

I LOVE TEACHING: The reflective stories of English teachers at achieving schools in Banda Aceh

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the teachers teaching strategies in six high achieving schools in Banda Aceh. One main purpose of the study was to explore particular strategies teachers use in conducting teaching effectively. The study was approached using the qualitative classroom research. The settings of the study were six high achieving secondary schools in Banda Aceh. The data of the study were collected through in-depth semi-structured Interview, observation and also focus group discussion. The data which was analysed using coding techniques reveals that most teachers interviewed suggested that they feel teaching at schools was at ease, and this due to mostly their extensive teaching experiences, trainings and Students' learning passion.

Keywords: *Learners-centred instructions; teaching strategies; achieving schools.*

INTRODUCTION

Effective teaching is the first and the foremost prerequisite for 'good' learning to take place. Teachers as one of the main actors for effective learning to occur are required to have many types of education-related competent. In fact, the Indonesian Teacher and Lecturer Law mandates that teachers should acquire personal, professional, pedagogical and also social competent. Having gained these

competences, teachers are believed to have been well prepared to engage in effective teaching. These competences therefore are important for effective teaching to occur.

In regard with pedagogical competent, teachers should acquire general content knowledge and also pedagogical content knowledge. The content knowledge is also known as subject matter knowledge. This refers to teachers' ability to gain sufficient knowledge on subject they are teaching. For instance, an EFL teacher should acquire knowledge of English before he/she could actually engage in language instruction. While pedagogical content knowledge refers to teachers' ability in transferring knowledge to students. As qualified teachers are important for successful leaning, educational institutions should guarantee that their teachers should be qualified enough to teach effectively and efficiently.

There are many factors leading to effective teaching; it could be personal, social, cultural and also economic aspects. Teachers' qualification, such as their level of academic status, in-service training, students' readiness to learn, and school culture are some of important factors that help produce quality teaching. These factors are interrelated with each other, and are seen to vital for educational development.

Improving academic qualification is a must academic journey that all teachers should pursue. This is because the higher academic qualification is the better teachers' professional competent will be. For example, teachers who hold the B, Ed are encouraged to pursue their M. Ed. In addition, in-service training available to teachers gives opportunities to teachers to improve their professional, pedagogical, social and also personal competence. Apart from these two important factor leading to effective teaching, social environment and social capital shape teachers' ways of classroom practices; students' willingness to learn and the nature of classroom they are in influence their teaching instructional process (Louws, Meirink, van Veen, & van Driel (2017)

All countries and societies bring with them certain cultural values and those values are also brought into school settings. For instance, cultural values exercised in Indonesian mainstream societies outside school building are for sure exercised

within the Indonesian school buildings. Having brought into school building, these values also influence instructional process.

THE INDONESIAN SCHOOL CULTURES

The Indonesian school cultures seem to have been influenced by the culture of the Indonesian society. Research by Hofstede (2014) suggests that the Indonesian cultural values are seen as big power distance. It means that the elders are still respected as such, in which younger people choose to listen and abide by their elders' comments (Zulfikar, 2013). This in turn, shape certain ways of instructional process in Indonesian schools. Some scholars argue that teacher-centred classroom instruction is deeply embedded in the Indonesian school settings; this type of instruction is in fact, seen as an important part in the Indonesian school culture (Azra, 2002; Bjork, 2005; Buchori, 2001). There is a consensus that such an instruction method provides little room for students to be creative and expressive (Kohl, 1994; Shor, 1992; Wolk, 1998). Teacher-centred classroom instruction is considered to be less democratic because it fails to take into account students' learning dynamics and ignores students' contributions in the classroom (Wolk, 1998). This creates classroom passiveness, in which some students choose not to learn, or as Kohl's term 'the not want learning'. In addition to teacher-centred instruction, rote learning is still common in Indonesian schools (Bjork, 2005). There is no suggestion that rote learning should be totally avoided in the Indonesian context because this type of instruction has some advantages for students as well; for example, rote learning of historical dates is in fact necessary as a part of learning. However, excessive use of rote learning means there is less emphasis on more student-centred aspects of learning, such as the critical analysis of history itself. Rote learning plays a large part in Indonesian schools because it is believed to be able to transfer knowledge to students through memorisation. With rote learning, students are judged to be successful when they are able to memorise lessons or topics within their subjects. Even though education practitioners in Indonesia criticise the use of excessive rote learning and attempt to eliminate it (Azra, 2002), such a method prevails.

However, the Indonesian education practitioners argue that there are ways to improve teaching qualities in the Indonesian schools, one of which is through deconstructing the teacher-centered instruction to learner-centred. The latter recognises and appreciates students' presence in the classroom. In learner-centred teaching environments, students come to recognise their own potential talents. Teachers adopting a learner-centred teaching style not only understand their subject matter but also position themselves as learners so they can be more understanding of students' social background (McCombs & Miller, 2007). The most important of all is that, according to Shor (1992), learner-centred classes allow the emergence of democratic dialogue. Such a dialogue is significant in the attempt to create a healthy learning environment because it gives students the space to voice their understanding or point of view on issues. Shared authority in the classroom will allow critical dialogue to emerge.

