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"Why my students didn't read according to their level?": An instructor's reflection in an extensive reading class

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Abstract

The present paper is a novice teacher reflection in an Extensive Reading (ER) course. It attempts to explore the extent to which reflecting on critical incident of a reading level contributes to new understanding of Day and Bamford's ER principles utilized to design the course. This study found that reflection through critical incidents provides a systematic structure to develop practical pedaogigcal knowledge into teaching. By exercising a critical incident reflection on ER, I was able to critically contextualize Day and Bamford's ER principles into my current teaching context. It concludes by pointing out how a narrative reflection on critical incidents is needed to understand a novice teacher's experience when practicing a new approach in teaching.

Keywords: Reflection, Extensive Reading, Critical Incident, Reading level and comfort zones

Why a reflection in an Extensive Reading course?

Oftentimes, teachers found themselves in a situation where they need to teach a brand new course whose nature is unlike the courses they have taught in the past. For me, that situation happened when I was assigned to teach an Extensive Reading course in an English Teaching Education (ETE) department in a private university in Indonesia. The Extensive Reading (hereafter, ER) course is given for first year students. Although the name remains the same, approach-wise the course has evolved from teaching reading intensively to extensively. The intensive-approach of the course aimed to explore students' reading accuracy of a passage. Students' responses to the reading text were evaluated by their abilities to accurately answer various types of questions (E.g. true or false, multiple-choice items, and matching). In 2005, the ER course underwent a major content revision to make it more aligned with Day (2003) top four ER principles. Those principles are:

(1) The reading material is easy;
(2) A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available;
(3) Learners choose what they want to read; and
(4) Learners read as much as possible.

I have had the opportunity to teach the ER course with an intensive reading orientation but never had the opportunity to teach the new ER course until now.

One of the biggest challenges in teaching ER was the changing role of teachers: from an evaluator of student reading accuracy to an advocate and a facilitator of reading. When teaching reading intensively, teachers are positioned as the guardian of knowledge, or "evaluators" (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 166). When I taught the course, my preparation consisted of finding the correct answers of a set of comprehension questions by closely and accurately reading the text to gain a somewhat thorough and detail understanding. In the classroom, my reading role was more of an evaluator of students' responses and guiding them to find the 'correct' answers. By contrast, in the ER course, the teacher is expected to be a reading guide, an advocate and a resource person (Day and Bamford, 1998); roles that I haven't yet had experiences prior to teaching the present ER course.

The changing role that I needed to take in the ER course has led me to seek a lens through which I can see if students have indeed benefited from the ER experience. This is particularly important because for the next academic year, I will be assigned to course-design and teach an ER class for weaker students in the department. One approach that I deem appropriate to serve such a purpose is narrative reflective practice. Although to date there is no precise and agreed definition on narrative reflective practice, in this paper, I would use the term narrative reflective practice as noted by Farrell (2012). Teachers conduct a narrative reflective practice when they systematically and selectively tell pedagogical stories about their teaching and student learning and subject those stories to reflection. By doing so, Farrell (2012) believes, teachers can obtain a new insight of themselves as language teachers as well as their teaching.

Teacher narrative reflection can be mediated through various tools: diaries, interviews, portfolios, and peer observation, to name a few. While considering these different narrative tools, I found that narrative reflection through critical incidents would better serve my purpose. By critically analyzing critical incidents concerning students' reading level, I attempt to reflect on Day and Bamford's top four ER principles that were used to guide the course design of the ER course. The investigation into critical incidents is carried out in this study from the point of view of the classroom teacher

anchored in teacher journal entries, student reflective narratives, and portfolios. It also aims to promote a classroom teacher reflection. More specifically it attempts to address the following research question: To what extent does my narrative reflection on critical incidents of teaching high and teaching low contributes to new understanding of Day and Bamford's ER principles? The critical incidents of teaching high and teaching low were chosen to provide a somewhat balanced perspective of the ER teaching experience.

