

## **“From Teacher-Centered to Students-Centered to Collaborative Learning” Illuminating My Teacher Knowledge through Narrative Inquiry**

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### ***Abstract***

Teacher knowledge refers to the ways teachers know themselves and their professional work situations. This paper applies the narrative inquiry method to illuminate my own teacher knowledge. Through each vignette told in this paper, I will inquire into what I know and feel about English teaching-learning process and illuminate my teacher knowledge by referring to what education experts say regarding particular concepts of English teaching-learning. My students and I will have greater chance to share the values behind the students-centered classroom interaction, the Internet-based learning, or other kind of learning to follow in the future when ‘we’, not only ‘I’ redefine education practices at schools

**Keywords:** *Narrative Inquiry, Teacher Knowledge, Vignette*

### ***Abstrak***

Pengetahuan seorang guru berkenaan dengan bagaimana mereka memahami diri mereka sendiri dan keadaan yang berhubungan dengan pekerjaan mereka secara profesional. Penelitian ini menerapkan metode naratif inquiri untuk menambah pengetahuan keguruan saya secara pribadi. Melalui setiap penggambaran yang ditampilkan dalam penelitian ini, saya bermaksud memperdalam mengenai apa yang saya ketahui dan apa yang saya rasakan mengenai proses pembelajaran serta memperkaya pengetahuan mengajar saya berdasarkan beberapa dalil dari para ahli pendidikan yang berhubungan dengan beberapa konsep pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris. Saya dan para mahasiswa saya pun akan memperoleh lebih banyak kesempatan untuk menyampaikan nilai-nilai yang diperoleh dibalik interaksi kelas yang berpusat pada peserta didik, pembelajaran berdasarkan internet, ataupun

berbagai pembelajaran lain nantinya, dimana istilah 'kita', sebagai ganti untuk istilah 'saya' dapat diterapkan dalam pelaksanaan proses pendidikan di sekolah.

**Kata Kunci:** *Pendekatan Naratif Inkuiri, Pengetahuan Mengajar, Sketsa*

## **Introduction**

There is still a strong dispute on whether the content knowledge or the pedagogical knowledge is the most important attribute of a quality teacher. A research done by Kukla-acevedo proves that both are equally important in effective teaching (2009). As an English teacher who is not a graduate of an English teacher college, I often find it very challenging to prove for myself that I am able to teach. I read books and research reports on pedagogical theory and practices and I like to apply some recommendations on effective teaching provided by educational experts in my own classroom. Nevertheless, I never find myself as a confident teacher who feels all right with all that have happened in the classroom. I feel like there is always a gap between realities in my classroom and the ideal teaching practices as described in the books and research reports. Xu and Connely argue that teachers' knowledge is more critical than knowledge-for-teachers (2009, p. 223). Bearing in mind that content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge as knowledge-for-teachers, I believe it is time for me to know about my own teacher knowledge in order to gain more confidence in teaching. By definition, teacher knowledge is "a narrative construct which references the totality of a person's personal practical knowledge gained from formal and informal educational experience" (Xu & Connelly 2009, p. 221). Teacher knowledge refers to the ways teachers know themselves and their professional work situations. This paper applies the narrative inquiry method to illuminate my own teacher knowledge. The narrative inquiry itself is adopted here because through

thinking narratively, I can see everything that I experienced as happening in particular time and place and so I see each experience in sequential flow and that “inquiry itself is a narrative process”(Xu & Connelly 2009, p. 223). On the following are vignettes narrating my experiences in learning English, in becoming a novice teacher-educator, in joining the 6 months International In-service Teacher Certification organized by Cambridge University in Bali, in lessening the gap between the ideals and the realities of teaching English in my own classrooms, in taking leaves from teaching routines while pursuing a master degree on Educational Leadership and Management at La Trobe University, Australia. In each vignette, I will inquire into what I know and feel about English teaching-learning process and illuminate my teacher knowledge by referring to what education experts say regarding particular concepts of English teaching-learning.