We share understanding of good learning with prominent figures in the field of education, such as John Dewey, Ira Shor, Paulo Freire and other important figures in the field who believe that effective learning occurs through learner-centred instruction. We refer to Zulfikar's (2009) article in which he argues that Indonesian teachers are not willing to share classroom authority, while the willingness to share authority is a prerequisite for learner-centered instruction. Furthermore, in Zulfikar (2013), we understand that it is difficult to instill progressive ideas to students who hold the doctrine that challenging elders are not appropriate. In his recent article 'Indonesian Education: its efforts for progressive learning environment', Zulfikar (2014), argues that teachers and parents should shift their outlook on education. He emphasizes in the article that teachers should understand principles of learner-centered approach for its effective implementation.

It has been understood from the theoretical framework that there are challenges and also complexities in the implementation of learner-centered instruction in Aceh, Indonesia. However, Finn (1999) argues that different schools cultures shape different ways of instruction. As discussed in Finn (1999), Jean Anyon conducted research in five different public schools in the USA; an Elite school, an affluent professional school, a middle class school, and two working class schools.

Anyon's findings suggest that teachers' ways of teaching and students' ways of learning are different in schools mentioned above. For example, in the elite and the affluent professional schools, students are actively engaging in the learning process, and most of the time, teachers play facilitator roles where they facilitate learning through posing some issues to be discussed by students, while in the middle and working class schools, students tend to be passive and teachers are trapped into implementing teacher-centred instruction.

In referring to these findings, we tend to believe that instructional process in high and low achieving schools are different, and that leads us to explore how high achieving schools in Aceh, especially in the city of Banda Aceh approach classroom instruction; do teachers implement learner-centred instruction? If they do, are there any particular strategies these teachers apply in the implementation of the learner-centred instruction?

This prospective research will learn successful stories of effective secondary school teachers in their implementation of learner-centered instruction. Our main concern in this research is to understand how teachers in high achieving schools in Aceh effectively implement learner-centered instruction. It is also our intellectual curiosity to explore challenges that these teachers face in encouraging learning participations of their students, and how they solve these challenges. This research also explores high achieving schools' ways of inviting student parents and communities to engage in improving schools. To uncover all these issues, we use qualitative classroom research. As we also explore communities' perceptions on their roles in schools within their localities, we also use a small scale ethnographic research, in which I community leaders are interviewed and engage in their active participation at schools.

UNDERSTANDING CLASSROOM PRACTICES

This study is conducted through a qualitative classroom research. In this context, classroom is defined as wide ranges of learning contexts, in which teachers-learners and learners-learners interact in the context of learning. Classroom is then referred to classes where instruction takes place, 'multi-media lab, distance learning

situations, one-to-one tutoring' (Brown & Rodgers, 2002, p. 79) and other places within a particular school building where learning process is feasible.

Participants and Research Settings

The study is conducted at 6 high achieving schools in Banda Aceh: MA_M; SM_FH; SM_MB; SM_T; SM_LS; and SM_FB (all pseudonym). These schools are seen as high achieving secondary schools in Banda Aceh. In each school three teachers were invited to become participants; a total of 12 teachers were interviewed and also observed during their classroom practices. In addition, a coordinator of curriculum from each school is also invited to take part in the study. The selected participants are expected to represent gender, in which male and female teachers are recruited. This is important because different gender produces different perceptions and experience. In fact, the selection was simply purposive at targeted schools of research. However, it was highly estimated that samples are able to enlighten important information on research issues. The participants will be initialised as P1_M; P2_M, which refer to teachers from MA-M, while P1_FH and P2_FH refer to SM_FH, other participants follow this similar categorization.

Observation

Most of the data for this research were obtained at high achieving secondary schools, and most of the time, fieldwork was conducted in classrooms during instruction, especially for observation data. We basically observed teachers' classroom practices; mainly by looking at their ways of distributing the wealth in the classroom-providing equal opportunities to students to engage in learning activities. We also observed teachers' ways of asking students' responses as well as responding to students' inquiries. Basically, we are looking at democratic instructional process in the classroom.

The observations were carried out in participative way in order to maintain the accuracy and richness of data. Having participative observations also brought qualified understanding of the topics problems of the study. Furthermore, we observed classrooms during the teaching process as the purposes of understanding teachers' teaching methods, strategies, interaction, and students performances. By

this, it would be able to perceive and portrait the relation between teachers and students.

In-Depth interview

In addition to observation, we also used **in-depth interviews** to generate in-depth data from teachers in those six schools and curriculum coordinators respectively. In addition, we were accustomed to school environment through an ethnographic study, in which we participate in the community and interviews with some community leaders, our observation of teaching practices, and interviews of the teachers. The main purpose of the step was to explore and understand perspectives of teachers on their challenges, experiences and lessons learned during their duty at schools. By offering questions on their teaching performance, we expect to learn how hard or easy the teaching reflects. It is important to sit and interact through the one on one interviews.

