

A Narrative Inquiry of a Non-native EFL Teacher's Reflection on Reading and Writing Proficiency

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of acquiring the English language throughout the years of a non-native EFL teacher, with particular attention to the development of reading and writing proficiency. The research addressed the importance of individual learning experiences, supported by a conducive environment and authentic materials, as a form of self-directed learning. Guided by this importance, the study employed a narrative inquiry design to document the researcher's experiences and reflections on her growth in reading and writing proficiency. Data were gathered and interpreted through narrative analysis. The finding showed that regular use of authentic materials and continuous support from the learning environment played a substantial role in the researcher's language learning development. This study highlights the importance of reflecting on one's language acquisition to plan effective techniques for the ELT classroom, particularly the use of authentic materials that have been shown to support learning development. Additionally, it is hoped that this work will contribute to the growing research on related topics.

Keywords: English proficiency; self-reflection; narrative inquiry; EFL teacher

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1. Introduction

Self-reflection occurs when an individual can evaluate their thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and acts, and will likely arrange plans based on what they gain from their reflection. Sedikides & Skowronski (1995) highlighted the importance of self-knowledge, describing it as a critical approach to understanding one's consequences of thoughts, feelings, motivation, and behavior. A quest for self-knowledge is through self-reflection, a perspective that links behavioral self-perception, internal states, and inference processes. Self-reflection is ideal for individuals whose roles require creativity, critical planning, and problem-solving. In educational practices, learners are often encouraged to reflect on what they have been taught so they are aware of their learning process. Likewise, it is also beneficial for teachers to engage in self-reflection to evaluate their teaching practices. Teachers need to identify their strengths and weaknesses and find ways to improve themselves as better teachers (Gun, 2011). Self-reflection is a metacognitive process that enables individuals to think about their own thinking, regulate their cognition (Goupil & Kouider, 2019; Shekh-Abed, 2024), and ultimately fosters self-development. While teachers commonly conduct self-reflection of teaching practices, the present study took a slightly different approach. The researcher, who was also the sole participant in the study, conducted this investigation to reflect on personal experiences as a language learner and to examine how these experiences, combined with the knowledge learned

from an undergraduate program in English education, have shaped their teaching strategies. Moreover, this study aimed to reflect on and evaluate the researcher's proficiency in English reading and writing.

English proficiency is a concept of understanding one's ability to use English effectively. There are two common instruments to check English proficiency, such as CEFR and ACTFL. These instruments, or frameworks, are used to see how individuals can do with language in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in real and spontaneous situations (ACTFL, 2024). Reading, as a receptive skill, and writing, as a productive skill, are both language skills that involve comprehension and use of written text. Reading is a cognitive activity that requires interaction with the text. It serves three objectives, including reading for entertainment, for information, and for research (Bojovic, 2010). Meanwhile, writing is the ability to express one's thoughts in a meaningful form to deliver messages clearly and fluently (Ariana, 2010). The connection between reading and writing has been documented numerous times. Schoonen (2019) showed there was a relationship between reading and writing, with the assistance of subskills involving linguistic knowledge. In their systematic review, Jouhar & Rupley (2021) found that independent reading activities significantly affected students' overall writing quality, such as spelling accuracy, content, grammar accuracy, and text organization. This finding aligns with Bai & Wang (2023), who reported that a self-regulated reading-to-writing strategy had positive impacts on writing competence. Moreover, Tulkinjonovna et al. (2021) showed that reading books consistently improved vocabulary; hence, it would assist the writing process when it needed a variety of descriptive words, adapt to the objective of writing, and a variety of words to engage the reader, enjoying the whole paragraph or text.

Up to now, far too little attention has been paid to the self-reflection focus on the relationship between reading and writing. The studies that were found mostly focus on teachers' language proficiency in their teaching process. However, two studies were found that fit the current scope of the study. Daud (2021) documented how his life experiences significantly shaped his identity as an English teacher. Ruslin et al. (2022) explored how teachers' reflection played a great role in helping to improve students' speaking skills. Therefore, this present study was conducted to address the gap and provide a contribution to the growing area of research. In this study, the researcher explored personal experiences of acquiring the English language over the years, from being a student to a non-native EFL teacher, focusing on reading and writing skills, as well as self-evaluate of proficiency based on CEFR. The research problems proposed by this study were:

1. How are my English reading and writing experiences?
2. What strategies did I use to improve my reading and writing?
3. How have these experiences shaped me with my current level of proficiency?

