

A REFLECTIVE SELF-INQUIRY INTO MY TEACHING PRACTICES WITH NON-ENGLISH-MAJOR TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Action research allows teachers to evaluate and gain insight into their own practices in their teaching contexts through reflection, and inquire into ways to improve their practices and student learning outcomes. This study is a reflective self-inquiry in which the research team engages in a deliberate and retrospective analysis of the principal investigator's teaching practices. The purpose is to identify possible factors that cause the low performance of non-major "English as a Foreign Language" students in her university English classes and propose alternative instructional practices and evaluative measures to manage their learning problems.

INTRODUCTION

Action research allows teachers to gain insight into their own practices in their teaching contexts through reflection and evaluation, and to inquire into methods that can help improve student practices and learning outcomes. It comprises a broad spectrum of approaches to action, change, and inquiries. One form of action research is self-reflective inquiry by which practitioners seek to solve problems, improve practices, and enhance their understanding of their own contexts (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 1992). Inquiry is intrinsically a behavior or course of finding an answer to a question (Wallace, 1998). Reflection is a process of critical self-examination (Habermas, 1973) involving actions of "self-evaluation, self-recall, self-observation, and self-dialogue [and concerning a person's] preferences, values, norms and feelings" (Yip, 2006, p.780), with people

generating insights and perspectives from the reflection (Rolfe, 1998), which is thought of as a critical process or action for the development of practices (Dewey, 1933; Leitch & Day, 2000; Loughran, 1996). Dewey (1933) explained that reflective thinking involves numerous stages involving first being in a status of “doubt” or encountering difficulties of mind where thinking arises, and, second, with an ensuing act of inquiry, moving to seek ways to address the doubt by referring to information. Atkins and Murphy (1993) describe reflection as possibly arising from one’s perception of mental and emotional disturbance, and in reminiscing about all past and present experiences, “both happy and unhappy, encouraging as well as discouraging, pleasurable or traumatic memories will be aroused” (Yip, 2006, p.708). In the process, one can analyze relative elements in specific situations and one’s fundamental assumptions in practice, identify existing knowledge, and exploring alternative practices (Atkins & Murphy, 1993; Yip, 2006).

This study is a reflective self-inquiry into a deliberate and retrospective analysis of Dr. Chien’s teaching practices in the first-person dimension of inquiry (Ladkin, 2005; Torbert, 2001), with this reflective self-inquiry arising from recognizing an ongoing problem of low performance in non-major English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Dr. Chien’s university. The intent is to identify possible factors affecting Dr. Chien’s teaching practices applied to these students, and their attitudes toward learning English, which have possibly contributed to their failure in learning English as effectively as they might have in her English classes. This study also offers alternative instructional practices in addition to evaluative measures to improve Chien’s teaching practices and, consequently, enhance the learning effectiveness of non-major EFL students in her university. The following statement of reflections is to be presented in the perspective of Dr. Chien.

SELF-REFLECTIVE ACTION INQUIRY OF MY TEACHING PRACTICES

My inquiry was motivated from a discomforting feeling that emerged from my experience of teaching general English to non-majors: the recognition of an ongoing problem of low performance of non-major EFL learners in my university. Nevertheless, the problem of non-majors’ tendency toward performing poorly in English has long existed in this context. I often heard my colleagues complain that their students were still unable to reach the goals that the curriculum had set for them, that they were not learning in class, and that their English test scores were consistently extremely low since they had been streamed in their respective classes based on their level of English proficiency.

Research has documented numerous factors contributing to academic underachievement, and teachers’ instructional practice is recognized as an influential factor (Baker, Bridger & Evans, 1998; Kirk & Gallagher, 1989). Regarding English learning, teachers’ teaching qualities and assessment methods have also been considered critical factors that have a considerable impact on learning results (Wen & Johnson, 1997). In addition, research has shown that teacher attitudes critically influence their teaching practices as well as their students’ learning attitudes (Flores, 2001; Stern & Keislar, 1977; Wood & Floden, 1990), with teachers’ negative dispositions or attitudes toward students impeding their educational progress (Ball & Lardner, 1997).

