



Critical reflection in the English Classroom: The experience of Bule Hora University, Ethiopia

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Abstract

In the presented reflective paper, an experiential approach to critical reflection in the classroom was described, with a focus on problem-solving and motivation enhancement in teaching practice. The study addressed the topical and significant issue of motivation in foreign language learning, specifically highlighting the lack of effective techniques in the language classroom. Using a qualitative method, the study conducted a literature review and classroom observations at BuleHora University. The results demonstrated a notable increase in students' learning motivation. The findings highlighted the benefits of student-centered learning, such as improved learning outcomes, increased self-confidence, and enhanced motivation. The research emphasized the importance for language teachers and researchers to recognize and prioritize their students' individuality, as student motivation played a crucial role in fulfilling teaching responsibilities effectively.

Keywords: *Critical Reflection, reflective practice, critical thinking, motivation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The area of critical reflection is widely acknowledged as a complex and challenging field, despite its apparent appeal in theory (Lucas, 2012; Fook et al., 2006). Educators emphasize the importance of developing critical reflection skills in students, as it contributes to a deeper understanding and enhanced learning (Lay & McGuire, 2010; Moon, 2006; Wolf, 2010). However, the diverse range of approaches to critical reflection often places greater emphasis on techniques at the expense of the broader purpose and outcomes of reflection. To address this issue, it is essential to provide guidelines that enable students to develop their own reflective style (Moon, 2006).

The term “critical reflection” is frequently used without much thought and encompasses various meanings (Lucas, 2012; Fook et al., 2006). It is frequently used interchangeably with terms like reflection, reflective practice, reflexivity, and critical thinking. However, critical reflection involves contemplating our practices, processes, and identities as well as considering external factors, policies, and people that influence our choices and actions (Wenger, 2010). Although critical reflection is regarded as a pervasive activity in professional settings and is generally viewed positively, teaching and assessing socially responsible critical reflections in educational institutions can be challenging, especially when learning takes place outside of broader social or practice-based contexts (McNaughton, 2016; Ryan, 2013; Sutherland, 2013; Liou, 2001).

Moreover, reflection is not merely a technique or a curriculum element but rather a state of mind and an integral part of practice (Ryan, 2011). Reflective practice empowers practitioners to learn from their experiences, gain insights into themselves and their work, and understand their relationships with their personal and professional lives, significant others, and society as a whole. It provides strategies for bringing hidden aspects to the surface, posing new and meaningful questions, and creating safe spaces to explore and express otherwise challenging experiences. Additionally, it challenges assumptions, ideological biases, social inequalities, and personal behaviors that may silence or marginalize others (Bolton, 2010).

Although reflective practice has become a dominant paradigm in language teacher education research and programs worldwide, there is a limited documentation of its application in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher education, including the case of Ethiopia (Farrell, 2016). Critical reflection enhances teachers’ awareness of English language teaching, or EFL teaching, deepens their understanding of various teaching variables, and leads to positive changes in their practice. In this paper, the author intends to present a reflective account based on personal experience in motivating or de-motivating students in the classroom.

Reflection and development through reflective practice occur most effectively in learning organizations that provide supportive mechanisms such as coaching, mentoring, or facilitation, rather than through top-down imposition of organizational visions that result in compliance. Well-facilitated reflective and reflexive professional development yields valuable returns, enabling practitioners to make more accurate and informed decisions by drawing on reliable intuition. Reflexive professional development refers to the process in which practitioners critically examine their own beliefs, practices, and assumptions to continuously improve their professional growth and decision-making (Gould, 2004; Redmond, 2004; Gray, 2007). Furthermore, organizations benefit from reflective practitioners who exhibit increased morale, commitment to clients, openness to multiple perspectives, creativity, innovative problem-solving and clearer boundaries (Fook, 2002). Critical reflection by professional evaluators is also crucial, given the inherently political and value-based nature of evaluation, necessitating critical monitoring of biases (Jewiss & Clark-Keefe, 2007).

