one of which is through reflective journals (Bray & Harsch, 1996; Casanave, 2013; Dart, Boulton-Lewis, Brownlee, & McCrindle, 1998; Dong, 1997; Garza & Smith, 2015; Good & Whang, 2002). A reflective journal refers to 'a teacher's or a student teacher's written response to teaching event' (Richards & Lockhart, 1994, p. 7). Journal writing can be considered reflective if events and ideas recorded are used for later reflection, and if 'the process of writing itself helps trigger insight about teaching' (Richards & Lockhart, 1995, p. 7). In addition, Kim (2013) clearly states that the prime goal of a reflective journal is to enable students to be responsible for their own learning. This suggests that a reflective journal is a kind of writing that record one's practices in order to learn from past experiences. Casanave (2013) considers a journal to be reflective if it:

engages the writer's feelings, emotions, interests, or curiosities; (2) connect writer with something (e.g., with another aspect of the self, with another idea, with another person, with experiences and subject matter); and (3) helps the writer develop the awareness needed to understand the self, an experience, an idea, or an event in expanded ways. (Casanave, 2013, p. 8)

This quote suggests that journal writing can only be reflective if it meets those criteria, which include writers' feeling, emotions, interests, and curiosity, which then lead to their awareness of their classroom practices. Because of its significance, reflective journaling has gained popularity in the field of teacher education, and teachers generally have a positive reaction to the process of journal writing (see Garza & Smith, 2015; Holly, 1984; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Arguably, their support for this approach is related to the fact that journaling helps teachers identify important insights about their teaching and how to improve their classroom practices.

In their work with student teachers, Richards and Lockhart (1994) construed reflective journals as students' written responses to their teaching experiences. According to these authors, two remarkable benefits of reflective journals can be gained. First, a reflective journal can be a record of teaching experiences upon which teachers can later reflect on. Second, it helps teacher gain insights about their teaching (see also Holly, 1984), for example, through their recording teaching events, teachers develop a basis for reviewing their practices. Richards and Lockhart (1994) also noted that a variety of (often complex) classroom problems can be recorded and later revisited through the use of reflective journals. Some other issues, such as the substance and effectiveness of lessons, information about teacher–student relationships, and commentary about a variety of classroom practices could be recorded in reflective journals.

Other benefits of journal writing are identified by Richards and Ho (1998) who claim that it enables teachers to generate inquiries about their teaching process, develops awareness of salient instructional issues, and provides an ongoing record of classroom activities and events (Richards & Ho, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Richards and Ho (1998) also found that journal entries played a significant role in helping participants become more conscious of their teaching. Therefore, from the vantage of some researchers, reflective journals provide a useful tool for surfacing data pertinent to determinations about teachers' (including student teachers') strengths and weaknesses. The example of this benefit is evident in teachers' improvement in their classroom practices after their journal writing.

Studies on reflective journals have taken place in various settings: in higher education as well as in secondary school settings (Moon, 1999). Research, such as a study conducted by Dart et al. (1998), for example, examined if the journal writing of 27 Graduate Diploma in Education students influenced their learning and their acquisition of knowledge. Other researchers, such as Francis (1995) and Good and Whang (2002), have demonstrated how journals help pre-service teachers reflect on their experiences and thereby contribute to

No	Name	Country of origin	Years of teaching
1	Ana	Indonesia	5 years
2	Wini	Indonesia	4 years
3	Yoki	Japan	4 years
4	Yayoi	Japan	5 years
5	Gandi	Mexico	2 years
6	Yuan	Dominican Republic	6 years
7	Deb	USA	4 years
8	Joel	USA	4 years
9	Jack	USA	5 years
10	Ema	USA	3 years

Figure 1. Brief introduction of the participants.

their efforts to gain practical knowledge. Some researchers have investigated the use of journaling by ESL (English as a Second Language)/EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers, suggesting that this approach helps teachers improve their teaching practices, and thus, it also helps students learn. For example, Bray and Harsch (1996) showed that reflective journals helped increase ESL/EFL teachers' awareness of their teaching and students' awareness of their learning.