Since the study was based on personal experience, the readers should note that some details may be affected by memory limitations, and the researcher's language proficiency level may differ from those reported in similar studies conducted under similar or different circumstances. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study will contribute both theoretically and practically to ELT practices.

2. Method

This study employed a narrative inquiry as a design to explore individual life stories and retold them in chronological events (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Furthermore, this study also acted as a self-observation of an individual as a language learner with potential benefit as a language teacher (McDonough & McDonough, 2014). The data source for this study was the

researcher, and the data was gathered from the perspective of individual experiences spanning childhood to adulthood, including experiences with English reading and writing activities. The data was analyzed descriptively, with reference to the CEFR framework for reading and writing comprehension, based on the researcher's proficiency level at the particular time. For practical purposes, a first-person point of view was used.

3. Findings and Discussion

The chronological events of my English learning experiences are divided into five parts. The first part covers my elementary school years (ages 7-12), the second part occurred in junior high school (ages 13-15), the third part covers in senior high school years (ages 16-18), the fourth part occurred in undergraduate studies (ages 19-22), and the fifth part spans my teaching years and second semester of master's program (age 23- to the present). In each part, I described the strategies I used to improve my English proficiency, along with an evaluation of my proficiency according to the CEFR description.

First part. I had very limited exposure to the English language during my childhood. I began learning English in school when I was in fourth grade, and I struggled with it. My difficulties were so pronounced that I developed a strong dislike and questioned its purpose with cynicism. At the time, I could not read basic words in my school textbook, let alone understand their meanings. I believe it was the negative attitude that hindered me from making good progress in the subject. I remember an assignment from the teacher in which she asked us to memorize a dialogue and perform it in pairs. Although my friend and I practiced diligently, when it was our turn to perform, I could not utter a single word I had memorized. I felt embarrassed and guilty, fearing my poor performance would affect my friend's score. At home, I lack the resources to improve my English. My parents did not consume any form of media in English; therefore, I was not exposed to the language culturally through songs, movies, magazines, and the like. Because of my poor relationship with English, I can no longer recall any details of my experiences in English learning from that time. In this matter, the level of my proficiency was pre-A1 in both reading and writing, as it was described for a student who had just begun or had no prior knowledge of the language.

Second part. It occurred during junior high school. I realized that the materials for English class had become more complex. Thus, I begged my mother to enroll me in an English course. To my surprise, I enjoyed learning English in this type of environment. I suppose this was due to the smaller class size and the teacher's ability to see our progress in class. Early on, I was surprised that I could understand the meaning of words spoken by my teacher. I could read and write according to my level at the time, and this pleasant moment in the course changed my attitude toward the English class at the school. I became more attentive during the class and learned seriously. Moreover, I got a higher score than before. Around this time, I was also exposed to English songs and movies. I enjoyed collecting song lyrics, rewriting them in my journal, and looking up the unfamiliar words. This activity, which I learned was a form of using authentic material, became my first exposure to language input outside the school's textbook. Initially, my intention in engaging with this material was merely for personal entertainment. Gilmore (2007) stated that authentic materials, especially audio-visual ones, provided richer input for language learners as they had the potential to incite learners' communicative competence. Rewriting song lyrics was beneficial for me to gain new vocabulary, as I frequently used a dictionary for unknown words. It also helped me practice writing simple sentences. The proficiency level for my writing production at the time was A1, as it was described that learners can write simple, isolated phrases and sentences. I believe my reading proficiency improved more significantly, reaching A2 level. A2 refers to learners who can

understand short, simple text containing the highest frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international items.

Third part. I believe this part of my life differed from junior high school in terms of my reading and writing activities. I stopped attending the English course as I was sure I could learn English independently outside of school. I still used English songs and movies as my sources. I recall a reading assignment from my teacher, which we were required to get a novel written in English. She instructed us to summarize it. Unfortunately, I no longer remember the details of this assignment or the quality of my summary writing, but I remember struggling to understand the novel thoroughly. It was my first time reading a novel written in English, so comprehending the whole novel was challenging. My reading and writing had not progressed much during this year; however, I improved my listening skills. The reading and writing activities I had mostly came from teachers' assignments, which were dominantly grammar-focused. Despite the lack of reading and writing activities, I was able to produce better sentences than before. I recall becoming increasingly aware of the parts of speech. Although I was unfamiliar with the terminology of 'part of speech', I knew how to use word pairs such as responsible- responsibility and choose- choice correctly. Harmer (2007) distinguished writing into two different approaches, which are writing-for-learning and writing-for-writing. The writing activities that I had done for this level were administered as writing-for-learning, as they were designed to assist students with their language learning and assessment. At this level, my reading proficiency was still at A2, which refers to learners who can understand short, simple text on familiar matters of a concrete type that consists of high-frequency everyday or job-related language. My writing production proficiency reached A2, describing learners can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors.