### **My English learning**

*I had learnt English for six years prior to my study at the university. In my school times, students learnt English through classroom learning activities highly controlled by the teachers. Students were therefore so dependent on the classroom learning pace. I learnt English in ways very common to any English teaching in schools at that time, by focusing on the structures of discrete English, generally presented from the simple to complex structures, then to compare the structures to their counterparts in **bahasa** and used this knowledge to translate texts, principally designed for school usages, from English into **bahasa** or vice versa. Reading skill and writing skill were emphasized than the speaking and listening skills since students would unlikely use their English for other purposes than the academic purpose. Students' performance in English was measured from their test results which*

*items were mostly close ended questions and multiple choices.*

*I was accepted at the Department of English Literature at the Faculty of Letters of the Gadjah Mada university in 1993 as I was one among the 28 out of 10.600 applicants passing the very competitive selection test to the Department. My performance in English was above the average English performance of senior high-school students because the selection test itself was designed to qualify very limited top achiever to major in English Literature, where students would very likely study different kind of English, the more complex and extraordinary English as used in literary works. Nevertheless, in the university, I learnt English much in the same traditions of English teaching-learning where students tried to gain as many advantages as possible from classroom activities highly controlled by teachers. The difference was that students were exposed to more examples of English usages outside the academic world. Through my extensive readings on the prescribed English novels, poems, dramas, and short stories, and lecture sessions on appreciating and analysing meticulous literary works I was involved in learning English as the inseparable part of cultures and values of the English natives. I might have instilled some values of the western people, such as egalitarianism and critical thinking, even though the classroom activities might not be designed to invoke those values.*

The vignette above shows that the prevalent view of teaching adjoining my learning English is that teachers believe students will learn nothing unless teachers make effort to teach them what to learn therefore the classroom activities are so structured (Raz 1982, p. 110). The rampant learning styles adopted by students in my school time is what so called as *surface learning* where students understand and remember knowledge already exist as it is provided by teachers, and absorb new information that do not change

students engrained thinking process (Offir et al. 2008, p. 1175)

From the vignette of my learning English above, I like to accentuate on three things as follow.

1. I tagged along similar path of English learning like other students in Indonesia did 6 six years of formal classroom sessions with learning activities highly controlled by teachers except that I also joined English course outside school that provided less controlled learning activities.
2. At the university, I studied English as both a means of communication and expressions of cultures and values.
3. To certain degree, I was integrating myself to the values and cultures of English native speakers. It would be really hard for me to look into the worth of any literary works in particular community if I failed to understand the values and cultures of that community.

The fact that I also joined English course outside school may become one of the reasons why I managed to always score higher than the average. This course gave me additional learning activities that other students could not have in their formal education. Lier (1996, p. 43) says to guarantee improvement in language learning students must occupy their minds with that language between lessons as well as in lessons. My involvement in the course was also an indicator of my having higher motivation to learn English that helped me much in my learning (Bernaus & Gardner 2008). However, there is also another explanation for this. Perhaps I was one of what Jeffrey calls as *high assessment focus students* or students who win the games of learning by following exactly all rules prescribed by teachers (2009, p. 199).

*High assessment focus students* are the successful ones in surface learning.

My learning English at the university makes me believe that discussion on English structures must not serve as the most important section in textbooks or classroom activities since as expressions of cultures, English usage is very dependent on the users. I know that the choices for the use of particular forms or structures of English do not depend merely on the information content, time of events, etc but also on the purposes, identities, and social variables of the users (McConachy 2009, p. 117). My attitude toward teaching-learning English has also changed through my experience studying in the faculty of English literature. I preferred to look at the purposes of someone using particular chunk of English rather than the structures of that discrete English. Literary persons are very skilful in their choices of language and so if I am to teach English I believe I will let my students to study variety of possible pieces of English to achieve the users' purposes to communicate in English. This is in line to what Cadman (2008, p. 30) says that teachers' attitude and priority influence the teaching learning process.

