TEACHING REFLECTION AND ENGLISH ONLINE TO VIETNAMESE RURAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Quality teaching and learning English require educators and students to actively update their knowledge of English language as well as to reflect on their teaching and learning techniques. They also need to learn new technology as the Covid-19 Pandemic has forced educators around the globe to teach online which many of them as well as their students have never done before. In this paper, we demonstrate how we used a reflective cycle framework that consists of five actions: *Describe, Analyse, Transform, Act and Evaluate* (DATAE framework) to teach English and how we facilitated reflective practice among students who were mainly from rural areas in Vietnam and had never studied English online before our course. We will explain how we empowered 29 students at a university in a small town in Vietnam to engage in learning online with educators from Australia for nine weeks during 2021 and how technology such as Moodle can enhance English language teaching and learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our reflection on our teaching experience and on students' learning experience will contribute to the rethinking of English Language Education in the COVID Era.

Key words: reflect; DATAE framework; Moodle; Facebook; rural students

INTRODUCTION

Quality teaching and learning English require educators and students to actively update their knowledge of English language as well as to reflect on their teaching and learning techniques. However, students in rural areas of Vietnam have limited opportunities to practice listening and speaking in English (Dang et al., 2021) and they are not taught how to reflect on their experiences to consolidate their learning (Tran et al., 2018). Furthermore, students in rural areas and small towns need to learn new technology as the Covid-19 Pandemic has forced educators around the globe to teach online which many students have never done before.

In 2017, the first and the second authors were invited to teach English as guest lecturers at Quang Nam University. The university offers a four-year course of English major to about 500 students per year. Students learn listening, speaking, reading and writing in English. Final year students are encouraged to sit for the IELTS exams upon their graduation. According to Quang Nam University's standard, course assessment tasks for second-year students are at band 4.5 of the IELTS

scale, third-year students at band 5.5 and final year students at band 6.5. According to the IELTS exams, band 4 students "frequently show problems in understanding and expression. They are not able to use complex language." Band 5 students "are likely to make many mistakes. They should be able to handle basic communication in their own field."(British Council, 2022).

After the 2017 visit, the first author designed online courses to teach reflection and English to Vietnamese students (Tran et al., 2018). The courses were free of charge and the students were free to participate outside their university classes. During 2021 we taught students at Quang Nam University online for nine weeks from 12 April to 13 June.

This paper presents learning theories and outlines the contents of our course for students in rural Vietnam to develop their English with us, two educators from Australia, during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: (1) literature review and key concepts (2) Procedure and Activities (3) Discussion and Reflection, and (4) conclusion.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND KEY CONCEPTS

In 2008, the government of Vietnam announced the National Foreign Languages Project known as the NFL 2020 project, Decree 1400, or Project 2020 which required university graduates to have a good command of a foreign language to communicate confidently. This project fulfils Vietnam's industrialization and modernization objectives (Le et al., 2017). However due to overcrowded classes, lack of proper training and resources, the objectives of this project have not been achieved (Nguyen, 2017). The shortfall of the objectives is more pronounced in rural areas where students lack the modern equipment needed for learning a foreign language, and there is a lack of educators trained in teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. These problems are exacerbated in countryside because students are not in contact with native English speakers (Dang et al., 2021). Furthermore it is a common practice among Vietnamese teachers to provide exercises for students to learn grammar and vocabulary and to complete their lessons in classrooms only (Nguyen, 2017).

Leaning activities in a well-balanced language course cover four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Meaning-focused input involves giving learners the opportunity to learn from listening and reading. Meaning-focused output involves learning through speaking and writing. Language-focused learning involves a deliberate focus on language features such as pronunciation, spelling, word parts, vocabulary, collocations, grammatical constructions and discourse features. Fluency involves making the best use of what learners have already known and giving them the opportunity to practice fluency in listening, speaking, reading and writing so that they are able to receive and produce language at a reasonable rate (Nation & Yamamoto, 2012).