Fourth part. After graduating from high school, I enrolled in a university and chose the English language as the subject I felt most confident in. The exposure to English was much more frequent than before. I got more input from reading academic textbooks, academic papers, lectures, and other listening materials. My production skills were also developed intensively through writing many essays, oral presentations, and an undergraduate thesis. My reading proficiency improved as I found techniques to gain information from the text effectively. My reading became more effective when I knew the purpose of my reading or what I needed to find in the text. These reading subskills are explained in Harmer (2007). He also mentioned extensive reading in which learners are not only instructed to read much but are also offered to bring their chosen readings. Some lecturers applied this approach by allowing us to find reading materials after being given a specific topic. This strategy assisted students in reading at appropriate levels with ease and confidence. From this level of education, I knew that writing required a thorough process. Harmer mentioned the writing process includes drafting, reviewing, re-drafting, and final writing. It was more complex than I thought, as I experienced it during my academic essays and thesis. At this level, both my writing production and reading comprehension improved rapidly despite the limited amount of authentic materials. I use the word 'limited' because the sources I had studied or used mainly were from my program's required readings. Movies and songs presented in English were a medium that I still constantly consumed at the time, which signified that the variety of my authentic materials had not broadened since the last part. However, it was the complexity of materials that was upgraded. In this matter, I believe my writing production proficiency was at the level of B2, which refers to learners can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to their field of interest, synthesizing and evaluating information and arguments from several sources. My reading proficiency was at the level of B1 to B2 as I comprehended various texts within my field and other texts for different purposes with a sufficiently satisfactory level of comprehension, and can read to a degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading with different purposes, and use appropriate sources selectively.

Fifth part. This part consists of a longer period than before, as it includes the progress from my first year of being a professional teacher to the present moment of writing. During this time, I had a relatively new hobby, and it was reading English novels. Reading novels has been my pleasure activity since I was in junior high school, although the novels I read were written in Indonesian. However, I discontinued this activity in my undergraduate program since I was occupied with my academic assignments. At the end of my final year in university, I read again. The English novel that I had at the time was called *Pride and Prejudice*. It took me three years to finish the book, and I completed it when I was already teaching in a public school. I realized that my reading approach was not optimal. I kept getting books that, later, I realized were considered ‘hard reads’ for my reading level at the time. Although the Internet was a useful platform to get book recommendations, I failed to notice the initial intended target of these recommendations. Over time, I learned this lesson that I was not supposed to follow other readers who were significantly advanced than I was. Furthermore, I have become more adept at selecting authentic reading materials, especially reading for pleasure, to improve my reading proficiency. Regarding writing, I started a routine of writing my reflection after completing my readings. I briefly described the content of the books, the conflicts or problems, and my personal reactions. Unfortunately, I need to pause this activity since the beginning of my master’s program. Finding time to read and write for pleasure has been difficult, since my reading and writing now involve academic textbooks and journals to help me produce academic essays or papers. Harmer (2007) signified writing as an activity that focuses on its process. He used the term ‘the process wheel’, which involves the planning, drafting, editing, and final version of writing, yet it still needs a revisit or review of what has been completed. I have deliberately implemented this writing process during my master's program. It is a requirement that students are capable of producing academic text with a thorough understanding of how to write it. I have intended to consistently implement authentic materials for various purposes, whether for entertainment or research, a shift from writing-to-language to writing-to-writing, to enhance my reading and writing proficiency. I believe my writing proficiency level has reached B2 to C1 as I am capable of writing more complex and structured texts, utilizing sources to prove my points, presenting different perspectives or arguments, and reaching reasonable conclusions. As for reading, I believe my current proficiency has reached B2 to C1 as I understand complex texts within my field with minimum difficulty with unknown words and moderately comprehend serious topics and academic texts outside my area of specialty.