As journal writing has been seen as an effective way to improve one's teaching, this study investigated student teachers' perception of writing reflective journals for their practicum class. It also attempted to understand if student teachers enrolled in a MA Linguistics program saw journal writing as an effective way to engage in professional development. It is important to examine voices of student teachers, who apparently have had some teaching experience, in regard to their perception of writing reflective journals in their practicum class. The article also seeks to explore particular issues these student teachers chose to write about in their journal. It is important to know contents of their reflective journals as it gives insights into whether these student teachers actually take benefit of journal writing to record their teaching experience. Prior to investigating in-service teacher's perception of journal writing, we will firstly review findings of previous research on essences of journaling toward teaching improvement.

Reflexivity, journaling, and teaching improvement

Reflexivity is indeed related to inner consciousness of one's practices. It is an action of looking at and reflecting on one's practices (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). This can be done through written protocol in addition to other tools used in reflective practices. Researchers in education and especially those who are concerned with professional self-improvement have been planning to carry out large-scale studies to discuss issues related to professional development. For example, Angela and Feng (1994) reviewed teachers' personal written reflections to examine teachers' awareness of features of effective teaching. The findings revealed that reflective journals allow teachers to grasp ideas on how to succeed in teaching. Rogers (2001) also found that that reflective practices lead to the birth of transformative learning. In the work of Rogers (2001), teachers' reflexivity allowed them to recognize their teaching weaknesses and thus use them as a way to improve their teaching. Tillman (2003, p. 229) also found that 'dialogic journaling and personalistic reflection' enable novice teachers to be aware of challenges faced during their teaching.

In addition, reflective journaling is found to give advantages both to teacher and to students alike. Students are aware of their learning styles through reflecting on their learning, and teachers alike can explore their teaching through reflective journals. In addition, Dart et al. (1998) who examined reflective journals written by 27 students, revealed that journals can help these students understand the process of their learning. This finding is also relevant to that of Myers (2001), who also found that reflective journals help students become aware of their learning style. In his study, Myers randomly selected 15 Mandarin-speaking Taiwanese students enrolled in a composition class at Ming Chuan University in Taiwan. The students were required to write journals for three months on topics of their own choice. Students were given the opportunity to exchange their journals with their colleagues once during the period. In fact, Myers reported journal writing helps students improve their writing skills. Myers' premise was that journal writing can be an alternative way for students to discover their consciousness about writing.

Good and Whang (2002) also conducted research on how reflection benefits students' learning. The researchers asked their participants (pre-service teachers) to write response journals, a term used to refer to reflective journals. These pre-service teachers, enrolled in an educational psychology course, were to keep their journals in a binder throughout the course of instruction. In addition, to assist the pre-service teachers in developing their critical thinking, the instructors suggested that they choose a colleague to be their partner. All pre-service teachers held mutual discussions with their partners, exchanging information and commenting on their peers' reflection. The instructor wrote feedback on the journals. In their research, Good and Whang (2002) explored students' reactions and beliefs about journals at the commencement of their course and after students engaged in actual writing of their response journals. Students' initial thoughts about reflective journals were positive. Most students agreed that reflection helped them become creative thinkers. Some of them believed that reflection enabled them to monitor their progress. Other students understood that it helped them explore their experiences and provided them opportunities for self-evaluation. After writing response journals, students agreed that reflective journals helped them 'organize their thinking.' The journals also 'encouraged depth thought and the construction of meaning' (Good & Whang, 2002, pp. 262–263). These students also stated that response journals helped them prepare for their actual teaching career; the journals could be the important 'resource that will be valuable to them when they start their teaching career.'

In recent times, studies on reflective journals has become more popular not only in the field EFL teaching (see Abednia, Hovassapian, Teimournezhad, & Ghanbari, 2013; Casanave, 2013), but also in the field of nursing and tourism (see Kim, 2013; Ruiz-Lopez et al., 2015). These studies have explored perceptions of a reflective journal and also benefit gained through writing the journal. Abednia et al. (2013), for example, found that writing a reflective journal has fostered self-awareness of the students; the finding also suggests that reflective journals improve students' reasoning skills. In addition, Abednia et al. (2013) and Ruiz-Lopez et al. (2015) found that reflective journaling enhances the possibility for the emergence of dialog and trust between teachers and their students.