Theoretical framework of critical incident

One tool for teacher reflection that has recently gained momentum is critical incidents (Richards and Farrell, 2005). Critical incidents can be defined in a number of ways. Richards and Farrell (2005) define a critical incident as "an unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during a lesson and that serves to trigger insights about some aspect of teaching and learning" (p.113). For Brookfield, critical incidents are any incidents that are "vividly remembered" (Brookfield, 1990, p.84 in Farrell, 2013, p. 81) inside or outside a classroom and also throughout a teacher's career. For Measor (2005) critical incidents are "key events in the individuals' life and around which pivotal decisions revolve" (p. 63). Measor further explained that these events provoke the individual to select a particular course of action that leads to a particular decision. Inspired by these definitions, in the present paper I see a critical incident as any unexpected event that occurs inside the classroom that trigger new insights and understanding of the ER principles.

At present, studies related to teacher reflection through critical incidents are relatively limited. Perhaps it is safe to say that Farrell is one of the recent pioneers who is keen in encouraging the use of critical incidents as a reflective tool in second language teacher education program. Farrell (2013) studied one ESL teacher's construction of a critical incident of the negative feedback she received from a student in a course entitled Socio-cultural Influences on Teaching English as a Second Language in Canada. By deconstructing the critical incident using McCabe's (2002) framework, Farrell was able to show how such a typical incident (receiving negative feedback from a student) can become critical to that particular teacher. Through the analysis, we can see how the teacher coped with the negative feedback; an insight that otherwise would not be possible without such analysis.

In another study, Farrell (2008) studied eighteen trainee teachers in an English language teacher education course in Singapore reflecting on critical incidents occurring while they were teaching. He found that critical

incidents were highly personal which means an incident critical for one trainee might not be critical for another. However, despite the personalized nature of critical incidents, there were incidents that are universally critical for many. Many of these teachers reported that their critical incidents were related to the ways of dealing with students' low language proficiency levels. Another important finding from the study is the fact that many trainees found it easier to identify negative critical incidents rather than the positive ones.

In studying the critical incidents collected from 60 female students through questionnaires and interviews, Khandelwal (2009) sought to identify six components of teaching behaviors that differentiate excellent and very poor performance of undergraduate college teachers in India. Those six components were: rapport with the students, course preparation and delivery, encouragement, fairness, spending time with students outside of class, and control. By eliciting these categories through studying the critical incidents elicited through questionnaires and follow-up interviews, Khandelwal argued that he was able to not only merely knowing the characteristics contributing to effective teaching but also able to illustrate how those characteristics were enacted in the classroom.

The studies cited here have one thing in common: they are all examining the critical incidents produced by other persons (E.g. teachers, trainers, students) other than themselves. Although analyzing critical incidents of other persons will ensure greater objectivity, there are times when teachers are unwilling to disclose certain types of incidents with others for fear of being judged incompetent or unprepared. Canagarajah notes the self is a "rich repository of experiences and perspectives" (2012, p. 260) and this might not be easily accessible when others represent it. Therefore, through this narrative practice, I aim to explore how critical incidents in my own teaching have informed ER instructional practices.

Research methodology

In this study, individual interviews were conducted with Indonesian English teachers as a means of gathering data concerning how the teacher participants conceptualized their teacher identity formation whilst their participation in a US graduate program. The major question guiding the study was: How did the three Indonesian teachers negotiate their teacher identities as they participated in a US graduate program?   Although semidirected, the interview questions were open-ended to elicit a richer set of responses and allow teachers more freedom to explore personal struggles (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The interviews in this study were designed to explore participants' perspectives and responses to factors affecting the

construction of their teacher identities by focusing on three areas: (a) their perceptions of what constituted Indonesian teachers; (b) their academic and cultural adaptation in the academic community; and (c) their visions upon returning to Indonesia.

The teachers who participated in this study were recruited through contacts with mutual friends. Participants were three Indonesian teachers in their mid twenties to mid thirties with teacher experiences ranging from two to five years. They taught English in universities located in different parts of Indonesia. The interviews presented here are part of a larger study that included interviews with twelve Asian English teachers over the course of eight months. During this time, I had frequent informal conversations with the teachers and conducted three one-hour formal interview with each participant at the school site. Each interview was audiotaped and then transcribed for analysis. The participant statements from transcripts were then coded according to the previously mentioned categories and analyzed for recurring patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis included an examination of expressed attitudes, contradictions, and conceptualizations concerning key issues related to their teacher identities. It would be impractical to include all the information obtained from the interviews in this article. I have selected several typical examples of the responses to illustrate the participants' identity construction.