This method of inquiry is based on action science, reflective practice, and critical philosophy. It views teaching practice as a source of new knowledge, as practitioners continuously create and modify knowledge to respond to specific teaching contexts. However, practitioners may engage in their practice without fully recognizing students’ interests or addressing existing shortcomings. This inquiry method, consisting of descriptive, reflective, and critical phases, aims to provide practitioners with a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of their practice, improve practice through self-reflection and critique, generate models of exemplary practice and theories of application, and uncover the processes of practice in classroom

situations. Descriptive: Focuses on objectively documenting what happens during teaching without judgement. Reflective: Involves thinking about and analysing teaching practices to understand them better. Critical: Examines the broader implications, including power dynamics and assumptions, to challenge and improve practices. Teachers, and pre-service teachers, can collaborate with researchers or mentors to utilize this inquiry method to develop their teaching knowledge, enhance their individual practice, and engage in shared learning.

In various domains of life, particularly in teaching and learning, the achievement of any task depends not only on the goal but also on the individuals' motivation and desire to succeed. This psychological concept is commonly referred to as motivation in second language acquisition (Kondal, 2015). Motivation serves as a driving force to stimulate action, and a learner's motivation is a crucial factor for success in language learning environments (Oroujlou &Vahedi, 2011). Motivation is often defined as the effort that an individual is willing to exert to reach his/her specific goal.

Prominent scholars such as Black and Plowright (2010), Pew (2007), McManus (2011), and Nukpe (2012) describe motivation as the forces that arouse, select, direct, and sustain behavior in order to achieve a goal. In the context of education, motivating students in the classroom is an essential aspect of effective teaching. Motivated students are more engaged, enthusiastic, and willing to put in effort, to learn. On the other hand, de-motivated students may exhibit disinterest, lack of effort, and reduced achievement due to some factors like lack of relevance, poor teacher-student interaction.

Motivation can be categorized into two broad types: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal desire and personal enjoyment that individuals experience when engaging in an activity. It is driven by factors such as curiosity, interest, and a sense of accomplishment. Intrinsic motivation is often associated with deep and meaningful learning. For example, a student who studies out of genuine interest in the subject demonstrates intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is based on external factors such as rewards, grades, or praise. While extrinsic motivation can be effective in the short term, such as when a student studies to earn a reward, it may not sustain long-term engagement and learning.

To motivate students in the classroom, teachers can employ various strategies:

- Create a positive and supportive learning environment: Foster a classroom atmosphere where students feel safe, respected, and valued. Encourage collaboration, active participation, and open communication. Celebrate student achievements and provide constructive feedback.
- Make learning relevant and meaningful: Connect the content and activities to real-life situations, students' interests, and their prior knowledge. Help students understand the practical applications and significance of what they are learning.
- Provide autonomy and choice: Offer students opportunities to make decisions and have control over their learning. Allow them to choose topics, projects, or learning activities based on their preferences and strengths. This promotes a sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation.
- Set clear goals and expectations: Clearly communicate the learning objectives, expectations, and criteria for success. Break down complex tasks into manageable

steps and provide regular feedback on students' progress. This helps students understand what is expected of them and gives them a sense of direction.

- Use varied and engaging instructional strategies: Employ a mix of instructional methods that cater to different learning styles and preferences. Incorporate active learning techniques, hands-on activities, discussions, multimedia, and technology to enhance student engagement.
- Foster a growth mindset: Encourage students to embrace challenges, view mistakes as learning opportunities, and believe in their ability to improve. Cultivate a classroom culture that values effort, perseverance, and a positive attitude towards learning.
- Establish connections and relevance beyond the classroom: Help students see the connections between what they are learning and the world outside the classroom. Invite guest speakers, arrange field trips, or engage in community projects to broaden students' perspectives and show them the real-world applications of their knowledge.

It is important to note that different students may be motivated by different factors, so it is beneficial to employ a combination of strategies and adapt them to individual student needs. Regularly assess students' motivation levels, and adjust instructional approaches accordingly. By fostering a motivating learning environment, teachers can inspire students to become active and lifelong students.

1.1. Problem Justification

There is a wealth of literature on critical reflective practice, with many studies focusing on personal perspectives and the use of Fook and Gardner's model of critical reflection as a framework for reflection and learning (Hickson, 2011). The Fook and Gardner approach encourages the deconstruction and analysis of personal or professional experiences to understand the underlying assumptions, relationships, and influences, and how they impact practice. Other studies have explored reflective practices as a professional development approach for leadership in transformative education (Qutoshi, 2018), the qualifications and challenges faced by teachers and teacher educators in engaging in reflective practices (Saric and Steh, 2017), the effectiveness of reflective practices in the development of student teachers (Mathew et al., 2017; Benade, 2015), and experiences of teachers and leaders in the digital reflective intersection (based on New Zealand case studies) (Benade, 2015).