In summary, studies by these scholars found in their respective research that reflective journals are significant to improving their instructional practices. There are two main benefits of reflective journals as found in some studies: first, reflective journals increase teachers' awareness of the challenges and weaknesses of their classroom practices. Second, reflective journals also help teachers to explore their teaching and conduct 'good' classroom practices (Abednia et al., 2013; Angela & Feng, 1994; Kim, 2013; Rogers, 2001; Ruiz-Lopez et al., 2015; Tillman, 2003). These studies have shaped our study, in which we explored if MA students of various cultural and national backgrounds, studying in an American university, felt the same way as participants of other relevant studies. The main research questions of this research range from asking participants: how these young scholars perceive reflective journals; what student teachers write in their reflective journals; and why do they write so are some of the research questions raised to guide this research.

Method

The research was conducted at a US Mid-Western university from the end of 2005 to mid-2006 with student teachers who were taking practicum in their MA program in Linguistics. At the end of each week of their teaching practicum, these student teachers were required

to write a one-page reflective journal regarding their experiences, weaknesses, and strengths of their teaching. The journals were then collected by the instructor to be reviewed and commented on.

Twenty student teachers were enrolled in the Department of Linguistics. However, for the purpose of this study, 10 student teachers were recruited as participants through snowball and convenience sampling techniques. Snowball is a sampling technique in which the researchers make the first contact with someone in the population and then start identifying other participants through the help of their initial contact (Bryman, 2004; Mackey & Gass, 2005), while convenience sampling 'is one that is simply available to the researchers by virtue of its accessibility' (Bryman, 2004, p. 100; Mackey & Gass, 2005). We first made initial contact with a student teacher enrolled in a MA linguistics program and then we worked with her to identify other potential participants. The participants were also taken through convenience sampling, since there were only 20 students taking practicum class that were accessible for the study. The teaching experience of these participants ranged from two to six years' teaching experience. These participants were given consent forms before the actual interviews took place.

Because of the time constraints and participants' availability and consent, we only used in-depth interviews as our method of data collection, as no access to participants' journals was feasible. In-depth interview has been seen as a valid data collection technique in qualitative research (Babbie, 2008; Bryman, 2004; Glesne, 2006; Silverman, 2005). To enhance the credibility of our research and to allow the triangulation of the data, we interviewed participants twice, and this allowed us to compare the participants' responses between the first and second interviews. The second interview also served as respondent validation, by which we hoped to increase the credibility of our research. Ten in-service teachers (six international and four US students) were interviewed. To obtain rich interview data, we prepared various types of interview questions as suggested by Bryman (2004); these questions ranged from introduction, follow-up, probing, specifying, direct-indirect, and interpreting questions. In the introduction question, for example, we asked: 'What is your perception of reflective journal?' we would then follow it up with: 'Could you please elaborate what you have just said?'. In the probing questions, we asked questions such as: 'You have said that writing journal is advantageous and yet tiring, would you please tell more about what you mean?'. These were some types of questions asked during our interviews.

Interviews were conducted on the basis of student teachers' availability. The first round of interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and uncovered perceptions of journal writing, content, and the perceived positive impact of the journal on teaching attitude. The second-round interviews, which lasted approximately 10–15 minutes, were used to confirm the participants' response during the initial interviews. All the interviews were conducted in places and at times convenient to the participants and were tape-recorded.

In qualitative research, data analysis involves organizing the data from interviews, documents, or observations (Glesne, 2006). However, in this study, we only obtained data from interviews. For this reason, we only analyzed interview data through three coding techniques: open, axial, and selective coding following the suggestion of Babbie (2005). Before we coded the interview data, we first transcribed our initial interviews to identify issues covered during our first interview. The transcript of the first interview was important in allowing us to identify issues needing clarification in the second interview. Only after we transcribed the second interview did we code the data. The open coding allowed us to examine and question masses

of data from interview transcripts. Having examined and questioned the data, we then classified and labeled the data into several themes. In the axial coding, we then reanalyzed and reexamined the classification and labels several times. In this phase, the themes or codes were regrouped to form other emerging codes or themes. Our final phase in data analysis used selective coding. In this coding strategy, we identified, developed, and evaluated the themes resulting from open and axial coding. In this phase, we generated central concepts and categories that we used in reporting the findings. In reporting the data, we show them through the use of tables following the suggestions of Glesne (2006) who calls for exhibiting the data in this way.