Current Study

The context and research design

The ER course is a stand-alone-course for beginning students at the ETE department . It is three-hour per week and runs for 14 weeks. When I was teaching the course, there were 30 students in the class. There were a total of four ER classes with four different teachers. The course coordinator had taught the course several times, the rest, including me, was a novice. The coordinator designed the course outline, assessment, and provided the classroom materials although I sometimes added additional materials and tailored the classroom activities according to the condition of the class. Each week there was a coordination meeting where we discussed the class agenda and shared students' responses to the previous ER activities.

The Pedagogical Orientation of the Course

To me, the essence of ER approach is cultivating pleasure reading with the belief that when students discover the pleasure of reading, it will likely lead into a lifelong reading habit (Cher, 2011). As mentioned at the

beginning of the paper, the course was designed to meet Day and Bamford (1998) top four ER principles: 1. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available; 2. Learners choose what they want to read; 3. Learners read as much as possible; and 4. Students read easy materials. To meet the 1st and 2nd principles, students were directed to the university library or on-line ER resources to choose the graded readers. Every week they needed to fill in a reading log where they set a reading target and recorded daily reading time. To facilitate the 3rd principle, students were encouraged to read as much as possible. Activties such as Best Reader of the Week was introduced to encourage students to read more.

Several activities were designed to meet the 4th principle 'Students read easy materials.' For Day and Bamford, easy materials here mean materials where students can read comfortably without opening a dictionary. In other words, to experience pleasure reading, students need to read within their comfort zones. A comfort zone here means "the range of materials that can be read easily and with confidence" (Day and Bamford, 1998, p.92). Student comfort zone is pitched at i-1 (i minus 1); 'i' being student current reading level. By reading within their comfort zones, Day and Bamford believed students will be more comfortable reading since it removes major stumbling blocks in reading such as difficult words and continually opening a dictionary. They further hypothesized that materials that was once beyond student reading level gradually becomes i-1 as student comfort zone expands. Eventually, student comfort zone will 'ladder up' (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 92) illustrating students' "developing linguistic and reading competence" (p.92). On the affective dimension, reading at student comfort level would increase student confident level in reading books in English.

Due to the significant concepts of reading level and comfort zone, I started the class by introducing students to the concept of reading level. I used the activity from 'Finding your level' by Schmidt (2004, p. 31). In the activity, students were asked to read texts from level 3, 4, 5, and 6 taken from Lit2Go (http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/). Texts at level 1 and 2 were not provided by the coordinator because she assumed those texts were too easy for the students. In the activity, students needed to circle or underline unknown words or words that they could not guess the meaning from the context. According to Schmidt, students can read with comfort when there are no more than two unknown words in a page. Table 1 below shows the distribution of student current reading level based on the activity:

Table 1
Student Reading Levels

Reading level	Number of students	Percentage
1 or 2	5	19.23%
3	18	69.23%
4	3	11.54%
5	1	3.85%
6	0	0

After conducting the activity, I realized we should have made available level 1 and 2 reading materials. Five students admitted level 3 were difficult for them. Table 2 below gives an estimation of student comfort zone:

Table 2
Student (Reading) Comfort Zone

Comfort Zone	Number of students	Percentage
1	5	19.23%
2	18	69.23%
3	3	11.54
4	1	3.85%

Based on Table 2, the majority of student comfort zone (88.46%) were at level 1 and 2. Following Day and Bamford's suggestion, I encouraged students to start reading a book within their comfort zones so that they could fully benefited from the ER class.