I aim to examine my own attitudes (hereinafter with a connotation of prejudices) toward non-major EFL learners and their learning, as well as my personality. These factors possibly affect my teaching practices and student attitudes toward their learning, which might have contributed to their failure to achieve as effectively in English as they might in my class. Moreover, through this self-reflective inquiry, I will also generate alternative practices, to improve non-major EFL learners' learning conditions and outcomes, in addition to proposing different evaluation measures to evaluate the effectiveness of my reformed practices.

Self-observation and reflection have helped me identify the following four themes within myself as potentially requiring closer consideration because they might have impacted the learning results of non-major students.

I. Ignorance of Learners' Pronunciation Problems

Most non-majors (particularly those in class levels C and D) in my university are not appropriately proficient in the English language: they have limited vocabulary and cannot use basic grammar. Whenever I asked them to pronounce English words or sentences, they always remained silent. Most of them could not or would not even say a word in English.

As Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) claimed, pronunciation is the most critical and fundamental factor when learning a second language. However, according to my understanding, many senior high school English teachers in Taiwan currently do not teach phonetics to their students. Most non-major students I taught also expressed that they were not offered phonetics instruction in high schools, which is why they could not pronounce English words. This reflects what Gilbert (1994) stated: "Pronunciation has been something of an orphan in English programs around the world" (p.38). Although I recognized within myself that the most critical dimension to learning a second language rests on pronunciation, I did not assist non-majors to improve their pronunciation by engaging them in pronunciation practice and exercises. I was aware that their vocabulary was limited because their knowledge about and skills in pronunciation were absent. However, I attempted to avoid this problem, partly because I always confined myself to my teaching schedule, and partly because I thought that teaching pronunciation skills would be too time-consuming. In addition, because I also assumed that their reticence was caused by their lack of interest in English, given their status as non-major students with poor language proficiency, I did not bother to teach them pronunciation.

Through this reflection, I have come to realize that to improve non-majors' English competency might require including pronunciation skills in their English class. I fear that non-majors would be unable to reverse their underachievement without receiving instructions in pronunciation to build their fundamental English ability. Without gaining such knowledge, non-majors cannot pronounce words correctly and have trouble learning the vocabulary accordingly. Therefore, I cannot disregard this serious deficit, and I am determined to improve my teaching practice by incorporating pronunciation skills into non-majors' English class. I must also know how feasible it is to implement pronunciation

instruction in non-majors' English classes. Consequently, I queried my colleagues about my idea through e-mail correspondence. Most of them were in support of this practice. Only two expressed that they would find it difficult to execute the plan because of time constraints. Three mentioned that they always included phonics instruction in non-majors' English class, thus increasing student vocabulary and involvement in classroom learning.

The communication with my colleagues has built my confidence in executing this practice; therefore, I am determined to incorporate a systematic and explicit pronunciation sub-syllabus within the overall syllabus of a weekly 2-hr freshmen's English course to improve my practice and increase the non-majors' knowledge and pronunciation skills as well. This practice will be implemented in the freshmen's English course and will last for one semester. I intend to allocate 20 min each week to teaching pronunciation, excluding during mid-term and final exam weeks, which fall on the 9th and 18th weeks. The 17th week is scheduled for evaluating the effectiveness of the pronunciation instruction and practices. The teaching content topics cover the main features of general spoken English at both segmental and supra-segmental levels, including vowels and diphthongs, consonants, final consonants, double consonants, minimal pairs, syllables and stress, linking sounds, rhythm, and intonation patterns.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the practice, a personal diary recording the observation of the students' learning conditions, such as their attentiveness and involvement in tasks and exercises, and their improvement, will be used for data analysis. The diary will also include the reflective accounts of my personal attitudes toward non-major students regarding English learning. Individual oral and written test results will also be used for evaluation. At the end of the course, a survey will be administered to the students to elicit their responses to this practice and their perception of their progress through the pronunciation training.