Results

The participants viewed a reflective journal as a medium for self-improvement. However, their views on the benefit of a reflective journal are different in some respects. Some of the participants saw writing a journal as a genuine way of engaging in reflexive practices, and thus saw it as a venue to help improve their teaching practices. The majority of the participants in this study agreed on the significance of reflective journals; they suggested that journaling can improve their teaching and also promote teaching conscientiousness. Figure 1 the following table shows participants' perceptions.

Views on reflective journals

The data shows that three participants believed that reflective journals both promote their teaching conscientiousness and enhance their teaching skills. Yoki, for example, suggested that:

I am not used to writing journals (it is a kind of new for me) but it is very good way to help reflect on what I have done, to evaluate myself and try to improve my teaching skills and keeps me learning. (Yoki)

This shows that Yoki perceived writing reflective journal as enabled her to improve teaching skills and enhance her conscientiousness about teaching. She noted that her teaching skills improved as the result of her engagement in writing reflective journals for her practicum class (Table 1).

Reflective journal was also perceived as an effective medium to boost one's awareness of their teaching. Ana, for example, states that reflective journals promoted her teaching awareness, and thus believed that constant engagement in journal writing will help her be aware of her teaching process. In her own words, Ana suggested that 'it is easy to forget what we are good at and what we are bad at, the journal helps us reflect on our strengths and weaknesses.' This shows that journal writing was perceived to enable teachers to monitor their teaching practices.

Table 1. Student teachers' views on reflective journals.

Comments	Ana	Wini	Yoki	Yayoi	Gandi	Yuan	Deb	Joel	Jack	Ema
Enhancing teaching skills		x	x	x		x		x		
Promoting teaching conscientiousness	x	x	x				x	x	x	
Being hesitant					x					x

The other participants also felt such journals were useful to evaluate and watch the progress of their teaching. Yayoi, for example, perceived that journaling can be helpful, not only for junior/beginning teachers like herself, but also for senior teachers alike. Because of her belief on the effectiveness of journaling, she liked to write journals in spite of her hectic schedules. She said 'a journal is very important especially for new teachers like me although sometimes I don't have time to do it' (Yayoi).

Although the majority of participants were convinced of the benefit of reflective journals, two of them were unsure that the reflective journal had positive impacts on teaching. One participant stated that she was not sure if she becomes a better teacher, even though such journal may be useful for some people (Gandi). The other participant stated that reflective journals provided very few benefits to teachers because few or none can be honest with themselves. She felt there were alternative means for reflection, 'I would rather ask my colleagues to observe my teaching and give me feedbacks about it' (Ema).

The data showed that while some variations emerged from interviews, the majority of participants felt that journaling was helpful. It is necessary to note that those who perceived journaling as beneficial were more experienced ESL/EFL teachers. Most of them had a Bachelor's degree in teaching ESL/EFL (Teacher Education program), and had more than three years' teaching experience.

In contrast, the two participants who did not see reflective journals as the best way to reflect had little teaching experience. In spite of their different perceptions about journals, the two participants believe that journals can be used by some, but not all teachers. Differences in teaching experience can be assumed to have contributed to the participants' distinctive views on journaling. However, apart from this claim, this study does not focus on examining if length of teaching experience contributes to distinctive views on reflective teaching.

Contents of the journals

In this research, we found that participants mostly wrote about issues taking place in their classrooms. Other issues that seemed important were about teaching issues, i.e. teaching problems and teaching beliefs. Teaching methodology and issues on teaching materials were also recorded in the journals.

