

First Year Teaching in the Pandemic Era: I Survived!

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Vignette

"Experience is not the best teacher. Evaluated experience is." This quote by John C. Maxwell resonates with my first year teaching at the university level, although teaching was not completely new for me. I started teaching English to kindergarten and primary school students while I was finishing my undergraduate degree in English Education. Upon graduating, I worked in a language school for adults who were around 15 to 65 years old. When I was doing a master's in TESOL, I worked as a student staff at our self-access center and became a teaching assistant too. I also had a teaching practicum for 15 weeks during my final semester. With these experiences, I was confident and ready to start my professional journey. I had also set certain expectations regarding my classes and what kind of teacher I wanted to be.

However, the beginning of my career was not as smooth as I thought it would be. In 2020, we transitioned from face-to-face to online teaching, a situation many of us had never experienced. Hence, the confidence, readiness, and expectations I had were not enough to get me through my first year. I often found myself exhausted and not able to enjoy teaching the way I used to, hence, I kept asking myself, "am I doing this right?" One day, I just sat down, reflected on my graduate school days, and remembered a discussion we had in one of our classes: "Teaching is not about what's right or wrong. It's about finding what works for us and our students." From this point, I regained some motivation and learned the importance of reflective practice for my professional development.

Objectives

- To share my experience with other first-year teachers so they know that they are not struggling alone.
- To encourage teachers to do reflective practice regularly for their professional development and motivation.

Practical Implications

Reflective practice can be described as a reflection over teachers' daily practices in the classroom, including challenges and successes, in order to make conscious decisions for the improvement of future practices (Farrell, 2015; Rushton & Suter, 2012). In other words, reflective practice is a personal tool for teachers to assess themselves and to be aware of the reasons behind their decisions. Farrell (2018) proposes some activities to facilitate reflective practice which can be done individually, with peers, or in groups: Teaching journals, critical friends, teacher development groups, class observations, and action research.

To do any of the suggested activities, I faced two main issues. First, I did not have enough time to prepare for my classes, grade, give feedback on students' work, or research. Second, I felt anxious about my teaching practice. For many new teachers, it is uncomfortable to see that some activities may not work in our classes or to admit that we do not perform as well as our own expectations. These two problems led me to choose individual reflection among the proposed activities. By doing individual reflection, I did not have to set a specific time and I could personalize the questions for my reflection. Instead of asking myself what was right or wrong, these were three questions I formulated for my reflection:

1. Who am I as a teacher?

I think this is a crucial question as the answers influence our decision making in the class. I aspire to be a teacher who listens to what students say. I want my students to know that learning is their responsibility, this is their class, and learning English is a process.

2. What will my students feel about certain activities?

The second question is related to my answers for the first question. As teachers we often forget how students feel as we focus on ourselves as a teacher. Taking students'

feelings into account does not mean indulging them, but it means balancing between giving them challenges and avoiding unnecessary stress because I want students to enjoy the learning process.

3. What can I do better next?

To answer this question, I consider what works in my class and what does not work. Although it is important to be critical with our teaching practices when we do reflection, we should be aware not to overly criticize ourselves.

Remember that the point of doing reflection is to improve ourselves positively.

Reflective Conclusion

By reflecting back on my experience and trying to answer those three questions, I decided to implement some changes when I entered my second year. For example, during my first year, I tried to give personal feedback on all of the students' assignments. I used to like reading my teachers' feedback which was why I demanded myself to do the same. Yet, giving personal feedback took up so much time. Now, I prioritize which assignments need personal feedback and use my time effectively. Another change that I made was how I used technology in the class. At the beginning of online teaching, I tried to use different applications, such as *Kahoot*, *Google Classroom*, *Flipgrid*, and *Quizlet*. I realized students were overwhelmed with using technology, so I decided to use just *Zoom*, *Kahoot*, and *Google Classroom*. I focus more on making sure students feel familiar with the applications and they are comfortable with online classes.

My reflection also changed how I perceived the use of English in the class. I used to be strict with an English-only policy in the class. I am now more flexible and allow students to check their understanding using Japanese with their friends. I sometimes try saying one or two things in Japanese that make students laugh and that helps develop our relationship. Finally, my reflection also makes me more comfortable to practice learner autonomy. I am more willing to engage students in making decisions, giving them options, and encouraging them to be active. These changes made my second year a much better academic year. This experience also motivates me to keep reflecting on my teaching practice. By sharing this experience, I hope teachers, especially

novice teachers, feel inspired to reflect on their own experiences.

References

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