II. The Manner in which I Teach Non-Major EFL Learners

Reflecting on the past years' experience of teaching non-majors English, I have come to realize that I always showed enthusiasm in teaching for the first couple of weeks before my fervor became subdued because of their non-response to any English-related questions I raised, a situation I have already described in the first theme. Their reticence discouraged me from attempting to initiate any further interaction with them for the classes that followed. I also chose to avoid interacting with them because I was too impatient to wait for any response from them, which might have become possible if I had waited longer, until they had attained a certain level of English competency. Therefore, to avoid silent moments and wasting instructional time, I chose to practice one-way lecturing. My intention to adopt this practice was reinforced by my assumption that non-majors are "poor" English learners and are unconcerned with English learning. This assumption also strengthened my conviction that generating any change for the learning state of non-majors in my university was difficult; thus, one-way lecturing was justified.

Using this practice of predominantly direct instruction, I occupied almost all of the class time, with little interaction with my students. Therefore, every time I taught listening, I simply allowed the students to listen to audiotapes and offered them correct answers,

occasionally eliciting answers from them with simple questions. When I taught reading, I translated the texts, coupled with an explanation of the usage of the vocabulary and of phrases. When I taught writing, I usually offered one sample writing exercise of the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), working out the answers with an explanation of the grammatical rules and an analysis of syntactic structures. When teaching speaking, I led the students to read dialogue sentences and asked them to recite after me. I never organized and planned classroom activities to engage students into their own learning tasks and allowed them to construct their own learning. This teaching practice did not improve my students' learning, nor did it motivate them to learn. I knew my students were not listening to my lectures. Nevertheless, I persuaded myself into believing that I was a conscientious teacher and that I had performed my obligations by transferring academic knowledge to them. I blamed their lower scores on their inattention to studies; however, I was aware of the fact that I was attempting to find a pretext to shirk my responsibilities.

This reflection has helped me understand that my over-lecturing possibly demotivated my students from learning English; this practice probably contributed to their poor learning outcomes. I started to think of ways to manage such a predicament. I understand that the currently applied teaching methodology emphasizes learner-centeredness, which is the knowledge I have gained from my TESOL study. To grasp this aspect further, I sought articles from the literature and learned that this practice can help increase learner motivation and involvement in learning and improve their academic outcomes as well (Meece, 2003; Weinberger & McCombs, 2001). I also learned that the purpose of applying the learner-centered approach is to direct learners to think about the learning content (Perkins, 1994). This approach assumes that learning is a constructive process (McCombs & Whisler, 1997), and that it is best facilitated in a positive environment with supportive interaction (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Moreover, I also understand that this approach requires that teachers plan extensively and conduct task-specific classroom management (Altan & Trombly, 2001).

To implement this practice, I will divide students into different groups that include both the more competent and the less competent students, to allow the more competent learners to help their less competent counterparts. I will organize various types of classroom activities that require learners to solve problems or complete tasks collaboratively. Therefore, when teaching listening, rather than simply listening to tapes, the instructional activities might involve group members cooperating to note what they hear from a recording. When teaching reading, rather than translating and analyzing texts, the group members will be requested to work out the meaning of the texts by themselves, with each group assigned to read a different piece of the text each time. When teaching writing, after explaining a unit of a GEPT writing exercise, each group will be given a different writing exercise and group members must solve writing problems and compose a paragraph on a prescribed topic. When teaching speaking, instead of simply reciting dialogue, students will need to create their own dialogues and practice in pairs. When learners have built a certain level of oral skills, role-playing will also be added to various classroom activities.