Findings

Identifying a critical incident

To my surprise, when asked to report their reading experiences in the following week, a striking pattern emerges from the discussion: many students read beyond their comfort zones. In fact, 71.43% of the students read one level above their current reading level. Only 28.54% read within their comfort zone. Table 3 below illustrates the distribution of the reading levels in the first week:

Table 3
Student Reading Levels at week 2

Reading level	Number of students	Percentage
1	1	7.14%
2	4	21.4%
3	16	64.29%
4	2	7.14%

A relatively similar pattern was found in week 3. There were a total of 75.11% students who read at level 3 (46.88%) and above level 3 (28.23%):

Table 4
Student Reading Levels at week 3

Reading level	Number of students	Percentage
1	1	3.13%
2	7	21.88%
3	15	46.88%
4	6	18.8%
5	2	6.3%
6	1	3.13%

One student who read way beyond their comfort zones is Adi (a pseudonym). Based on the 'finding your level' activity in week 1, his reading level was at level 3. Following Day and Bamford's hypothesis, his comfort zone should be one level lower than his current reading level, which is level 2 (his comfort zone). In week 3, he started to read two books: one at level 2 (*Mr.Bean)* and another at level 6 (*Memoirs of a Geisha*). When I asked why he chose a book from level 6, Adi responded that he was intrigued by the title of the book. After reading the summary, he became even more interested in it. When I asked if the book was hard, he admitted that the book was very hard for him and he needed to open his dictionary often but he did finish reading it. His effort was rewarded because that week he was nominated as one of the best readers of the week and he was ecstatic. He wrote in his reflection: "I became the best reader I don't realized. All my friends chose me. I felt so happy and I started to realize … Extensive Reading class was a wonderful class" (Adi, Reflection).

It seems Adi's level-jumping and nomination as the best reader of the week inspired many other students. If in week 3 only Adi read way beyond his comfort zones, in week 4, I found more students read beyond their comfort zones. One of them was Kristin. She shared that in week 4, she read a book from level 6 although her comfort zone was actually at level 3. In week 5, she went back to level 5. In the following week, she read at level 3. In her portfolio, she wrote that the reason why her reading selection was not consistently graded was because she chose books based on interest rather than level.

Similar to Kristin, Adeo's selection of books was not consistently graded. In week 2 and 3, he tried to read in his comfort zone but then, in week 4, he jumped the level; reading a book at level 6. When I asked why he decided to jump levels, he stated that he wanted to challenge himself. Besides, he was intrigued by Adi's book, *Memoirs of Geisha*. In the portfolio, he admitted reading a book (*Memoirs of Geisha*, level 6) beyond his comfort zone was hard. In every page of the book, he came across more than 3 difficult words. Therefore, he needed to open his dictionary frequently. But he felt the effort was rewarded because in the following week, when he read a book from level 5 (*Sugar Glider*), he only found 1 difficult word per page. It was then that he felt a sense of achievement and committed to read beyond his comfort zone.

At the end of an ER class, Day and Bamford hypothesized that when reading within their comfort zones, students' reading fluency will significantly increase. At the beginning of the class, I consciously did not assign a higher grade for students who were able to reach level 6 (the highest level), although I did say that I expected them to ladder up. Table 5 below illustrates the students reading level at the end of the ER class.

Table 5
Student Reading Levels at the end of ER class

Reading level	Number of students	Percentage
6	18	56.25%
5	2	15.63%
4	4	12.5%
3	5	15.63
2	2	6.25%
1	1	3.13%

Although students did not consistently ladder up, at the end of the ER class, I felt happy because more than half (56.25%) read at level 6. What is worth noting, six students read more than one book; one even read 4 books in a week for level 3, 4, 5, and 6. Two students read two books at level 6. There is certainly no doubt that all the students read more after the ER class started than before as the following Table 6 indicates:

Table 6
Number of books students read at the end of ER class

Number of books	Number of students
8-12	5
13-17	8
18-22	6
$\geq$	2

Based on Table 6, each student read an average of 13 books so roughly about one book per week since the class started. At the end of the program, one student, Joy, read an impressive number of 45 books.

