# Attending to EFL Teacher Identity: Reflective Practice in Optimising Teacher Professional Education Program

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## ABSTRACT

This paper offers a discussion on the interconnection between teacher professional development, teacher learning and teacher identity and how reflective practice can optimize Indonesian EFL teachers' development of professional identity. This paper provides some ideas for designing reflective activities to foster the development of teacher identity. It presents practical suggestions about how to incorporate reflections in learning activities during the Teacher Professional Education (TPE). The reflection model proposed by Kolb (2015) is preferred as it is considered to be simpler and more suitable in the context of TPE in Indonesia. The reflective practice during TPE is fundamental to promote lifelong teacher learner identity.

**Keywords:** teacher professional identity, teacher learning, teacher professional education

## INTRODUCTION

Indicators of success in education is most easily measured from the student learning outcomes. In fact, a number of factors contribute to the quality of education including educational policies, curriculum, resources, school leadership, testing and evaluation, and teachers and teacher education. However, teacher quality remains the most critical issues in the quality of education because teachers play the roles of agents of change (Kusumaningrum, Suharno & Triyanto 2019; Lisnawati 2018; Pramastiwi et al. 2018). Teachers are often blamed for students' low achievement. When they are blamed for it, teachers and teacher association argue that low teacher income contributes to their low motivation for teaching (Syahril 2016). The Indonesian government has been striving to improve teacher quality. Since 2006, and the enactment of Law No. 14/2005 on teachers and lecturers, the Indonesian government has held a Teacher Certification Program (TCP) called Program *Sertifikasi Guru* in order to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. The Indonesian government implemented the TCP as an attempt to improve teachers' competencies and at the same time increase teacher income by providing professional allowance (Syahril 2016). Being certified, they are expected to perform better as professional teachers because they have upgraded their knowledge and skills and they receive double income as an incentive of their profession, which should motivate them to be better teachers.

TCP aims to ensure that teachers meet the standards of the teaching profession. The logic of the policy is "that by certifying all teachers, teacher quality will improve, and this improvement will lead to improved student learning quality" (Syahril 2016, p. 10). However, the effectiveness of this program needs to be examined because many factors may come into

play and affect the success of the program. TCP was initially conducted through portfolio-based assessment. The method received a lot of criticisms regarding to its relevance in assessing teacher competencies in teaching (Syahril 2016). In response to the criticisms, a ten-day re-training program was conducted, which is called *Pendidikan dan Latihan Profesi Guru* or PLPG (Teacher Professional Education and Training), which required in-service teachers to take a 90-hour re-training program. Based on the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 8/2009, the government introduced a new program of teacher certification. PLPG, which was considered too short to improve teachers' competencies, has been terminated as the new certification program called *Pendidikan Profesi Guru* or PPG (Teacher Professional Education or TPE) is introduced. The program requires graduate teachers with the S1 four-year (Bachelor) degree to undertake an entry test prior to commencing their professional education (Jalal et al. 2009). PPG or TPE offers two pathways for teacher certification, namely the pre-service TPE, which is a two-semester program with a total of 38 credits and the in-service TPE, which is conducted in one semester through hybrid learning system with a total of 24 credits.

In Indonesia, teacher certification is one-time process. Once a teaching certificate is obtained, it can be used to secure one's teaching career. If teachers perceive TPE merely as a way to obtain a teaching certificate as a legal document to secure their profession, they may not be motivated to aim higher towards continuous professional learning and development. Despite the fact that effective and continuing professional development programs are needed in order to improve teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner 2017), such programs are often criticized as "top-down, externally determined" (Smaller 2012, p. 83). Thus, the effectiveness of such programs depends to a large extent on individual teachers and how they make meaning of the programs (Smaller 2012). This self-understanding and self-awareness about the need to be more professional should motivate them to develop and to become better teachers. Thus, any kinds of educational reform as an attempt to improve teacher quality should not only focus on training teachers about what and how to teach but should also consider other aspects beyond the training issues such as issues about their identities and motivation. In this way, understanding teacher identity is central to teacher professional development (Afrianto 2015).

