Pre-service English teachers' reflective practice via online journaling during school-based teaching internship program at the time of Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the reflective practices of two pre-service English teachers (PSETs) during their school-based teaching practice and internship program at the time of Covid-19. The purpose of this research is to describe PSETs reflections during their online school-based teaching practicum. The data were collected by utilizing the research participants' journal writing as part of their e-portfolio projects which they kept during the teaching practicum. The collected data were analyzed thematically referring to Bain, Ballantyne, Packer & Mills, (1999). The research revealed four main thematic findings namely, Focus on Teaching, Focus on Self, Focus on Professional Issues, and Focus on Students or Class. Furthermore, the study also identified frequent sub-themes, such as General Teaching Issues (GTI), Specific Lessons or Incidents (SI), Own Teaching Approach (OTA), Relationship/Discussion with Supervising Teaching (RST), Teaching as Profession (TP), Professional Preparation (PP), Student /Class Behavior (SBC), Student /Class Characteristics (SCC). Overall, this research suggests that the use of online journaling helps to facilitate the reflective practices of prospective future English language teachers introspecting on a multitude of aspects of their teaching practicum/ internship program.
Keywords: online journaling; pre-service teachers; reflective practice

INTRODUCTION

During the emergency remote learning situation in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, it required pre-service teachers to embrace online learning while taking part in their school-based teaching practice. Most universities and schools had decided to eliminate all face-to-face classes and other learning activities and had agreed to move their learning activities online to help reduce the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Murphy, 2020). The pandemic also affected pre-service English teachers (PSTs) or student-teachers in dealing with their online teaching practice. The pandemic had demanded PSETs regarding their readiness to utilize technology for their remote internship and online teaching practice which similarly happen to many other educators who were obligated to effectively exploit tools for online and distance teaching-learning (Torrey & Whalen, 2020). In the midst of the bewilderment due to Covid-19, educators, teachers, practitioners, and students were forced to make sense of the situation while reflecting on their online curricular decision makings and practices. During this period, not only would quick response and mindful adjustment be valuable, but the act of reflecting on their undertaking would also be immensely helpful.

Reflective practice is an important skill for teaching professionals. It helps them to gain a deeper level of self-awareness regarding the character and influence of their performance, and in so doing facilitating their professional growth and development. According to Loan (2019), pre-service teachers need to establish reflective practices in order to lay the groundwork for their ongoing and critical reflection for the improvement of their future education and learning.

Previous studies have been conducted to provide evidence for the use of journal writing by pre-service English teachers; among others, reporting its benefits in the teaching training program. Journal writing has been considered as one of the effective mediums and ways for reflective practices. In general, reflective writing can help students improve their writing skills. It is a useful tool for students to improve their critical and creative thinking skills, and reinforce their acquired knowledge by reflecting on personal experiences (Boumediene, Berrahal, & Hardji, 2018). Critical reflection through journal writing as part of PSETs' e-portfolio can encourage critical thinking among student-teachers. This reflective practice assists PSETs in analyzing their prior knowledge and attitudes, realizing how their understandings arose, researching the consequences of their actions and behavior, and considering other conceptions and principles that may be more effective in teaching (Alshawi & Alshumaimeri, 2017). The act of reflective practice also provides a crucial prerequisite in employing process function and effective assessment instruments for learning and professional development (Slepcevic-Zach & Stock, 2018).

Furthermore, the reflective practices conducted in an unprecedented time such as that of the Covid-19 pandemic meant more than just a mere curricular contemplation. It could have been aimed to break through some anticipated challenges that hamper teaching (Elif & Deniz, 2016). This makes for an argument that the nature of reflection may vary depending on the context.

The content investigation of PSETs reflective accounts for this current study employed four focus areas of Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills (1999) which also served as a classification framework. This study hence seeks to capture and describe teaching-related aspects identified from the pre-service English teachers' journal writing as a product of their reflective practices during online school-based teaching internship programs conducted in public secondary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHODS

This study was qualitative in design and employed thematic analysis. The design and method were chosen for its feasibility and affordance for identifying the participants' descriptive accounts. The use of the thematic analysis technique has facilitated the researchers' attempt in detecting, clustering, and analyzing patterns in the data leading up to the theme finding. It helped to organize and define the data set in (rich) detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As with the participants, the study involved two PSETs, Ani and Budi (pseudonyms) who were taking part in their online school-based teaching internship program for 1,5 months. They had varied levels of English ability and teaching skills. Despite Ani's requirement to teach online, she was obliged to be at the school in which she admitted has helped her to do her school task more effectively. In contrast, Budi performed his teaching practices online from his home which was located in a different city, which he further admitted has presented him with several technical challenges. The researchers collected and used both participants' journal writings which were part of their e-portfolio documents. The researchers examined the participants' written reflections in their respective online portfolios which they fulfilled and kept during the school internship program and for their online teaching practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part discusses different takes experienced by the two research participants. On the whole, Ani reported that she faced fewer technical challenges which she was relatively able to manage; more or less, due to her privilege of being present at the school despite her assigned task to teach online. Meanwhile, Budi has admitted to dealing with more problems during his online teaching practice because it was done remotely from his home.

In the following table, the researchers present the main themes and codes identified from the participants' reflective accounts.

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Table 1. Themes and Codes

Data	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
PST's reflective weekly journal writing	1. Focus on Teaching	1. General teaching issues 2. Specific incident	1. GTI 2. SI
	2. Focus on Self	3. Own teaching approach	3. OT
	3. Focus on Professional Issues	4. Relationship with supervising teacher 5. Teaching as a profession 6. Professional preparation	4. RST 5. TP 6. PP
	4. Focus on Student/Class	7. Student/class behavior 8. Student/class characteristics	7. SBC 8. SCC

Based on the PSETs reflective accounts, it was learned that in general, both participants had participated and completed their online school internship program quite well despite several obstacles. Related to the first identified main theme, Focus on Teaching, there were two sub-themes found to be prominent, namely: General Teaching Issues (GTI) and Specific Incident (SI).

Both participants had a similar experience, yet they also encountered different problems while teaching. The similar problem that they shared was a poor internet connection. Meanwhile, one of the pre-service teachers also had a problem with students who were obliged to help their parents during the lesson/ class time. Both participants also admitted in their reflective journaling that they encountered difficulties when planning their lessons and designing teaching materials. According to both participants, this was an issue that has gotten most of their attention despite their realization that every teacher must have struggled with the same sort of thing, especially when they were starting it out in the first attempt. The excerpts below (taken from the participant's reflective accounts) exemplified the points illustrated above:

Day 1 - Monday, August 10, 2020
The problem I tried to anticipate when making teaching plans is to find a stable internet connection so that the class observations and seminars that I attend would not be disturbed by unstable signals
(Document/01/GTI/Budi).

Day 4 - Thursday, August 13, 2020
I didn't encounter any problems when I was planning. However, I actually encountered a problem when the plan was being implemented. … my cell phone could not access the *Zoom* link that had been given by the teacher whose class I would observe
(Document/01/GTI/Budi).

Day 11 - Thursday, August 6, 2020
Today's feeling was awesome! I think online teaching was not difficult as I thought but it was also not easy. We need to adjust the materials and media based on the students' condition. We never know what is the real problem that our students felt during online learning. It might be difficult to get internet access or they apparently had to help their parents (Document/01/GTI/Ani).

Under the Specific Incident sub-theme, the two participants had the opportunity to do three times online teaching practices over the period of 1,5 months. Even though both of them ought to teach online, one of the participants was required to come to and physically attend school, which

brought them a different dynamic to their teaching internship experience. The specific incident also concerned particularly with a few unexpected things that the PSETs encountered on their first day of online teaching practice.

> Day 11 - Thursday, August 6, 2020
> But, again, an unpredictable situation happened. It was around 7 am, and our cooperating teacher had messaged us on the group. She said that we needed to send the materials to the class leader via WhatsApp or we could make our own Google Classroom and invited our cooperating teacher as a student. … (Document/02/SI/Ani).

In Budi's case, his cell phone suddenly went off and he had to borrow his parent's cellphone to teach. A similar problem happened to Budi's laptop that hindered his teaching material display. In the following excerpt, Budi illustrated the unanticipated technical problem; it also shows how he attempted to resolve the incident:

> Day 13 - Wednesday, August 26, 2020
> The problem I face today is that my laptop won't turn on … and because of that, I was only able to send my lesson plan to Mr. Irfan at night because the data is in the laptop and my laptop had to be repaired.
> When I was faced with a problem that was quite serious for me, I felt annoyed and panicked because I was worried that my data might be gone missing or get deleted. But in the end, I decided to go to a repair shop and fix my laptop (Document/02/SI/Budi).