There are four types of activities: experience activities which involve students performing activities within their previous experience; shared activities which involve students learning from other team members in small groups; guided activities which involve students doing already partly completed tasks and, independent activities which

involve students working independently without assistance or preparation (Nation & Macalister, 2019).

Vygotsky's Social Constructive theory of learning requires interaction between learners and their peers (Vygotsky, 1980). Learning occurs through interaction with facilitators who are skilful and have the ability to help the learner to construct new knowledge by providing support (scaffolding) based on the learners' existing knowledge (Vygotsky, 1980). Thus both learners and facilitators form a partnership in the learning (Naude & Bezuidenhout, 2015).

Reflection is widely taught around the World (Graham & Phelps, 2003). In Australia reflective learning strategies were taught to first-year students of a Bachelor of Education program (Graham & Phelps, 2003) and to professionals learning Accounting Information Systems (Tran & Anvari, 2013a). Cinkara (2016) reported a case study with students of an intensive language programme in Turkey in which the efficiency of learning and teaching improved when reflection was included in students' activities. Tran et al. (2018) introduced the reflective concept to second-year university students in Vietnam while teaching them English grammar and compositions. "Reflective capacity" provides graduates with tools of competence in their professional practice (Anvari & Tran, 2014).

2. PROCEDURE AND ACTIVITIES

To encourage students to reflect on their learning experiences, we structured our lessons according to the reflective cycle framework: *Describe, Analyse, Transform, Act and Evaluate* (DATAE framework) (Tran & Anvari, 2013b, 2013a).

We used Moodle as an online learning technology platform because Moodle was widely available, free and easy to use. We created a private Facebook group for communication purposes because every student had a mobile phone and a Facebook account. Students received notification daily for new activities of the day. We noticed that students would check their Facebook regularly. We created all our online lessons in Moodle. Moodle is accessible via computers or mobile phones. Moodle provides tools for educators to create lessons such as forums and quizzes. Moodle provides log files of the activities to allow educators to observe students' online activities. Moodle is free for up to 50 users at one time. However the free version of the Moodle provides a limited amount of storage for uploading material which makes the postings restricted to text with small images.

Facebook is a tool that is almost universally available and provides a number of functionalities similar to Moodle such as reading and replying to posts, listening and watching videos. Facebook also allows students to upload their video assignments. However Facebook does not provide any logging of the user activities. Hence its use for teaching and research purposes is limited.

Our learning activities cover four strands that are recommended for a language course:

1. *Meaning-focused input*: learning from listening and reading.
2. *Meaning-focused output*: learning through speaking and writing.

3. Language-focused learning: learning language features such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical constructions.

4. Fluency: learning to make the best use of what is already known: fluency practice in listening, speaking, reading and writing (Nation & Yamamoto, 2012).

We provided students with feedback on every piece of writing and video material they posted during their studies.

Based on the five actions - *Describe, Analyse, Transform, Act* and *Evaluate* (Tran & Anvari, 2013b, 2013a) - of the DATAE framework, we divided our teaching materials into five active lessons. For every lesson, there was an assignment. The assignment for each lesson encouraged students to reflect on their previous assignment and improve on their work. Each lesson has four types of learning activities: experience activities, shared activities, guided activities and independent activities (Nation & Macalister, 2009).

The five lessons were as follows: Lesson 1: *Describe*; Lesson 2: *Analyse*; Lesson 3: *Transform*; Lesson 4: *Act* - a major assignment for this lesson was making a video which was posted in the Facebook group; Lesson 5: *Evaluate*. In addition there was lesson 6: *Reflect* - for students to reflect at the end of the course.

Lesson One taught students to '*describe*'. There were seven activities, one activity per day. In this lesson students read two samples of written text covering personalities and study methods of two fictitious Vietnamese students (meaning-focused input activities). They posted new words they learnt and explained their meanings and constructed sentences using the new words. They answered questions about the traits of the sample writings (language-focused learning activities), wrote a piece about themselves and other members of their team (meaning-focused output activities). They read to learn from each other and wrote a piece describing their team (meaning-focused output activities and Vygotsky's theories of learning). They reflected on their study and their learning (fluency development activities).