Table 2 shows that the most common topics written in the journals were about methods and approaches of teaching. Of the 10 participants, seven of them used their reflective journals as a means to record classroom issues. In this particular study, classroom issues were identified as students' problems, everything taking place in the classroom, teacher–student interactions, and interesting points during teaching. Some of the student teachers wrote

Table 2. Contents of reflective journals.

Comments	Ana	Wini	Yoki	Yayoi	Gandi	Yuan	Deb	Joel	Jack	Ema
Classroom issues	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	
Teaching issues: Problems and beliefs of teaching	x	x	x	x	x					
Issues about methods/ approaches of teaching	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x
Techniques in preparing teaching materials				x		x		x		

about many issues in their journals. For example, Yayoi recorded various issues ranging from classroom issues, belief about teaching, teaching approaches, and also about designing teaching materials. Considering this finding, we are convinced that reflective journals can be a medium allowing student teachers to write about issues facing them during teaching. For this benefit alone, we believe that reflective journals will become a medium for professional improvement.

Classroom issues

In this study, we refer to classroom issues as activities and events that occur in the classroom, such as problems a student experiences during learning. Joel, for instance, said that teaching intensive English to international students required tremendous efforts to assure messages go through. This is because to succeed in this classroom type requires strong commitments from both the teacher and the students. For that reason, he regularly had extra meetings with students and encouraged students to engage in self-learning through take-home assignments. To keep up with his effort, Joel wrote his planning and also noted classroom issues that needed taking care of in his journal. He was also aware that one way to get benefit from his teaching was to keep track of his progress as well as his students'. In monitoring his teaching progress and students' achievement, he found that journaling could be an option. He stated 'I wrote on issues which are happening with my student to keep track of the student's achievements and evaluate my own progress' (Joel).

Another participant, Jack, indicated that he did not pay attention to a particular issue in the journals; everything taking place in the classroom seemed important to record. This participant said that he wrote a little bit of everything. He sometimes paid attention to his teaching methods. In other occasions, he was concerned with the issue of selecting appropriate materials for class. However, he argued that the most important things to record were about the issues taking place during classroom time. They could be students' problems, teachers' ways of teaching, or other unexpected issues that may arise during the teaching.

Gandi, the only participant from Mexico, indicated that although she was interested in writing about many different issues, she was much more concerned with developing teacher–student relationships through promoting healthy communication. Her concern was to maintain good relationships with students and one way to do that was by developing communication with them. This is very important because oftentimes instructional success is determined by teachers' ability to maintain good relationships with students (Gandi). Abednia et al. (2013) and Ruiz-Lopez (2015) have identified from their findings that a reflective journal allows healthy communication to take place between teacher and students. In fact, a reflective journal is sometimes referred to as a dialogue journal, since teachers and students use it to engage in mutual communication.

Teaching issues

In addition to writing about classroom issues, participants wrote about important issues that occurred during their teaching. In this study, teaching issues refer to teaching problems, teaching strengths and weaknesses, and teaching beliefs. One participant, Yayoi, claimed that apart from writing about the issues that emerged in the classroom, recording about her teaching strengths and weaknesses can be a milestone to improve teaching. She stated that understanding strengths and weaknesses in teaching enabled teachers to determine steps for improvement. In addition to writing about teaching strengths and weaknesses, Yayoi wrote about issues that she found in her reading of teaching-method textbooks.

Another teacher, Ana, noted that reflecting on lesson plans is also the best way to improve teaching. She claimed that if her lesson plans were not appropriate to a particular class, she would write about it, which enabled her to revise the lesson plans for future meetings. She stated:

I wrote about my lesson plans, for example, I decided to write a little plan before coming to the class, and I shifted a little bit, or I totally change the plan. Say, for example, I would like to teach reading comprehension but in the class students need to study conversation, so I changed a little bit sometimes. (Ana)

This narration indicates that a reflective journal enables teachers to monitor their class, and shift instructional activities accordingly.