REFLECTIVE STORIES OF EFL TEACHERS

Our fieldwork generated important findings on teaching classroom of EFL teachers in high achieving school in Banda Aceh. Most of them showed joyful and are passionate enough of teaching career. During the observation and interview, we at consistently observed that they were happy and satisfied for their assignment to become teachers in those prominent schools in Banda Aceh . As one of them suggest:

I feel blessed to be assigned in this prominent school. I can carry out my teaching well, since the majority of my students are very passionate in their learning. These students are very much active and participative during instruction, and I believe being active learning is the first and prerequisite for effective learning (P1_M)

The majority of participants expressed how thankful they are being teachers in those outstanding school although they see that it is more challenging being part of achieving schools.

It is indeed a good to be at these good school, but I need to work harder and it is more challenging I believe compared to if I teach in low achieving schools (P2_T)

These teachers argue that being in outstanding school demands lots of professionalism, totality, focus, and extra works. However, these teachers seem to enjoy and in fact thankful being part of high achieving schools.

Effective classroom instruction

The research found that most teachers have been well-qualified to teach. They are experienced and as well as expert teachers. This allows them to have high level of pedagogical content knowledge.. The finding reveals that these participants have gained extensive teaching experience; they have been teaching over 10 years. In addition, we found that a large number of our participants had been tenured in various kinds of schools, low and high achieving school alike prior to their appointment at current schools. P2_MB for example stated:

I was well selected and assigned to teach at several achieving schools under the authorisation of Provincial Education Department. Before I actually take this position, I have been experiencing teaching in many different school, and being in many different schools allow me to grasp extensive knowledge both on subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge

This suggests that experience shape one's teaching attitudes. Element was considered important to picture their deployment at schools. Teachers elaborated that". The Department supervises the high schools across the Aceh Province, and the teachers admit that this is beneficial in achieving schools' learning programs. Teachers added that "achieving schools achieve priorities and focuses of the department" (P1_LB). Therefore, there are a number of positive impacts enjoyed by teachers at high achieving schools.

On the spotlight of the authority

The interview also reveals that being at these prominent schools benefit them in some respects. These schools will attract the Department of Education in the provincial level. For that reason alone, the teachers are more exposed toward professional development related programs. These teachers for example come across many opportunities for professional development. In fact, because of the

school status, the teachers oftentimes join national program representing the Province of Aceh. One of these teachers stated:

I find it advantageous to be in one of those high achieving school in Banda Aceh. For example, I am exposed to many enrichment program conducted by Department of Education in the provincial level or in the national level. My participation in professional development related program for sure will benefit me a lot (P1_FB).

Most teachers have been trained and are skilful due to their experience before being assigned at achieving schools. Training highly influenced teachers' successes in maintaining their teaching achievement at the schools. Teachers admitted that they were fully trained, so it was important for them to appear professional at schools. In spite of this benefit, some of them also argue that being in these high achieving schools is also a burden for them. They should always meet the expectation of the government. They are always under the spotlight of the authority as they should set example to teachers in different schools. One of them said that "having fully and strict supervision from the authority sometime creates a feeling of discomfort; the authority seems to shadow my performance" (P2_T). This assertion shows that in spite of some benefit gained being at those good school, some discomforts are also revealed.

Students' readiness to learn

Our interview and observation show important findings. As we observed, we found that these schools are full of smart students. As smart students by nature, they are active and participative students. These students are good at learning independently, in which they are creative in their learning. These qualities give so much benefit for schools that they are capable of making their own learning. P2_FH stated, "one of the advantages being in the public school is students' quality, who are considered as best or excellent".

The fact that students would learn best eases teachers in many respects, such as in preparing and delivering instructional activities. It has been a common knowledge that admission to these high achieving schools is not easy. Student should follow certain strict procedure. In fact, some private high achieving schools

are very strict in their admission requirement. As the result, they are able to give admission to some smartest students in Aceh. One teacher, for example stated: "the students' recruitment was strict; they find the the best candidates, and they almost always accept highly qualified students" (P2_MB), As a result of high qualified students, teachers find very helpful in their attempt to design teaching materials and also strategies. It is believed that students' quality shapes teachers' strategies in instructional process seems very true. Some teachers explain that "we do not find any serious problems during teaching, students may adopt well and easy in teaching activities" (P2_T).

Healthy instructional atmosphere

Another important finding of this research was the fact that teachers are able to create healthy interaction between students and teachers and also students and students. Our observation shows a high level of interaction taking place during the instructional process within classroom in these high achieving schools.

In our interviews with teachers, they elaborated that one of the important factors for this healthy interaction is the nature of students' ability to learn well. One participant for example stated that "students are mostly gifted, therefore, teachers find it easy in building mutual teaching relationship" (P2_MB). Furthermore, other participant also stated that "the advance of students openness and in attitudes open spaces for cooperative and interactive ways of teaching learning at schools" (P1_T). It was revealed that some teachers deliberately explained how their students respect teachers and other classmates in any exchanges or interactions.

CONCLUSION

Referring back to the objective, the research attempted to understand how teachers in high achieving schools in Banda Aceh effectively implement learner-centered instruction. The study found that teachers experience, strategies and relationship in learning activities are important facts found in these high achieving school.

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