Lesson Two taught students to '*analyse*' a written piece. There were seven activities, one activity per day. Students learnt the meaning and processes of 'analysis'. They watched a video to learn pronunciation and listening (meaning-focused input and language-focused learning activities). They were given two samples of written text covering personalities and study methods of two fictitious Australian students, a bright student and a mediocre student, (meaning-focused input activities). They posted the meanings of new words that they learnt and wrote sentences using the new words. They analysed the sample writings (meaning-focused output activities). They also analysed their own and their team members' writing. They read and learnt from each other (meaning-focused input activities and Vygotsky's theories of learning). They reflected on their engagement and disengagement with the course (fluency development activities).

Lessons Three, Four and Five had 14-days of activities each.

Lesson Three taught students the meaning and processes of '*transforming*' (language-focused learning activities). They watched sample videos to learn how to describe personal traits, how to talk about their studies, grammar lesson (meaning-

focused input and language-focused learning activities). They watched videos to learn from second-year students in previous classes (meaning-focused input activities). They also watched a video to learn how to describe oneself (meaning-focused input and fluency development activities). They studied their own writing and the feedback they received (language-focused learning activities). They re-wrote the pieces that they posted in previous lessons, taking into consideration the new knowledge (meaning-focused output and fluency development activities).

Lesson Four taught students the meaning and processes of '*acting* their writing' and speaking their writing. They watched videos how to describe personalities and how to give a speech (meaning-focused input and Vygotsky's theories of learning activities). They watched videos to learn from second-year students in previous classes and learnt about qualities of speaking (meaning-focused input activities). They prepared a video of themselves speaking / presenting their work (meaning-focused output and fluency development activities).

Lesson Five taught students the meaning and processes of '*evaluation*'. There were lessons that taught students to evaluate personal traits, grammar and writing. Students learnt to evaluate and reflected on what they had learnt.

Lesson Six taught students the meaning and processes of '*reflection*'. They learnt to reflect on their learning experiences. This lesson felt on the week of their exams.

3. DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Students started the second semester after the Vietnamese New Year (Tết) holidays in mid-February 2021. Because of Covid-19 in early May 2021 the university was shut down for two weeks. Students had their university semester exams in late June and finished university at the end of June.

Twenty-nine students from two classes participated in our online study.

Nineteen students were from a first-year day-time class (Class One). They were recent high school graduates, mostly from Quang Nam province. Their postings indicated that they had not yet adapted to university's studying methods. The university course duration was four years and covered 60 subjects with 144 credit points. They attended university 20 hours per week for lectures and their homework was estimated to take approximately 20 hours per week. During their first year, they studied 18 subjects: Speaking 1, Speaking 2, Listening 1, Listening 2, Reading 1, Reading 2, Writing 1, Writing 2, Grammar 1, Grammar 2, Training speech, Physical Education 1, Physical Education 2, Philosophy, Economy-Policy, French, Information Technology, Defence and Security policy.

Ten students were from a second-year evening class (Class Two). They were busy professionals with a full-time job. The duration of their course at the university was two-and-a-half years that covered 50 subjects with 126 credit points. They attended lectures for six hours per week. They studied 18 subjects a year, two or three hours of study per subject per week. They were familiar with the university studying methods as this was their second degree which was needed for their day time jobs.

For Class One, 15 students actively participated in a nine-week online course. Six students completed all lessons including the video assignment but they studied individually and made a video of themselves speaking alone. Through our conversation with their teachers and through our observations in teaching them we found out that the first-year students did not know how to do team work and hence did not see the value of team work in their learning. We observed that the students who participated in the course were either from villages or mountainous regions and none of them had done any team studies in schools and team work was not part of their university's syllabus. For Class Two, there were two teams of five students each, however, only five students posted their writings on forums.