Teaching methods

Issues of teaching method emerged as important content of reflective journals written by the participants. Eight student teachers wrote about this particular issue, in which they prioritized writing their strategies in handling their classes. They argued that different nature of classroom requires different teaching approaches. Therefore, teachers should always monitor their ways of teaching. One way to monitor teaching is by keeping reflective journals. Recording their teaching strategies in the journals was perceived as an effective way that allows teachers to evaluate their techniques and procedures used in their instruction.

Teaching materials

As shown in Table 2, three participants wrote about preparing teaching materials. For the purpose of this study, material preparation includes the consideration of types of materials that suit classroom conditions and students' expectations. One participant, for example, stated:

I don't remember exactly what I wrote in my journals last year but things like material preparation are possible to be included in the reflective journals, and I am positive that at some points I did write about the way I prepare the materials. (Yayoi)

Another participant asserted that when he found difficulties in teaching, he usually reflected on many issues. The reflective journal enabled him to find out if his teaching strategies and materials used in the classroom are not appropriate. In his own words, Yuan said:

...let say I asked a question, was the way I taught effective? If it did not seem to work out, the students were having a hard time understanding what I am teaching, I am considering it might be the way I am presenting it, or is it the problem to be with the materials that I am using in the class? I asked such question in my journals.

This finding enriches literature on the function of reflective journals. Student teachers participating in this study seemed to have used journals for many different purposes. They recorded important issues taking place during their teaching process. They wrote about weaknesses, strengths of their classroom practices, and also their concerns regarding their teaching materials and appropriate teaching methods.

Perceived impact of the reflective journal

The interviews yield several narrations on the perceived benefits of reflective journals. The data shows that the majority of participants agreed that writing a reflective journal will indeed shape the way someone teaches.

Table 3. The perceived impact of reflective journals.

Comments	Ana	Wini	Yoki	Yayoi	Gandi	Yuan	Deb	Joel	Jack	Ema
Influence instructional processes	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	
Uncertain about their influence			x	x						
No effects whatsoever					x					x

Table 3 shows that of 10 participants, eight of them claimed that the reflective journals influenced their instructional processes/teaching activities including methods of teaching, classroom interaction, material design, and teaching problems. However, two participants were unsure if their ways of teaching were influenced by the journals or by other resources.

Influenced instructional processes

One participant, Yuan, stated that he enjoyed reflective journals because they helped him to stay on track and watch his teaching progress. He added that journaling was important for him because it was useful as a monitoring device for his teaching. For that reason, among his suggestions is for teachers to persistently and continually keep journals. He said in the interview:

I think the reflective journal give a good impact on my practices. I think it keeps me on track. Personally I really enjoy writing the reflective journal because it allows me to watch my progress as well as the students'. I also enjoy it because there is a sort of task involve with it, and structure [the structure of the journal, what should be included and not be included in it]. I think the reflective journal is very effective, and I think if we continue writing the journals, I think that will be a very good tool [to improve teaching]. (Yuan)

Another participant, Wini, also stated that although many factors shape her teaching techniques, her reflective journals had also taken part in shaping her classroom practices. Being able to monitor students' as well as her mistakes is another perceived benefit of journaling. According to Yuan, Deb, Joel, and Jack, the journals also helped them to be sensitive to their students' needs, which enabled them to make adjustments in their teaching styles. For example, Deb stated 'the journals increase my awareness and consciousness about students' feeling and my teaching styles.' Another participant, Joel, claimed that the journals changed his view on the ideal relationship between teachers and students. In addition, Yuan stated that reflective journals affected his classroom practices such as his teaching methodology. He suggested that since teachers are busy with tight schedules, writing journals allows them to stop and think about their teaching.

In addition, Joel indicated that reflective journals allow him to investigate the effectiveness of his teaching. The journals made him aware of the events taking place in the classroom, such as his teaching strengths and weaknesses. Joel responded more positively about the impact of journal writing on teaching material preparation. He believed that writing reflective journals has really helped him in reviewing the techniques of material preparation. In his journals, he oftentimes wrote about preparing teaching materials. He therefore realized that the more he wrote about teaching materials in the journals, the more it helps him.

Uncertain about journal effectiveness

Two participants, Yayoi and Yoki informed that they were unsure whether changes that occurred during their teaching were because of journals. Although they agreed that reflective journals were worth trying and helped teachers improve, they were unsure if their knowledge in teaching was shaped by the journals or other factors.