In Ethiopia, research has focused on various aspects of reflective learning practices. Birbirso (2012) examined the challenges faced by prospective teachers during their practicum, including the lack of effective reflection and a tendency to remain silent, which hindered their ability to plan and present lessons effectively. Tessema (2008) explored reflective school-based activities and their impact on the researcher and practicum advisees, through a dialogical relationship. Seifu (2016) investigated student teachers' reflective learning practices, considering different levels and forms of reflection, and examined the extent to which the curriculum implementation process facilitated reflective learning. Kano et al. (2017) studied the practices and challenges of reflective teaching in helping EFL teachers become more effective practitioners in selected primary schools. Danbi and Tadesse (2019) assessed the role of institutional context in the preparation of critically reflective TEFL teachers in three universities, examining the use of structured opportunities for reflection.

These studies collectively highlight the challenges and opportunities of reflective learning practices in Ethiopia, offering insights into how future improvements can be made in teacher education and reflective practices.

While critical reflective practice has been extensively studied, motivation, despite its significant influence on the educational process, has received less attention. Cook (2000a, 2000b) highlighted motivation as one of the three major factors influencing knowledge acquisition, emphasizing its importance. In Ethiopia, English language (EL) is taught as a subject from elementary schools to higher learning institutions and is also used as a medium of instruction; however, many students struggle to use the language effectively in both spoken and written communication. Motivation has been identified as a contributing factor to this deficiency.

1.2. Purpose of the study

Numerous works of literature support the idea that teachers' awareness of students' attitudes and their relationship to the learning process can guide language instructors in utilizing more effective teaching methods. Within the realm of language learning, the significance of motivation, both in terms of its range and type, cannot be overlooked as it plays a pivotal role in the learning process. Consequently, language teachers hold a crucial responsibility in motivating individual students within the classroom setting. The aim of this study, therefore, is to identify and comprehend the social, cultural, economic, and emotional characteristics and backgrounds of language students in order to provide them with appropriate support. This support enables students to develop a clear understanding of their own roles and fosters respect for their learning journey. Specifically, this study seeks to investigate the role of teachers in enhancing students' learning motivation and determine the conditions under which its implementation can be most effective at BuleHora University in Ethiopia.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative research method was employed for the study. The reflection took place in a class of 48 second-year students majoring in English at BuleHora University. In other words, the participants were 48 students who were studying English as a foreign language as their major at Bule Hora University. The class comprised 31 male students and 17 female students. Due to the country's diverse nationalities, the students involved in the study represented various socio-cultural, economic, ethnic, and political backgrounds. This study aimed to examine how these diverse backgrounds influence students' motivation and acquisition of a foreign language. Therefore, the study included the teacher (the researcher) as a hypothetical important variable in relation to student motivation. The teacher played a dual role in teaching these students and conducting a reflective analysis of their motivation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study employed a qualitative method, specifically action research, through classroom observation, as described in the purpose and methodology sections. The motivation behind this inquiry stemmed from the researcher's observation that the students frequently remained silent and non-participatory, leading to a teacher-centered classroom environment. This lack of engagement hampered the students' learning. Additionally, it hindered their personal development. The researcher noticed various indicators of this issue, such as mistakes in

written work, nervousness in speaking, lack of confidence in answering questions, and poor performance in examinations.

Recognizing the significance of addressing these shortcomings, the researcher felt responsibility to improve both the students' current academic achievements and their future career prospects. The researcher was concerned that if these issues persisted at the university level, they would carry over into the students' future teaching practices after graduation. The researcher reflected on their teaching methods and realized that adherence to a traditional teacher-centered model had hindered the development of students' independent learning abilities.

Furthermore, the researcher identified a lack of confidence among students due to their inadequate general and professional knowledge. This lack of confidence stemmed from teachers not playing a central role in motivating and instilling confidence in students. The researcher noted that this problem was prevalent among teachers who lacked sufficient educational and professional training to effectively motivate students. An insufficient understanding of the complexities of professional practice among teachers and policy makers has also hindered the improvement of teaching practices, sometimes resulting in decreased student achievement.