Their local teacher, the third author, observed that the students tried hard to finish their tasks and post them on the forums. The students who completed their work for the course had made great efforts as they had a lot of homework and assignments to finish.

Figure 1 shows total number of posts per each student, identified by two or three letter codes. There were 15 students in Class One and five students in Class Two. Student LDN posted 36 pieces of writing and made one video. Student TH posted 35 pieces of writing and made two videos. Student TND posted 27 pieces of writing and made one video. Student LTN posted 26 pieces of writing and made one video. Student KNN posted 22 pieces of writing and made one video. Student XMT posted 19 pieces of writing and made one video. Other students did not make video, the graph shows the total number of writings each student posted.
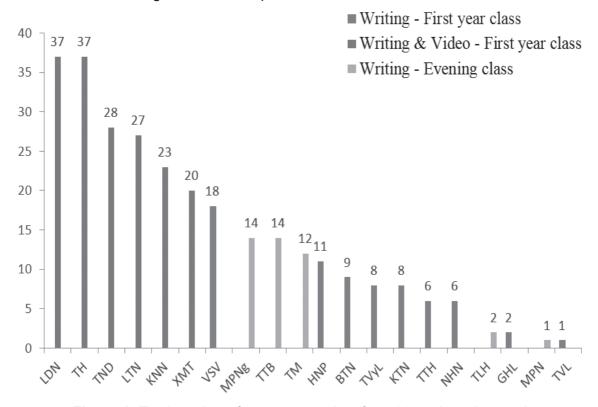

Figure 1: Total number of posts per student from 20 students in two classes

We have observed that mid-way through our online course, because of Covid-19 students had to stop attending classes at their university from early May 2021. After two weeks off, the students studied their university course online to finish their second semester in five weeks then they had exams. Despite facing Covid-19 disruption, six first-year students (out of 15 first-year students) completed all lessons and made a video of their speech.

Due to word limit, in this paper we present three sample writings of one student whose English language development we analysed. The student was 19 years old from a village in Vietnam. She lived in a boarding house and worked 45 hours per week while studying English at Quang Nam University. Prior to studying with us, she had never studied online and had never practised her English with foreigners. During her studies with us over a period of nine weeks, she posted 35 pieces of writing on the forums and made two videos of herself speaking.

Figure 2 shows Sample One of the student's post for one of the activities of lesson one. In this sample the student was instructed to write about herself.
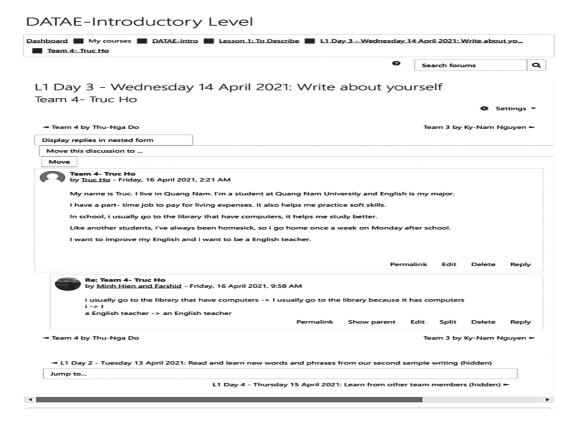

Figure 2: Sample One, posted on 14 April 2021, by TH for lesson one

Sample One consists of 87 words. It demonstrates that the student understood the required task. Her spelling of words is correct and her use of punctuation is appropriate. Her sentences are of subject-verb-object pattern. There are no complex sentences, except one that has a relative clause. Her choices of verb tenses are correct. There are

a few grammatical errors e.g. "In school, i usually go to the library that have computers, it helps me study better." These errors reflect what other researchers found that "both the learning environment and the learners' first language influence the order of acquisition" (Ellis, 2015, p. 74)