Yayoi also provided a similar opinion about the journals, that she was unsure if her teaching attitudes were influenced by her reflective journals or by other resources: they could be from teachers, textbooks, journals, or experiences. She was not sure if her teaching perceptions occurred because of journal writing or because of a teaching method course that she took. As she stated 'I learn a lot out of it (the reflective journal), especially about teacher-student relationship but I am not sure if it because of the journals or because of the class that I took when I am writing the journals.' She also asserted that the reflective journals did not necessarily help her with her materials selection; they only provided chances for her to think more about material preparation. She said 'I do not think that reflective journal gives me any new ideas but it just helps me to think more, and get some ideas about getting teaching materials.'

No effects of journals

Two participants (Gandi and Ema) regarded the journal writing experience negatively. Gandi argued that although at some points, she enjoyed writing journals, she was uncertain if they made her a good or a bad teacher, or did anything to improve her teaching because she wrote the journals just out of the routine.

Like her peer, Ema stated that she believed that all teachers should engage in reflective teaching. In reflecting on her teaching, however, she would rather choose other forms of reflection than journals. She argued if she or other teachers are incapable of being honest with themselves, there will be no benefits of writing journals. In fact, she preferred video-taping herself or peer-observation to reflective journals because by so doing she could get feedback from her colleagues. For that reason, she did not intend to use reflective journals as a form of reflective teaching in the future.

Closing remarks

Reflective thinking has been recognized since the early twentieth century through the work of John Dewey and Donald A. Schön. Their books on reflection have inspired other researchers to conduct research on reflection. The idea of reflection has been applied in many disciplines including the field of teacher training. Teachers have reflected by various means, one of which is through writing professional journals. This study investigated the perceptions of in-service teachers on writing a reflective journal. Ten in-service teachers were interviewed regarding their perceptions on a reflective journal. The research found that most in-service teachers regarded the reflective journals positively. The journals were assumed by most participants as a means of improving their teaching. Some of the participants perceived that the reflective journal promoted their awareness of what they do in their teaching.

In addition, most participants admitted that they wrote about classroom issues, which included students' issues, classroom interaction, everything taking place in classroom, and interesting points found in the classroom. Other participants also suggested that they wrote about teaching issues including difficulties in teaching and teaching beliefs. Some

participants wrote about teaching methodology and their perceptions of the teacher–student relationship. The findings also indicated that the reflective journal affected teachers in their classroom practices, their perceptions about teacher–student interaction, and their methods in preparing teaching materials. However, some participants were not interested in writing the reflective journal. These participants preferred other forms of reflection, such as videotaping or observation to journal writing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Teuku Zulfikar is the head of Department of Language Education in the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training. Dr. Zulfikar earned a PhD from Monash University, Australia, in Pedagogy and Cultural Studies (2011). He completed two Master's degrees, one from Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, USA, in Educational Administration (2006) with Fulbright Scholarship, and the other one from Monash University in Leadership, Policy and Change in Education (2003) with AusAid Scholarship. He has been teaching both at undergraduate and graduate level at UIN Ar-Raniry and Syiah Kuala University. Dr. Zulfikar has served a position as a senior researcher at International Center for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies from 2012–2015, and serves the directorship position from February 2016. His research interests include education governance, education management, leadership, pedagogy and cultural studies, youth and religious identity, and also ethnographic studies. He has published widely in the field of education and social science. Some of his selected publications are 'Researching my own backyard: an inquiry into an ethnographic study'; 'I feel different though: Narratives of young female Indonesian Muslims in Australian public school'; 'Understanding Muslim identity from multiple lenses: insights from a minority group in Australia'; 'Indonesian education: its effort for progressive learning environment' and other important work. At the moment, he is involved in a number of organizations: International Center for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies (ICAIOS); Aceh Institute for Human Resource Development (AIHRD); Institute for Islamic Studies Interreligious Dialogue and Peace (IISIDP); and Teaching English as Foreign Language Indonesia (TEFLIN).

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