### **Being a novice English teacher-educator**

*It was indeed startling, or other might look at it as silly, for me to get the position as teacher-educator as I was not a graduate of a teacher- college. Soon as I got the position, I knew that I had chosen the right profession. My father and mother were teachers and I felt like I was born to be a teacher too. I was impressed with the value of egalitarianism shared by English spoken communities as described in the literary works that on my first day teaching, I came to the class earlier hoping that students could see me as different teacher since other teachers generally came to class only after all students sat in the class and showed readiness for their sessions. That first thing I did in my*

*first teaching and my other behaviours to show that I liked to be treated more as a friend for their learning rather than as a teacher having higher authority in classroom activities did not work as what I expected. Very few students felt quite at ease with this changing value in my classroom. Consequently, the teaching-learning process in my classroom went in the same direction taken by other classrooms, where learning was still very dependent on teachers' control and performance. Even though, I taught them more on the usage of English than on its structures, I did not really encourage my students to challenge the curriculum that emphasized on the teaching of English structures. Indeed, by playing a role as knowledge provider, I felt more secure. I felt like I was on the stage showing off my skills, my English, to compensate for my lacks of pedagogical knowledge. Besides, I believed most of my students were still lacks of content knowledge and my role as knowledge provider would boost up their English mastery. Anyway, they could learn how to teach later when people put trust on their English mastery, just like what had happened to me.*

The content knowledge or the pedagogical knowledge influences on teachers' performances were not parts of the considerations for appointing me as teaching staff at STAIN Salatiga. My being alumni of a reputable English Department of Gadjah Mada University plainly convinced the selection committee that I would be able to fulfil my jobs. Albeit no complaints from my students so far, I did face some problems of teaching due to my lack of prior knowledge and experiences on pedagogical practices.

It was told in the vignette that I was carried away with the dominant local cultures that put me as the master in the classroom, instead of me instilling new values to my classroom. This diminished my initial intention to promote new learning through new teacher-students relationship which was more

egalitarian. According to Sowden, non-native English teacher often face obstacles for implementing particular teaching methodologies when students perceived that there are some imported values in the methodologies (2007, p. 304) this is perhaps a reason why not all my students feel secure with my new approach in our interaction. Regarding the array of experiences that students have at school in a whole, students may not remember all what their teachers taught but they will very likely not forget how they are treated (Nguyen 2009, p. 655). While other teachers are still keeping the hierarchy, it will be hard for students to treat me differently so as to lessen the power distance between me and my students. I was also unable to share the egalitarian value because I enjoyed my role as knowledge provider, which automatically positions my students as the ones need the learning, not me. Bernaus and Gardner (2008, p. 399) say teachers may apply any teaching strategy they think as of value for students but students have to perceived it as such in order for this strategy to be effective. Furthermore, since the prevailing cultures in my classroom still inhibit the desirable situations of my planned changes, the possibility for me to fail in implementing my plan is bigger (Wang & Cheng 2005, p. 20).

### **Joining an international in-service English teacher certification**

*From March to August 2005 I joined The Cambridge International In-service English Teacher Certification organized by Indonesia- Australia Language Foundation Bali (IALF Bali). I expected that this training would focus on upgrading my teaching skills than my English skills because the committee has standardized the level of the participants' English proficiency through IELTS. This training really improved my teaching skills in many ways. I experienced teaching as well as observing many classroom practices that used variety of approaches, methods and techniques as offered by many*



*experts in English teaching in their publications and research. I knew the importance of real communications, authentic materials, and opportunities for students to engage in the tasks as active English users through conversations, discussion, or team works. I also developed the habit of careful planning for each lesson I would have by sequencing classroom activities and allocating the time for each activity to be done and ensuring students talking time to be much higher than my talking time so students would have more chances to use their English.*

From the training, I developed more skills in teaching English and I learnt the new trends in teaching English called as student-centered education, which put more weight on active learning experiences than on lectures, on critical thinking and open ended questions than on memorization and close ended questions, on simulations and role plays than on drills and imitating, and on self-paced or team-based learning than on teacher-control learning and competition-based learning (Felder and Brent 1996 in Isikoglu et al. 2009, p. 351). This training put me to new learning situation where students were the center of the teaching- learning process as this training was delivered this way, for example by letting the trainees do peer-assessment and self-assessment through peer- observation and self-reflection on their microteaching practices. This also changed my belief and attitude to teaching-learning. Attitude and belief are dynamic and situated and they change as product of new situational experience (Ellis 2008, p. 23).