Figure 3 shows Sample Two of the student's post for one of the activities of lesson three. In this sample the student watched a video to learn to describe herself (IELTS Part 1) and was instructed to write about herself.
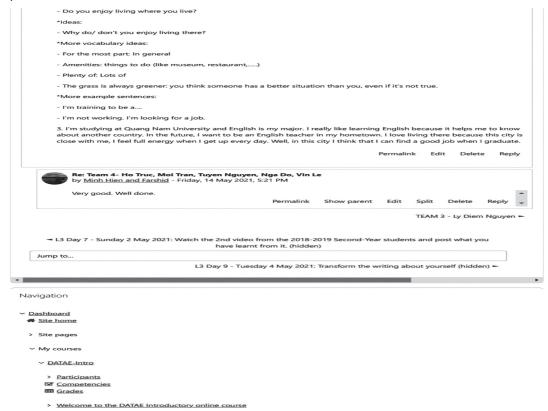

Figure 3: Sample Two, posted on 11 May 2021, by TH for lesson three.

Sample Two demonstrates that the student understood the required task and she knew how to correct her past errors (e.g. she used "I" instead of "i" in the middle of a sentence; "an English teacher" instead of "a English teacher"). Both Sample One and Sample Two show that the student wants to be a teacher of English language (an English teacher) in her hometown. This sample illustrates that the student is learning to write complex sentences (e.g. "Well, in this city I think that I can find a good job when I graduate.")

Figure 4 shows Sample Three of the student's post for one of the activities of lesson five. In this sample the student read from our sample writing about a student, named Thuy. In Q1b the student was asked to write at least five sentences to describe someone she knows who is similar to Thuy. In Q2b the student was asked to explain why does she empathise (or not empathise) with Thuy. In Q3b the student was asked to explain why does she emotionally resonate (or not resonate) with Thuy.

Figure 4: Sample Three, posted on 27 May 2021, by TH for lesson five.

Sample Three demonstrates that the student has acquired new vocabularies (e.g. "self-deprecating person", "safe zone") and can construct new sentences using these words. She did not repeat the same errors she made in previous posts (e.g. she used "I" instead of "i" and "university" instead of "school"). In this post she wrote longer and more complex sentences with compound verb tenses such as the present perfect tense (e.g. "I have gradually gained"). She wrote 75 words for Q1b, 38 words for Q2b and 50 words for Q3b about herself. Even though there are grammatical errors in some of her sentences such as "Since I came to this city, started a new life with a part-time job, I have gradually gained more confidence," she is able to express her view. Her writing is cohesive with the correct use of regular and irregular past-tense verb forms (e.g. "I have gradually gained" and "I have become").

The student's posts demonstrate that she has acquired knowledge of specific vocabularies and grammar to write about her personal experiences. Despite making some grammatical errors, she has successfully communicated her view and has learnt to reflect on her previous writing assignments to improve her English.

4. CONCLUSION

We have highlighted the challenges of teaching English to students from rural areas of Vietnam during the pandemic. Building on our experiences in teaching of English and reflective concept to students at a small university, we have designed an online course to explicitly teach reflection and English to students from rural areas of Vietnam so that these students can independently and confidently communicate in English. Our teaching activities are in line with the goals of the NFL 2020 project.

Vietnamese students who come from rural areas have limited free time outside classes because they are working while studying at university. To encourage them to study English after classes we have used reading materials that they can relate to as recommended by Phan (2007). To encourage the students to reflect on their learning, we incorporated a reflective concept into learning materials and we scaffolded them to reflect on their early writing assignments and to learn from their past mistakes (Tran et al., 2018). Our experience shows that students can learn grammar by reflecting on their early writings and on our feedback as recommended by Ngoc & Iwashita (2012). Our findings support the recommendation of Pierce (1995) to encourage English learners to reflect on their learning.

Our contributions to the rethinking of English Language Education in the Covid Era are that online technology such as Moodle can be used to design Content and Language Integrated Learning activities that teach reflection and English to first-year university students from rural Vietnam.

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