## *Theory*

### *Teacher Identity and Teacher Professional Development*

In a general concept, teacher identity is understood as how teachers see themselves as teachers (Teng 2019b), which are "shaped and reshaped in interaction with others in a professional context" (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009, p. 178). Teacher identity also has the basic nature of identity as being multiple, dynamic and contextual. Teacher professional identity construction is a complex process (Riyanti 2017). The process takes place in specific cultural contexts (Kuswandono 2013; Vesanto 2011). In the context of English language teaching in Indonesia, where English is a foreign language, English teachers are faced with many challenges including complex cultural challenges associated with learning and teaching a foreign language. For Indonesian teachers of English, English is the third or even the fourth language they learn after their local native language, their colloquial Indonesian and formal Indonesian language. They themselves are often still learning English. Thus, they can be learners and teachers at the same time. Nunan (2017) argues that "identifying oneself, or being identified by others, as a less than competent user of the language they are teaching can pose professional challenges" (p. 166).

To address the issue of inadequate quality of the Indonesian teachers of English, Renandya, Hamied and Nurkamto (2018) argue that professional development is needed to facilitate teachers in improving their English proficiency as a prerequisite effective lesson

delivery. However, PLPG with the 90-hour retraining program in teacher certification process, improvement of English proficiency may not be significant since the 90-hour program should cover all materials including content, pedagogical and technological knowledge, as well as teaching practicum and assessment. The new pathway of teacher certification program is expected to provide more opportunities for teachers to improve all aspects of their competencies.

One of the objectives of teacher professional development is to build professional knowledge (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner 2017). In order to build professional knowledge, teachers need to possess self-knowledge as well as self-awareness (Berry 2009). "Self-knowledge encompasses a broad field that includes knowledge of one's own knowledge and skills, and of how one learns" (Eraut 1994 as cited by Berry 2009, p. 308). The study by Lie et al. (2019) points out that teachers may overestimate their competence when they are asked to assess themselves. This confirms that teachers' perception on their own competencies may not match their actual competencies. The phenomenon of teachers' overestimating their competencies may be an indication of their lacking self-knowledge, which means that such teachers showed low sense of professional identity. This finding suggests that it is necessary to explore teacher professional identity development as the teachers are undertaking professional education program. An exploration of in-service teachers' experiences during TPE is expected to result in a better understanding of the effectiveness of TPE in developing English teacher professionalism and better understanding of English teachers' struggles in the process of professional identity construction.

Although attempts to improve teacher quality in Indonesia have been done, the results did not seem to reflect the efforts. One possible cause is that such attempts often focus on improving formal measurable aspect of teacher professionalism by providing various training programs and neglecting other unmeasurable aspects of teacher professionalism. Meanwhile, Kong (2019) argues that understanding effectiveness of teacher professional development, including area of English Language Teaching, demands comprehensive knowledge of "teachers' representation, perceptions of themselves and desires" (p. 4). In other words, in order to maintain an effective teacher professional development, teacher educators must go beyond the formal and measurable aspects of professionalism and start to delve into teacher professional identity development.

Teacher identity is dynamically evolving and "it has a future-oriented trajectory" which can be learned and modified "in daily practice, at the initial language teacher education and ongoing professional development" (Pennington & Richards 2016, p. 5). Studying teacher identity is of paramount importance to teacher professionalism as "identity was found to be an important dimension in directing, explaining, justifying, and making sense of teachers' professional lives related to others, the community and the world at large" (MacLure 1993 as cited by Teng 2019a, p. 48). One way of studying teacher professional identity and its development is by looking into teachers' experiences of growth (Sudibyo 2018).

### *Reflective Practice and Teacher Learning during Teacher Professional Education*

According to the Guideline of TPE 2018 (*Pedoman Penyelenggaran Program Pedidikan Profesi Guru 2018*), the graduation is based on the assessment process which is divided into two stages. The first stage, which is prerequisite to the second stage, is aimed at assessing the Personality Qualities and Social Competence and is conducted at the university level. This assessment is oriented at participants' learning process. Upon passing the first stage, the participants proceed to the second stage, which consist of a performance-based competency test and an online computer-based competency test. The computer-based competency test is aimed at assessing teachers' Subject matter competence and Pedagogic Competence and is conducted nationally, while the performance-based test is aimed at assessing how well teachers

put their knowledge into real practice in the classroom, including how teachers interact with students.