### **Lessening the gap between the Ideals and the Realities of Teaching**

#### **English in my own classrooms**

*The International certificate for teaching English from Cambridge University had boosted my self-confidence to teach even more. I had very*

*little doubt on my ability to be an effective teacher-educator since I had equipped myself with satisfactory content knowledge of English, adequate pedagogical knowledge and a belief that I had chosen the right profession. I was contented with my efforts to practice what I had learnt in the training until the time when I had to choose once again on which one to follow, my lesson plans or my classroom dynamic. Very often I could not implement my lesson plans because my students were so distinct in their abilities and learning styles that doing all the planned activities in my lesson plans could let some students gain more advantages in learning and make others struggle to keep up with the pace of learning. My purpose to use a well-planned lesson to promote a more students- centred approach to learning English came to no avail because some students were still unable to be more responsible with their learning. For examples, lively discussion was still hard to occur because weak students would rather say nothing rather than to be seen as poor students who always made mistake because they were accustomed to classroom practice that avoids mistakes whatsoever.*

Dardjowijoyo argues that it is indeed hard for teachers in Indonesia to make students talk because ‘to talk’ can mean ‘to lessen’ teachers’ authority (2001, p. 315). Team works and peer conversations could not provide same chances for all students to learn because strong students would be made dominant by the shared value that the more knowledgeable people were in the higher level of the social hierarchy and therefore had the authority to control the group. Indeed, my gradual shift of roles from a depositor of knowledge to a facilitator of knowledge gaining through involving students in classroom decision making and frequent peer teaching was taken by many students as a form of aversion to share my knowledge with them. My changing classroom practices are often blocked by the sociocultural values in Indonesia where

teachers are considered as the fountain of knowledge that pour into students' mind all that students need to study and students deposit all without reserve (Lewis 1997, p. 14). I cannot neglect both the discrepancies between the ideals and the realities of teaching English in my own classrooms or the discrepancies between my personal and my students' collective view of learning in order to create changes in learning and to address them one by one can cause minimum impact (Jeffrey 2009, p. 195)

### **Pursuing a further study at La Trobe University, Australia**

*I was taking two years leave from doing my teaching jobs when I got an Australian Partnership Scholarship (APS) to study at La Trobe University Melbourne from July 2007 to July 2009. I was enrolled at a Master's program of Educational Leadership and Management. Here, I found very different practices of education than what I had experienced while I was studying at Gadjah Mada University. I had more choices of courses to take based on my own preferences. I needed to finish 12 courses in all in two years and only six of them were compulsory while in Gadjah Mada, I had to finish 16 compulsory courses out of 18 total courses. At La Trobe, I could access the on-line library resources in 24 hours and there was a huge amount of electronic journals and books and links to multiple databases that I could always count whenever I had to do research to complete the tasks, which generally required students to produce knowledge, by critically analysed theories and conceptions, and to relate them to students previous knowledge and local contexts, not merely preserved knowledge by doing exams. I was also given freedom to choose among variety of tasks that I would like to perform to measure the outcomes of my learning. There were lots of discussion in the classrooms and I could see that most students were ready to contribute to the discussion because lecturers had notified the various*

*questions to discuss and resources to help students do research on those questions from the beginning of the semester and all was done with the LMS (the learning management system), an online computer program that linked all students taking the same course and used for all members of the class to communicate and most importantly to share knowledge. Here, in Australia, I was not dependent on lecturers in my learning because lecturers themselves never wanted to control students learning and they served students well by becoming facilitator, motivator, and collaborator in students' learning through maximizing the use of library and the internet. On the Technology for Education course, I worked with 4 other students in online discussion facilitated by the Internet to complete a task. I did not even need to leave my home for the discussion. I also practiced creating my own web quest, an online program in which I build up learning resources available in the internet for the users to accomplish certain learning tasks.*

My learning at La Trobe is the reality of what I could only imagine before as the kind of learning fostered by students-centered education. I have never experienced or seen myself a classroom teaching-learning process where students really have autonomy and responsibility in their learning. I could only envision the learning activities promoted by students-centered education from the books. In my training as told previously, I could only apprehend half of the teaching-learning practices in students-centered education since I was trained as a teacher and my students were my fellow trainees so our classrooms were not real. Below are very noticeable things in my learning at La Trobe that sustain the description of student-centered education.

1. I have more freedom in choosing what to learn
2. I have more choices in doing tasks to measure my learning outcomes
3. I am able to learn on my own pace through the availability of huge learning resources and the facilitation of lecturers.