Here is an illustration of how authentic materials contributed to my reading and writing proficiency during my years of learning the language:

Table 1. Contribution of authentic materials to reading and writing proficiencies

Stage	Authentic Materials	Contribution micro- and macro-skills according to Brown & Abeywickrama (2018) and CEFR]	
		Reading	Writing
1	No authentic materials used	pre-A1	pre-A1
2	Songs in English Movies in English	Recognized basic words in my textbooks and other media. Understand the meaning of simple sentences. A2- overall reading comprehension: can understand short, simple text containing the highest frequency vocabulary,	Produced simple sentences in command. A1- overall written production: can write simple isolated phrases and sentences

3	Songs in English Movies in English	<p>including a proportion of shared international items.</p> <p>Recognized sufficient grammatical word classes.</p> <p>Interpreted more complex sentences.</p> <p>Recognized the communicative function of certain texts.</p>	<p>Produced acceptable grammatical system sentences.</p> <p>Produced sentences with connections between events sufficiently.</p>
		<p>A2- overall reading comprehension: can understand short, simple text on familiar matters of a concrete type that consists of high-frequency every day or job-related language.</p>	<p>A2- overall written production: can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors.</p>
4	Songs in English Movies in English Videos in English Academic text in English	<p>Distinguished between literal and implied meanings sufficiently.</p> <p>Infer implicit context with background knowledge.</p>	<p>Express meanings in different grammatical forms.</p> <p>Accomplish communicative functions of written texts according to form and purposes.</p>
		<p>B1/B2- overall reading comprehension: can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field and interests with a satisfactory level of comprehension; and can read to a degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading with different purposes, and use appropriate sources selectively.</p>	<p>Convey links or relations, such as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification.</p>
5	Songs in English Movies in English Videos in English Academic text in English Fiction and nonfiction books in English	<p>Recognize cohesive devices in written discourse to signal the relationship between and among clauses.</p> <p>Detect culturally specific references and interpret them reasonably in the context of the appropriate cultural schemata.</p> <p>Develop reading strategies, guess the meaning of words from context, and activate schemata for the interpretation of texts.</p>	<p>Use cohesive devices in written discourse.</p> <p>Distinguish between literal and implied meanings when writing.</p> <p>Convey culturally specific references sufficiently.</p> <p>Develop writing strategies and conduct the writing process.</p>
		<p>B2/C1- overall reading comprehension: can read with a large degree of</p>	<p>B2/C1- overall written production: can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his field of interest, synthesizing and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources;</p>

independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low-frequency idioms; can understand in detail lengthy, complex texts, whether or not they relate to his/her area of specialty, provided he/she can reread difficult sections.

Having reflected and analyzed these experiences, this finding suggests that employing convenient conditions for learners, consistent self-motivation, and incorporating authentic materials would significantly enhance language learning. The use of materials created or presented by native speakers, mutual interest, and student-teacher personal engagement all contribute to the authenticity of learning materials (Gilmore, 2007). Implementing extensive reading and writing processes has been highly beneficial for me as a language learner to enhance both skills. As previously mentioned, self-reflection is a retrospective on one's abilities and motivation to influence actions in developing a set of plans. As a non-native EFL teacher, I draw on my personal experience to help me decide my teaching strategies. I put myself in my students' shoes as I ever was in their position, and found a way to teach certain materials effectively, considering how I dealt with them years ago. Creating a safe space is also an indicator of successful learning in the classroom. Although I may not naturally be an animated teacher, I strive to encourage my students to express themselves freely in the class. The struggle that I constantly faced with my students was that they were afraid of making mistakes, especially in this subject, which many found intimidating than enjoyable. Additionally, their unpleasant habit of teasing or laughing at their friend when they made mistakes was disruptive and discouraging, and it hindered a productive learning environment. To facilitate better learning outcomes, I incorporated a variety of authentic materials into my lesson, supplementing the prescribed textbook from school with diverse media that could better engage and support students. These points illustrated how my self-reflection influenced my current level of proficiency and informed my approach to classroom teaching strategies.

4. Conclusion and suggestion

This study set out to explore my experiences of acquiring the English language over the years, which focuses on reading and writing skills, by demonstrating how a supportive environment and utilizing authentic materials have significantly influenced the researcher's language development. Over time, researchers' attitude towards English transformed from aversion to appreciation and active use. Nevertheless, there is still much to learn, particularly in light of my role as a non-native EFL teacher. A limitation of this study is that some memories might have been overlooked, which could affect the completeness of the reflections presented. Moreover, my experiences might not be universally applicable, as individual circumstances vary. Despite its limitations, the study offers insights that may encourage teachers to engage in self-reflection on their language proficiency, reevaluate their teaching practices in the ELT classroom, and contribute to research in this area. Further research is recommended to address the gaps identified in this study.

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