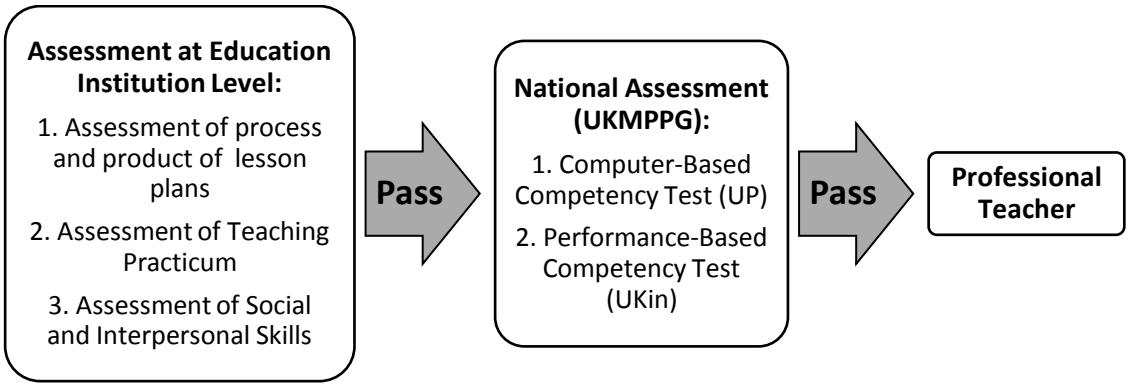



Figure 1: Assessment and Graduation Process of Teacher Professional Education in Indonesia

From the assessment procedure, it can be concluded that the university and teacher educators play a key role in facilitating the construction process of teacher professional identity from aspects that cannot be quantified by numbers. Teachers, too, may not be aware of the important role that university and lecturers play during the TPE program as they are more concerned about passing the examination and obtaining the teaching certificate. By raising the issue on the role that the university and teacher educators play, this study attempts to explore how the development of teacher professional identity can be facilitated and optimized during the TPE program. However, bringing this issue to the surface means challenging both teacher educators and teachers to reorient their goals. On the one hand, the university and teacher educators need to reorient their goal toward facilitating teachers to develop their professional identity instead of simply upgrading their knowledge and giving them training on teaching skills. On the other hand, teachers must invest more efforts on developing their professional identity, instead of merely obtaining a teaching certificate.

## METHOD

### *Theory Application*

Throughout the TPE program, the participating teachers are assigned to write their reflection in their journals. According to Dewey (1933), reflective thinking is "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads" (p. 9). Reflection is a process of learning from experience, but as Mathew, Mathew and Prince (2017) argue that reflection is essential because "experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning" (p. 126). Reflective practice is a way to process experiences into meaningful learning and to make meaning of the learning experience (Wain 2017). In their reflections, in-service teachers try to make meaning of their learning by relating the theories and their practice. It is necessary for them "to revisit what they have learned for improvement and for in-depth learning" (Chang 2019, p. 95). "Reflective practice is an important tool in practice-based professional learning settings where people learn from their own professional experience" (Mathew, Mathew & Prince 2017, p. 126). In brief, Mathew, Mathew and Prince (2017) believe that reflective skill is the foundation of life-long learning and continuous professional development.

Teacher learning is inseparable from teacher identity construction since "learning to teach is an identity making process" (Beijaard 2019, p. 1). Teacher learning here refers to how teachers learn to teach. Kelly (2006) postulates that teacher learning "is the process by which teachers move towards expertise" (p. 514). Further, Kelly (2006) argues that how intense teachers engage in their learning is a determining factor for effective teacher learning. This learning engagement helps teachers develop their situated teacher identity (Kelly 2006, p. 515), meaning that teacher identity is constructed and reconstructed whilst a teacher is learning. In connection to teacher learning, reflection function as "a core activity for all teachers -- pre-service and in-service, in schools and universities" (Walkington 2005, p. 59). Teachers benefit from reflective practice as it enables them to learn by examining their past experience and their current teaching practice, and gain insights into their future practice as an attempt of ongoing professional development (Farrell 2015).

Teacher are encouraged to write their reflection in the form of first-person narratives. They are provided them with prompts for writing their reflections. In the reflection, the writers usually reflect on issues and experiences that are important to them (Chang 2019). The reflections which are documented over a period of time can capture any changes of the participants including values and attitudes. In addition, written reflections often report significant events in the participants' experiences during the program. In-service teachers encounter many kinds of issues during the course, such as the struggles during the adaptation to the new learning environment or during the practicum processes. They can describe their reactions and feelings about those things in their reflections.