Thank to the pre-departure training that I took part in before leaving to Australia that I was not stunned by my real first experience as a student in the students-centered education. I could develop my autonomy in learning as required by this kind of education because I was made to take control in my own learning by lecturers' attitudes and facilitation. I was given all the opportunities to consult my learning problems with lecturers and they would do their best to address my learning needs, even though it was quite personal, like I needed to leave their classroom earlier as I was worried to take public transport late in the evening when the course was held in the evening, but they also remind me of my learning tasks during the weeks to come. According to Healey (2007, p. 384) taking the control in their own hands is the prerequisite for students' autonomy.

At La Trobe, I have even undergone a new kind of learning, which I have known very little thing about it from books I read before I came to Australia, a learning which is facilitated mostly by the Internet. In this new learning, I hit upon three features so dissimilar to my previous learning experiences. Those are:

1. The use of the Internet as more than just an educational tool because the Internet very often serves as provider of knowledge, a facilitator, organisator, and other roles that teacher commonly play in teacher- centered as well as students-centered education.

2. Learners are not united by the four walls of the classroom because they are taking the same course. They are united by the same interest in learning particular area of study with unlimited people around the world.
3. Students-teacher interactions do not occur at schools only. They can be anywhere but they can still interact for the sake of learning facilitated by the Internet.

I am so amazed with my learning experiences facilitated by the Internet. I feel like I have everything I possibly need to gain as many benefit as possible from my learning in Australia. I am very motivated to utilize various learning materials provided by the Internet such as videos, podcasts, journals, discussion forums, games, blogs, web quests, etc. to accelerate my learning. I agree entirely to list of advantages proposed by Egbert, Paulus, and Nakamichy (2002, p. 112) on the learning facilitated by the Internet, such as supported experiential learning, enabled individual, pair or team works, promoted exploratory and global learning, enhanced student achievement, availability of authentic materials, facilitation of greater interaction, individualized instruction and independence and increased motivation.

Regarding particularly to my experience involved in online discussion, I think I like it better than the face-to-face discussions. As a non-native English speakers, I sometimes feel doubtful whether I am articulate enough in expressing my opinions upon certain issues worrying that my classmates may not really apprehend what I am saying due to my pronunciation or wrong dictions. I do not feel this doubt in on line discussion because I can always check and recheck my sentences, without worrying my pronunciations, and I also have more time to provide data for my arguments. In their research, Coffin, North, and Martin (2009, p. 87) find that in online discussion students

select evidences more carefully, reticent students become more involved, and students have more time to think before replying. In on line discussion the present of lecturers can also be maintained in order not to interfere with students' autonomy. In my on line discussion told above, the lecturer just gave the starting questions to discuss but did not involve in the discussion, because she wanted us to take control of the discussion and responsible for the outcomes. This method is suggested by Arnold and Ducati (2006, p. 46) for teachers facilitating online discussion. The learning skills developed from learning activities facilitated by the Internet are various. The definition of literacy as one of the basic skills in learning includes more than just an ability to access information from written texts. Digital literacies involve other skills such as importing texts, dragging, dropping, editing, scanning and deciding what is important and what is not, and being able to process that information in the given time (Kinnane 2008, p. 2).

My learning activities at La Trobe University I believe are more adaptable cross-culturally than learning activities frequently mentioned in textbooks describing the students-centered education. I think many concepts in the students-centered education, such as autonomy, independence, self-assessment, and so on are easier to apprehend than to practice for many students at schools whose prevalent culture values are harmony, hierarchy, and indirectness. In the new learning facilitated by the Internet, the conceptions of collaboration, community of learning, and connectedness, may sound less threatening to students' from communal type of cultures as Asian students generally. The conception of learning community is indeed very fundamental in this new learning. The new learning is the practice of a new theory of learning called as *the connectivism theory*. Kop and Hill (2008, p. 1) argue that in the theory of connectivism knowledge is "actuated through the process of a

learner connecting to and feeding information into a learning community”. Kop and Hill (2008, p. 6) further argue knowledge is “situated within a community in which a ‘more knowledgeable other’ facilitates the move from the periphery to the centre of the community”. In connectivism, the conceptions of ‘transferring knowledge’ or ‘building knowledge’ are no longer the centre of discussion because learning activities are more like growing or developing ‘selves’ and ‘community’ (Kop & Hill 2008, p. 9). The recognition of ‘community of learning’ and ‘more knowledgeable other’ as basic elements of this new learning I think will give this new learning more values conforming to values in communal cultures therefore it will not create more cultural challenges for any type of cultures to adopt this new learning.