To evaluate and interpret the practicability and effectiveness of the learner-centered approach applied to non-majors in their English class, the personal diary, which I will use to record my observations of student interactions and my reflection of the reformed instructional practice, will be used for analysis. In the diary, I will also record my observations of my teaching pace and my attitudes toward the non-major students' learning. Video recordings of student interactions and their work on group tasks will also be used for data analysis. After receiving my students' permission to record them, the observational and video recordings will be **performed** by an observer. In addition, the documentation of the students' self-evaluation and peer evaluation forms, test and exam scores, individual learner's performance objectives sheet, samples of group work, and accounts of regular semi-structured interviews will also be used for data analysis.

III. The Manner in which I Assess Non-Majors' English Performance

The textbooks used for the non-majors' English class are GEPT elementary-level series magazines with unit test papers attached, which contain selected-response assessments with multiple-choice items designed to measure listening and reading skills and constructed-response assessments to measure speaking and writing skills. I administered the tests to students every 2 weeks as required by the course regulations. I always used these normative and standardized tests to assess student learning gains within the course, with the test scores being the only source of reference of the students' language learning performance. I expected that with the biweekly test students could push themselves to study English; on the contrary, few students' scores improved after taking numerous tests in a semester. Many students complained about having to take so many tests, and many confessed that they had not prepared for the tests because they felt the tests to be too difficult. Some students even disregarded the tests, showing indifference toward taking them by guessing answers and quickly finishing them in a few minutes; they occasionally skipped classes to show their unwillingness in taking the tests. I understood that the tests did not assist the students in improving their scores, and felt disappointed with their test results. Nevertheless, I did not change this assessment method because it was the university's policy to train non-majors to pass the basic GEPT test. Furthermore, I thought that using the ready-made test papers to measure student learning was convenient, and did not bother using other assessment methods.

Through this reflection, I recognized that the assessment practice I administered to non-majors probably affected their learning progress, and that it discouraged them from learning English. Their test results must have gradually debilitated their confidence and reduced their interest in learning English. As Jacobs and Nadel (1985) indicated, too many tests and examinations greatly frustrate students. Therefore, it is necessary that I apply different types of assessment practice for non-majors to offer them enjoyment and a sense of achievement, as well as boost their confidence in learning.

I began to inquire about other assessment methods and thought of my colleague Mr. Chen who often told me that he used portfolios to assess English-major students in their reading and writing classes. I contacted him and discussed his assessment approach online. Mr. Chen told me that a portfolio assessment was an extremely flexible manner for assessing

student performance, and that his students had gained substantially from engaging in various classroom tasks and projects. To know more about this method, I consulted articles and books, and came to understand that a portfolio assessment can reinforce student learning by drawing student attention to the learning processes. It motivates learners to learn by using a number of significant and engaging activities (Brown & Hudson, 1998); it also involves students in reflection and in monitoring their own progress (Pierce & O'Malley, 1992). Moreover, I have learned that portfolios can have different forms containing test and non-test data that can demonstrate the students' development of abilities (Pierce & O'Malley, 1992), offer opportunities for student-teacher collaboration, and provide teachers with insight into their students' progress (Brown & Hudson, 1998).

Seeing that a portfolio assessment can strengthen and motivate student learning, I decided to conduct this practice in my non-majors' English class to see how it affects my students. I will first inform the students that a portfolio assessment will be conducted, which will require them to present their work in each of the four language skill areas in their English class, and I will also explain the purpose of using this method. I will also discuss beforehand the contents and the requirements of the portfolio, and decide in advance the days in which students should revise, comment on, and organize their portfolios. Mini-lessons will be offered to students when problems arise during their work. Moreover, the performance objectives and criteria representing the four integrated skills will be established and defined together with the students. The practice also requires that students do self- and peer evaluations on their personal and peers' portfolios; therefore, guideline criteria will also be established to help students review and analyze their own and their peers' work. Students will also be requested to keep a reflective diary to write the reasons for describing the strengths and weakness in the four skill areas.