Another issue observed by the researcher was the students' lack of foresight and understanding of the purpose behind their learning, which led to a deficiency in motivation. This lack of motivation was seen as a crisis, given the changing needs of the future workforce and the rapid advancement of educational technology. The researcher emphasized the importance of incorporating technology and teaching essential skills, such as problem-solving, creative thinking, digital literacy, and collaboration, into the curriculum.

To address these challenges, the researcher proposed adopting a student-centered teaching model, considered a significant and contemporary approach to teaching and learning. The researcher described specific actions taken to implement this model, including collaborative learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and other pedagogical methods. The researcher highlighted the positive impacts of these methods on student engagement, learning, and success.

The researcher also recognized the importance of teacher quality in improving student outcomes. Factors such as class size, certification, qualifications, and experience have traditionally been associated with teacher quality. However, the researcher emphasized the significance of pedagogical knowledge in creating effective learning environments. Pedagogical knowledge includes the specialized knowledge teachers possess to facilitate learning effectively.

The researcher acknowledged their own influence as a product of the traditional education system and previous teachers, which led to a teacher-centered approach in the classroom. The researcher realized that this approach limited students' creativity, initiative, and independent thinking. Recognizing the diversity among students in terms of backgrounds, intelligence, and interests, the researcher emphasized the need for teaching methods that catered to individual differences and enhanced students' understanding.

The researcher further described specific teaching strategies employed, such as encouraging student participation, correcting language errors, implementing explicit/student-centered reading comprehension instruction, and involving students in vocabulary teaching. These

strategies aimed to actively engage students, foster critical thinking, and enhance language skills.

The researcher concluded that these new teaching methods had positively transformed the classroom atmosphere and student engagement. The students' active participation and collaboration indicated their enthusiasm for the novelty of these approaches. Encouraged by these outcomes, the researcher felt a renewed determination to continue the inquiry and further develop the students' potential.

3.1. Implications

The study revealed several important implications for the teaching and learning process. Firstly, the traditional teacher-centered approach hindered students' independent learning abilities and led to passive knowledge absorption. This resulted in students lacking confidence, having poor general and professional knowledge, and low motivation. Secondly, the lack of student-centered pedagogy limited students' creativity, initiative, and individuality. It also neglected the development of critical thinking skills. Thirdly, the study highlighted the importance of teacher quality and pedagogical knowledge in improving student outcomes. Lastly, the research emphasized the need to align teaching practices with the changing demands of the future workforce, including the integration of technology and the development of problem-solving, creative thinking, digital skills, and collaboration.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that adopting a student-centered approach is the most effective method for addressing the current circumstances. By implementing student-centered pedagogy, which includes collaborative learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and other methods, students are actively engaged and encouraged to participate creatively in the classroom. The researcher took specific actions based on these principles, recognizing the importance of improving student outcomes and the quality of the teaching workforce, which has become a challenge in Ethiopia.

In addition to these methods, student-centered pedagogy also focuses on individualized instruction, where teachers recognize and accommodate students' unique learning styles, interests, and abilities. This approach promotes personalized learning experiences tailored to each student's needs, helping them reach their full potential.

The researcher recognized the importance of improving student outcomes and the quality of the teaching workforce. In many education systems, including Ethiopia, challenges exist in ensuring high-quality teaching practices. By adopting a student-centered approach, teachers can create more engaging and effective learning environments that address these challenges.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study suggests several recommendations for future action. Firstly, adopting a student-centered teaching approach is crucial for enhancing students' participation, creativity, and motivation. Teachers should explore and implement collaborative, experiential, and problem-based learning methods. Secondly, comprehensive teacher training programs focusing on pedagogical knowledge and effective teaching strategies are needed. Policymakers

should invest in professional development models that enhance teachers' skills and understanding of complex practices. Thirdly, curriculum redesign is necessary to incorporate skills relevant to the changing workforce, such as problem-solving, creative thinking, digital skills, and collaboration. Additionally, efforts should improve the recruitment and retention of quality teachers, as teacher quality significantly impacts student achievement. Embracing these recommendations will enable Ethiopian universities to effectively prepare students for the evolving demands of the workforce and promote their overall growth and success.

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7. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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