Another prominent sub-theme that comes under the second main theme, **Focus on Self**, was the PSETs' **Own Teaching Approach**. The skill possessed by each pre-service teacher was different, such as that of Ani who reflected on her excellent time management in preparing the teaching materials, and her lesson plans and communicating them with the supervising teacher. Her time management skill helped her solve the problem related to her lesson planning.

> Day 23 - Tuesday, August 18, 2020
> What I actually did was completed the materials (Formal Letter) in PowerPoint. A few days ago, I made a PowerPoint about Formal Letters. I think it was not quite completed so I added some points related to the material (Document/03/OT/Ani).

Meanwhile, Budi was nervous and apprehensive about the students at his school. He reflected on his ability to reach out, take initiative and be resourceful in resolving his problem.

> Day 1 - Monday, August 10, 2020
> To be honest, at first, I was nervous and a little confused, because this is my first experience doing teaching practice online. However, I managed to overcome my nervousness by preparing myself and taking the courage to ask the teacher supervisor whenever there was something I didn't understand. Then, I was happy to see the interactions that took place between my students and me, the answers and reactions given by the students were quite entertaining (Document/01/OT/Budi).

The PSTs' **Focus on Professional Issues** was identified as another pronounced theme in this study. To illustrate that, Ani's reflective account described her awareness and attempt to make good use of the coordination time with her supervising teacher.

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Day 2 - Tuesday, July 28, 2020
Yesterday, Mam Mimi said that she would give us the KD (Kompetensi Dasar) / basic competency for the next teaching session. So, what I am planning for today is to follow it up. Probably, we will make a lesson plan based on the basic competency that she has shared. Early in the morning, I took initiative for a self-reminder to anticipate what could have been forgotten (Document/RST/05/Ani).

In addition, the pre-service teachers also have several classes with different English teachers, so the coordination was quite complicated. However, for both participants, they perceived it as their responsibility as pre-service teachers who must follow the schools' rules.

Day 3 - Wednesday, August 12, 2020
… I have to do everything with full preparation, or at least have a good and quick response and initiative when faced with a problem. … I feel helped by the answer given by Mr. Sukses and I will implement it when I encounter the same problem later (Document/05/RST/Budi).

From their reflective account, both PSETs' were made aware of the school's expectation that they must act and teach professionally.

Day 1 - Monday, July 27, 2020
I felt excited because this is the first day, I conducted an internship teaching program. On the other hand, I was worried because … this time, it is conducted online. However, as a pre-service teacher, I realized that these conditions make us more creative and innovative in creating the teaching material or using technology (Document/06/TP/Ani).

Day 3 - Wednesday, July 29, 2020
What I am planning for today is to continue the lesson plan about asking for & giving an opinion, and I need to search for the supporting video. … I need to wake up earlier to finish those plans. The lesson plan contains one sheet and the supporting video should be no more than 3 minutes to make it effective (Document/07/PP/Ani).

The PSETs' reflective journal accounts also revealed their significant Focus on Students/Class which shed their understanding of their Student/Class Behavior and Characteristics.

Day 12 - Friday, August 7, 2020
I do not have any task to do, but what I am planning today is only to check the students' tasks on Google Classroom. … many students had not finished their work. I gave a note on the students' late task submissions. Also, some students messaged me to ask for the task instructions via WhatsApp (Document/08/SBC/Ani).

Day 18 - Thursday, August 13, 2020
Good morning! The time shows 7.37. I am so excited because today is my second online teaching. … Further, I immediately uploaded the part II worksheet to Google Classroom at 08.15. Based on the cooperating teacher's instruction, the deadline for this task was at 4.00 pm. To be honest, I understand if the students felt overwhelmed because lots of tasks were given by the teachers and I gave them compensation. It was because one of my students chatted with me via WhatsApp, he said that there were lots of tasks and he needed more time to do the task I gave him. So, I asserted that he can

submit late, but no more than my new set deadline … and he agreed (Document/08/SBC/Ani).

As the PSETs took part and documented their daily reflections during the aforementioned program and period in their online reflective journals, this study managed to identify seven sub-themes that belong to four main themes or categories, namely: Focus on Teaching, Focus on Self, Focus on Professional Issues and Focus on Student/Class. It could be said that the main themes or categories identified in this study accord with those of Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills' (1999).