Understanding reasons behind the critical incident

Realizing that there were students who read beyond their comfort zones as early as week 3, I faced a dilemma. On one hand, I felt students need to read very easy materials, suggested by the ER principles, to experience pleasure reading and also to get the most language learning benefits from the ER. Therefore, I felt the need to 'fix' students inconsistency in selecting graded readers, or else the ER program might not be successful. I categorized this as my 'teaching low,' that is, "a specific classroom incident that was immediately problematic and perplexing" (Richard and Farell, 2005, p. 115) because their books were not graded according to their developing comfort zones. On the other hand, I felt excited that there were students (see Table 1) who read way beyond their comfort zones (at level 4, 5, and 6). This was my teaching high (Farrell and Richards, 2005, p. 115) because of their determination to finish the book even though the reading process became more arduous.

There were four primary reasons that might contribute to students' inconsistency in reading levels. First, is student's interests. From student portfolio, many students wrote that they selected books based on interest rather than reading level. When asked to reflect on the graph illustrating her reading level development in the portfolio, Yani (a pseudonym) wrote:

> *It [the graph] did not steadily increase because I pick books not based on the levels but themes […] in week 9, I read books from level 6 because that book [Les Miserables] is my favorite one and I have watched the movie so even though it is from level 6 I read it anyway.*

A somewhat similar comment was found in Sari's portfolio:

> *Why I decided to read a lower level book [than my current reading level]? …it is really interesting, because I was curious about the name Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I used to hear [them in] song lyrics … When I was at the library, I spotted those names as the title of a book. I took the book right away and decided to read it for the week although I knew it would ruin my consistency in reading level. But I was curious of the book.*

This might also indicate that lower-level graded readers might not be as interesting as the higher level ones.

From Yani's and Sari's comments above, we come to the second reason, which is topic-familiarity. Here, students picked books because they were already familiar either with the title and/or the other version of the story. Yani decided to read *Les Miserables*, way beyond her current reading level, because she enjoyed the motion-picture version of the book. Sari picked *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, with a reading level lower than her current reading level, because she was familiar with the title through song lyrics and wondered what the story was about. This also might indicate that topic-familiarity can contribute to comprehensibility.

The third reason would be variability with regards to content and title. For students to be able to comfortably and consistently ladder up in their reading levels, there needs to be a sufficient number of graded readers available. Therefore, I decided to visit the library and checked out the graded readers collection. I found that although the university held a good collection of graded readers, the number was not spread evenly by levels. Titles were only available in one level and not another. This made me wonder of the necessity to have all titles in as many different levels as possible so that students' choice was not constrained by levels. But, of course, having such a collection would not be cost-efficient, which I believe, the department would not have at the moment.

Last but not least was class readers; a teacher-selected book for the whole class to read. In week 7, the coordinator designed an activity where the classroom teacher needed to choose a class book. Students, then, needed to choose a book that was similar to (with regard to theme, ending, setting,

character characteristics and etc.) the class reader. For the class reader, I chose the book *Woman of Iron* from level 4 because I assumed it would be the level most students were comfortably reading. This activity was followed up by a group reader, where students needed to work in a group of 5 and read the same book together. Then, each group member needed to select and read a book similar to the group reader. What I did not realize at that time was the effect of the activities on the consistency of students' reading level until I read Esy's reflection in the portfolio:

> *From the beginning I tried to read consistently. I could raise the level gradually, but at the seventh week my lecturer instructed me to read The Woman of Iron from level 4. It means that I read a lower level. Not only that, I also read books from level 5 and 3 last week. I read Sons and Lovers (level 5) because it was a must for a group assignment [group reader] which all of the members read the same book on the same level and I also read Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Esy, Portfolio).*

When reading Esy's reflection, I realized that if teachers were to support students' to read consistently within their comfort zones, they need to think of ER activities that were in line with that. Although this, of course, is difficult, if not impossible, considering students' comfort zones in the classroom are not equally similar.

Addressing the critical incident

At the beginning when I realized students' selection of books was not graded, I did steer the students back into reading books within their comfort levels. However, when I learned that some students continued to select books inconsistently, I decided not to intervene with their choice. After all, the gist of ER is students' autonomy in choosing the book they like to read. Even though their selection of books was not neatly laddering up as suggested by Day and Bamford, they become a more confident English reader and develop more positive attitudes toward reading as indicated by their portfolio and reflection.