This practice emphasizes the process of learning, involving students engaging in different learning tasks and activities. Therefore, I will, for instance, account for what students listen to (e.g., notes taken in class) to assess listening. I will account for what and how much they have read and what they have learned from their reading (e.g., reading the journal they have kept) to assess reading. Individual and group work on sentences and paragraph writing will also be referred to in order to assess writing. Finally, audio and video recordings of students' oral presentation will be referenced to assess speaking.

To evaluate the effectiveness of this practice, substantial data will be used for analysis. They will include assessment worksheets (for the portfolios), which I and two colleagues will fill out; students' self-evaluation forms and peer evaluation forms; reflective accounts and notes in my personal diary containing my observations and reflections of the portfolio assessment practice; students' reflective diaries; and excerpts from the recorded monthly meetings with my two colleagues. Transcripts of tape-recorded monthly focus group interviews with the students and photographs of students working on their portfolios, which I will take, will also be used to evaluate the portfolio assessment.

IV. My Requirements for the English Class of Non-Major EFL Learners

My limited expectation of non-majors drove me to adopt laissez-faire attitudes toward their learning in several respects. For instance, my teaching was not directive because it steered student learning toward specific course objectives. I remember that, at the beginning of every semester, I informed students that they were expected to acquire the four basic English skills within 2 years of English training; however, I did not actually push them to try hard to meet the goal. In addition, going to the self-study center to practice English and receiving remedial instruction were not requirements for their English class. Moreover, a threshold for the minimum student competency for the biweekly English test does not exist; therefore, students were unconcerned with the low scores they obtained. Concerning the attendance requirements, because I prescribed attending a minimum number of classes, I seldom conducted roll call in class. Consequently, students occasionally skipped my classes or left before the end of the class sessions without valid reasons; and I tended to take a permissive attitude toward their presumptuous behavior. Regarding the requirement of in-class reading and writing exercises, I usually asked students to practice on their own, and did not follow their work closely, leaving a number of students who never did their in-class exercises. I seldom assigned homework to the students, and demanded little of them concerning the content of the assignments. I also accepted late homework.

Through this reflection I have come to realize that my assumption of non-majors as “poor” English learners made me expect little of them regarding their English achievements, exerting a loose control of their learning and treating them less strictly, which had probably affected their learning attitudes and, consequently, had a negative impact on their academic performance. My non-interventionist attitude toward the non-majors’ learning might have led the students to form a conception of themselves as “incapable” or “inefficient” learners. Thus, they carried a negative self-perception with them and reacted to it by adopting a passive attitude toward their learning, with some of them even giving up learning. My low expectations toward them reflected what Brophy and Good (1970) called a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” which assumes that what teachers expect from students affects their self-perception and motivation, and reduces their learning opportunities. Proctor (1984) indicated that low expectations are generally tied to low achievement, and that teachers are more inclined to demand less of students for whom they have low expectations and of their classroom performance, homework assignments, and overall academic effort. Teachers’ low expectations are closely related to students’ low self-expectations, and combined they intensify the likelihood of poor learning outcomes (Brattesani, Weinstein, Middlestadt & Marshall, 1981; Lockheed, 1976; Proctor, 1984).

To improve non-majors’ learning conditions, I must adopt a stricter practice toward their learning. I plan to impose further obligations by requiring them to go to the self-study center for at least 2 hours each week and attend remedial classes at least twice a week. I plan to require that students attend every class (mandatory attendance) and present their reasons for non-attendance either orally or in written form. Likewise, students are not allowed to skip classes or leave earlier without a valid reason. Each student is required to complete the in-class reading and writing exercises in the prescribed time; I will also watch their progress in their exercises more closely. I will assign homework to students every

week, and I will demand much of them in the content of the assignments. Finally, they will be required to hand in their assignments on time unless they can present valid reasons for their delayed submission.