The first finding revealed the PSTs' focus on the general teaching issues that they encountered. It was made clear and frequent in their reflective journal to which they had managed the attempt to find the solution. The teaching issues were both on technical and substantial levels – which are highly likely given the unexpected mode and unusual period of the teaching practice that they were in. In a review study conducted by Kadir and Aziz (2021), it had become obvious that among the issues faced by PSETs during their teaching practicum was their struggle to utilize and integrate technology in their teaching while attempting to prepare content and deliver materials that supposedly meet their students' needs. Such delicate demands and situations have forced the PSETs to thoughtfully define and accord their teaching content (Kosar, 2021).

The second theme identified was highlighting the PSETs' focus on self which frequently featured how they introspected on the significant challenges they faced during the period in which they were expected to manage several tasks concurrently while trying to get into the groove of their first and real-time online teaching practices. In short, they personally found them quite overwhelming. The above-mentioned is aligned with Kim's (2020) which attested to the need for pre-service teachers, to a certain degree, to vary and personalize their class activity which demanded them to juggle more tasks. It is quite the reverse of Pappa's (2021) finding in which on a more personal level influence, "the online practicum met participants' expectations and was perceived as an overall instructive experience, which was improved by the quality of mentorship and peer support they receive."

The third main theme identified is the PSETs' focus on professional issues. The reflective accounts of both participants emphasized how they introspectively dealt with the teaching-related problems and how proactive they were in attempting to sustain good cooperation and rapport building not only with their supervising teachers but also with other English teachers at the schools. The participants' reflective accounts acknowledged the challenging coordination of class scheduling, information sharing, teaching preparation, and supervision sessions which were mainly remotely conducted. In light of this, the PSETs felt that they were put to the test, yet perceived it as normal due to their early professional undertaking as pre-service teachers. The early awareness of professionalism shown by pre-service teachers although occasionally implied, it rings true to what Fraefel (2014) indicated in his preliminary study which pointed out the imminent impact of portfolio-based reflective practice or reflective thinking and the student-teachers participation in the professional field towards their own professionalization.

Last but not least, the main theme which is identified from the research participants' reflective online journals is their focus on students and/or class. The PSETs' reflective accounts stress how they put their thought and effort into facilitating their students' learning, on and off class. They also reflected on their students' varying behavior and learning characteristics and how they were dealing with them. The PSETs did not necessarily have to learn the hard way; they were mostly aware that their teaching-learning duty, class responsibility, and interaction with the students would not end as soon as that one online class session of hers/ his was finished. They reasoned that they would expect to encounter and tolerate such occurrences as they went further into their teaching internship. In line with Bain et al., (1999), in this study, the research participants' focus on student or class ranks as the least frequent in the PSETs' reflective accounts. Nonetheless, the accounts soundly show the PSETs' take on the instances of student and class characteristics and class/students' behavior. It is also not highly unlikely to expect the emergence of the PSETs' focus on student or class, given that it is part

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of and related to classroom management, which many educators/ practitioners would consider as one of the persistent challenges for pre-service teachers.

CONCLUSION

This study has aimed and managed to identify and describe the content of two pre-service English teachers' online reflective journals while employing Bain et al., (1999) as an analytical framework. The results suggest the pre-service English teachers' (PSETs) focus on the areas of teaching, self, professional issues, and students/class. The PSETs' focus on teaching (general teaching issues and specific incidents) top their reflective accounts which are fairly anticipated due to their teaching practice and internship period that took place during the Covid-19 remote teaching-learning. Alongside the PSETs' focus on teaching, the research participants' reflective journaling also underscores their attention on the subset of self, professionalism, and students/ class: *own teaching approach, relationship with supervising teacher, teaching as a profession, professional preparation, student/class behavior, and student/class characteristics.*

Bain et al., (1999) framework for analyzing the content of PSETs' reflection has been illuminating and useful. Future research intending to further explore the area of pre-service teachers' reflective practices within the similar context and framework of this study could advance in investigating the level of PSETs' reflection. This implies more careful structuring of PSETs journaling/reflective writing, for instance, by employing and constructing open-ended question promptings that could elicit deeper, dialogic, and more critical reflection.

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