Discussion

When embarking on the project, I thought selecting critical incidents constituting a teaching low and teaching high, if not easy, would not necessarily be difficult. I could not be more wrong. First, I have to confront myself with the uneasiness of being vulnerable when disclosing a teaching

low. Realizing that several students read way beyond their comfort zones as early as week 3 was definitely perplexing and problematic. There were times when I felt like a failure because students were not following my instruction when selecting books and I did not know why their selection of books were not increasingly graded based on their developing comfort zones. Second is the difficulty of pinpointing a teaching high. Indeed, although somewhat discomforting, identifying a teaching low was much easier than a teaching high. This is consistent with findings by Farrell (2008) and Francis (1995) who also discovered that it was easier for teacher-trainees to identify negative teaching incidents.

Writing this piece also made me realize that identifying a teaching high and low was more of a journey of discovery. At the beginning of writing this piece, I was thinking to simply list a teaching high and low but then, through the process I realized that my teaching high and low were associated to one area, students' reading level because this was the one area that 'disturbed' me throughout the course, and thus, decided to deconstruct it to gain more understanding. Only after deconstructing the critical incident, did I come to understand that some students' selection of books was definitely not random as I initially thought. Analyzing critical incidents have created a fertile space where I was provided with an opportunity to explore all factors affecting students' seemingly inconsistent selection of books. By engaging in self-reflective narrative, I was made aware how real practices could conflict with expectations formed by the ER theories.

My understanding of teaching high was also changing during reflecting on the critical incidents. Initially I was looking for incidents that correspond to Day and Bamford's expectation for teaching high. Only after recalling the detail of the incidents; reading and rereading students' portfolio, reflection and my own teaching diaries, I came to the conclusion that Day and Bamford's ER principles could not be applied unmodified. Canagarah (2012) argues that "no method or teaching philosophy can be mandated from outside. We appropriate the new methods in our own way and according to our traditions and our needs" (p. 265). Therefore, when utilizing a method, one must first consider all contextual factors for which the method is originated and intended (Razali, 1992). By engaging critical analysis reflection, I was able to consider all the contextual factors and viewed students' inconsistently reading habit more critically. Therefore, my teaching high shifted from aiming to replicate Day and Bamford ER principles to successful appropriation of the principles. Although the route my students took in the ER class might not be similar to those envision by Day and Bamford, at the end of the program I learned that students read much more than before they started the program. Their confidence levels also increased because they were able to finish a book in English. Therefore,

I argue that critical incidents provides a critical lens for the process of knowledge appropriation of Western-originated theories in local classrooms. Critical incident reflection provides an insider perspective to the struggle and process of appropriation of Western theories in local classrooms.

One of the critiques of teachers self-reflecting on their own teaching practices, as pointed out by Khandelwal (2009) is the danger of over-elaboration of incidents and the issues of reliability, subjectivity and interpretation. I did wonder if my critical incidents and my interpretations made sense, if my reflections were appropriately in depth and would resonate with other readers. Therefore I sent this piece to several critical friends asking for feedback before submitting it as a final version. Although the writing was self-reflective in nature, it is a product of intertextuality even though I ultimately was the one who made the final decision of which feedback to include and exclude.

Closing Remarks

This study gives some insights into teacher reflection by means of critical incidents. Although not without its problems, this form of reflection gave me further insight into the teaching of ER. By reflecting through critical incidents, I was able to develop more critical relationship between ER principles and my teaching context and come to an understanding that students' developing comfort zones were not linear as I initially predicted and their book selection were informed not only by their comfort zones but issues of interest, familiarity, availability, and teacher-designed classroom activities. Even though generalization of this narrative study may be problematic, language teachers may learn much about the importance of reflecting on their own classroom particularly in contextualizing pedagogical theories to their local context. I also hope that this narrative reflection can act as a lens in enabling other teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and therefore, contributing to the increasing awareness of the diversity and local appropriation of Western theories.

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