To evaluate this reformed practice, I will analyze the data emerging from the introspective accounts of my personal diary, where I will be recording my observations of student attitudes toward their learning and their progress, my expectation of their learning, and my introspection of my own feelings of this new practice. In addition, I will also use weekly produced analytic memos, which might contain evidence I will collect on the process or the problems that emerge in this action research. The analysis in the memos will be cross-referenced with the entries in the diary. Lastly, any relevant in-class transcripts, reading and writing tasks, and exercises and assignments by the students will also be used for data analysis.

CONCLUSION

Through the experience of engaging in this process of self-reflective inquiry, I have gained—following Atkins and Murphy's (1993) and Yip's (2006) claim—deep insight into my “fundamental assumption in practice.” I have realized that my assumptions in teaching practice applied to non-majors originated from my view on them as “poor” or “inefficient” English learners. Such a perception prompted me to adopt a passive attitude toward them, applying less effective and inappropriate teaching practices. I avoided the non-majors' problems in pronouncing English words by attributing their non-response to their lack of interest in English. Because of my perceptions and assumptions about them, I chose one-way lecturing to teach them instead of creating more opportunities to interact with them in the class. I have also recognized that my low expectation of non-major learners led me to become lenient toward them and their learning, treating them less strictly. From this reflection I recognized that my assumptions about the non-majors and my low expectations of their language performance probably affected their attitudes toward their learning, resulting in their underachievement. This is shown in previous research findings, which have indicated that teachers' attitudes significantly influence their teaching practices and their students' learning attitudes (Flores, 2001; Stern & Keislar, 1977; Wood & Floden, 1990), as well as their learning outcomes (Ball & Lardner, 1997).

This self-examination has also given me insight into my own personality traits. By examining my own thoughts and feelings, I became more aware that I can become a more competent teacher by becoming more patient and flexible. I recognized the possible causal relationship between my impatience and inflexibility and student learning outcomes. I recognized that I always cared more about fulfilling the teaching schedule than about creating further opportunities for students to compensate for their insufficiencies through learning and building their basic English competency (pronunciation skills), to provide alternative pedagogical and assessment methods, to motivate and facilitate their learning, and to allow them to voice their learning problems. I also identified that I am a teacher who lacked flexibility, blindly sticking to the school curriculum rather than providing substitutive assessment methods to suit the students' learning needs. Moreover, I also

observed that I am the type of person who resists change, acts conservatively, and is content with the status quo, a trait that inhibited me from improving my instructional practice and my students' learning as well. I also recognized that I convinced myself into believing that I was a responsible teacher imparting knowledge to students rather than choosing to confront the truth that students were actually not listening to my lectures and performed poorly on GEPT tests. Undertaking this self-reflective inquiry has also helped me recognize what knowledge I possess and to seek substitutive practices (Atkins & Murphy, 1993; Yip, 2006). Through this process, I recognized my insufficient knowledge of the linguistic instructional methodology, approaches, and strategies, and attempted to expand my knowledge by probing other alternative teaching practices found in the literature and generate insights and perspectives from consulting with my colleagues.

In this study, I applied the action research method to conduct a self-reflective inquiry into personal teaching practices applied to non-major English learners for their general English classes over the past years at my university in Taiwan. Through reflection and observation, I identified four major themes regarding my instructional practices, which might be factors leading to the non-major's poor learning outcomes, including "ignorance of learners' problems in pronunciation," "the ways I teach non-major EFL learners," "the ways I assess non-majors' English performance," and "my requirements for the English class of non-major EFL learners." Because of time, space, and cost restrictions, this study did not lead to concrete action. In the future, substantial action will be taken to address the four themes following and completing the whole cyclic process of action research to, hopefully, overcome the predicaments I have faced in teaching English to non-majors in my university. Furthermore, future studies might also lead me to discover the causes leading to my ineffective teaching practices with non-major learners in my university and to use large samples in investigations to enhance external validity or apply experimental research approaches to further confirm the possible causal relationship between problems and actions.

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