I am also enthusiast to think of what can I do more in my classroom after having this new learning facilitated by the Internet and being able to develop my web quest. I do not question on the benefits of implementing this new learning to my English teaching. Clarke and Bowe (2007, p. 19) claim that the far-reaching use of visuals, either still or moving, animations, sound effects, interactivity, and the text supported with voice over instructions are all very helpful for English as Second language students. Besides, students can always go back to their favourite sites of learning as many as they like and they can also have direct feedback on their performance when they are doing games, quizzes, or tests provided. The most anticipated problems in implementing this new learning in my work contexts are that first, we may not have good internet connection and second, that my students are not culturally prepared for this new learning. Egbert et al (2002, p. 112) warns teachers of these potential problems that prevent them from implementing the learning facilitated by technology. Those are:



1. Time pressures outside and during class
2. Lack of resources and materials
3. Insufficient guidelines, standards, and curricula
4. Lack of support for integrating computers
5. A clash between new and old technologies
6. Lack of leadership
7. Inadequate training and technical support

In order to be successful in a learning facilitated by the Internet, my students should first apprehend that this learning is different to their traditional learning in a sense that to compensate for the flexibility of time and place of this learning, being independence in their learning is a must (Felix 1998, p. 217). Rendering to the students' autonomy in a learning facilitated by the Internet, Healey (2007, p. 385) says to be autonomous students must know their learning goals, their preferred ways of learning, ways to be motivated, and they also need to develop learning community that enable the members achieve their goals in various ways and to be able to make decisions in learning as adults.

### **Connecting New Learning with Previous Knowledge**

It is obvious that I need to find a new way to cope with the learning situation in my own classroom to eventually see that my students treat me more like a friend in learning than a provider of knowledge and that they are autonomous in their learning so they will all take advantages of any classroom activities that are compromised to serve their learning needs. I have to restart my personal project to create a classroom interaction that is more students-centered. I have learnt from what I have done so far in my classroom that:

1. The initiative to shift from a teacher-centered to students-centered

approach was not shared by all students. It belonged to me and few strong students who took the shift as an opportunity to accelerate their learning.

2. My students were so diverse in their learning styles and abilities that blatantly following activities in lessons plan could favour some students learning styles and do unjust to the others’.
3. My open-mindedness to what happens in my classroom dynamics and to individual treat of my students can become very helpful for me to encourage students autonomy in their learning and to keep them secure with any changes necessary for the shift from a teacher-centered to students-centered classroom interaction.

Why do I think that my students will learn better when they are autonomous? Why do I feel cosy with the students-centered classroom interaction while many of my students felt threatened by it? Why cannot I just teach in the ways familiar to my students, the “chalk and talk” method? One answer satisfies all these questions. I have experienced my self this kind of learning. I learnt from many English literary works the value of egalitarianism, which I believe is one of the basic values in students-centered classroom interaction. I was trained how to practice students-centered education in my own teaching in an international training implementing the students-centered education and now I am studying in Australia, in which the students-centered education is the common approach and indeed there has been a shift to new learning as the advancement of the students-centered education and is facilitated by the Internet. I have the opportunity to constantly challenge my view of learning, to compare my traditional view of learning with my new learning. The key point is that I have undergone a situation where I keep connecting my previous knowledge on teaching-learning

practices with my new learning on teaching-learning practices and that this connecting process is personal.

## **Conclusion**

In order to have classroom situations in which I become a friend in learning not a sole provider of learning, students become autonomous and responsible for their own learning, and teaching-learning become a shared activity for people everywhere and anytime not limited to school building or school time, I know I have to ensure that all my students involve in personal activity to connect their previous knowledge with their new learning. My students and I will have greater chance to share the values behind the students-centered classroom interaction, the Internet- based learning, or other kind of learning to follow in the future when ‘we’, not only ‘I’ redefine education practices at schools and we have to redefine it through continuous collaborative learning.

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