Based on Dewey's (1933) notion of reflection, Schön (2017) introduces two types of reflection: reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. While reflection-in-action is done during an action, reflection-on-action is done upon past event or experience. A third type of reflection introduced by Killion and Todnem (1991) is reflection-for-action, which refers to "the desired outcome of both previous types of reflection" (p. 15). Reflection-for-action incorporates thinking and planning actions for improvement of practice (Olteanu 2017). Drawing on Dewey's experiential learning, Butt et al. (1992) argue that in order "to understand one's present situation one needs to bring forward prior related experience" (p. 60).

Kolb (2015) postulates that a person learns through discovery and experience and produces an Experiential Learning Cycle. This cycle demonstrates that effective and meaningful learning takes place as students go through a four-stage of reflective cycle. The cycle describes a holistic model of the learning process which reveals the pivotal role of experience in the learning process. Kolb (2015) presents four-stage model which is applicable in education as it allows teachers to learn and reflect during teaching practice. The model consists of the following stages:

- Concrete experience: the teachers as learners are assigned or carry out a task whereby active involvement is required.

- Reflective observation: the teachers take time out from the task to review what has been done and experienced
- Abstract conceptualization: the teachers attempt to make sense of what has occurred and interprets the events to promote understanding
- Active experimentation: the teachers consider how to put what has been learned into practice.

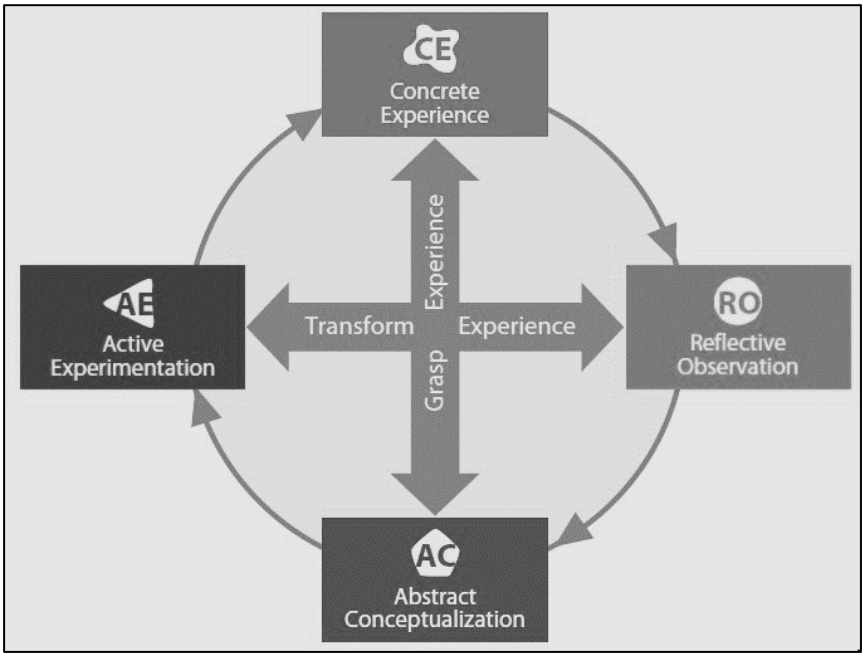



Figure 2: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 2015, p.51)

Compared to reflection cycle proposed by Gibbs and Andrew (2001), Kolb's model is simpler. However, both models explicitly mention action as a last element of the cycle (Gibbs & Andrew 2001). It means that both models incorporate Schön's (2017) and Killion and Todnem's (1991) concepts of reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action.

As participants of TPE, teachers will be guided to reflect on their experience both as learner and practicing teachers. They will be trained to use structured model of reflection to build the habit of effective and fruitful reflection. One of the characteristics of effective teacher professional development according to Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017) is that it should offer opportunities for feedback and reflection. Sudibyo (2018) who conducts a narrative study of senior teachers in Indonesia found that teachers' professional development occurred within sustainable support structures as they took ownership of their own growth, and they engaged in cycles of growth and sharing, reflection practice and action.

## CONCLUSION

Multiple factors may affect teacher identity development, such as teachers' learning, knowledge, cognition, and emotion, teachers' biographies and past experience, and teachers' participation in the community of practice (Yazan 2018). Teachers' learning experience during TPE can be optimized by implementing systematic reflection. Reflection serves as a tool to assist teachers in making meaning of their learning experience (Hahl & Mikulec 2018). Promoting the habit of reflective practice can empower teachers to make decision in directing

and developing their professional identity which goes beyond the TPE. Kolb's model is one of the structured reflection models, which teachers can adopt as a habit of reflective teachers in developing teacher learner identity to achieve professional fulfilment (Helyer 2015).

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