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Exploring English Vocational High School Teachers' Critical Incidents: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at identifying and exploring the critical incidents (CI) experienced by English vocational high school teachers. Their particular tasks, such as creating learning opportunities and resources that must meet the students' specific needs, bring them some challenges and difficulties. Despite the importance of CI for fostering teachers' reflective skill as well as teachers' professional development, the teachers are still unfamiliar with this systematical reflection activity. Besides, Research on this subject has been mostly restricted to EFL teachers in general and left ESP teachers like vocational teachers unexplored. By interviewing three vocational high school teachers and analyzing their CIs reflection, this study found that the most CIs teachers encountered are behavioral and students' language proficiency. Besides, their perspective on using CI as a self-reflection tool is somehow similar to the previous studies which notify that reflection is seen as challenging as well as rewarding at the same time. Some insight referring to the use of CI for a collaboration activity is seen as a promising activity for a professional development program.

Keywords: Critical Incident, ESP, Reflection, TPD, Vocational Teachers

1. INTRODUCTION

Critical incident (CI hereafter) is an unexpected event in the classroom which could stimulate teachers' consciousness of their practice [1]. This incident could be a daily incident that normally happens in every day's teaching, yet CI can initiate teachers' new understanding of teaching and learning phenomena [2]. In the process of reflecting on CIs, teachers recall their past and try to clarify what happened by explaining and understanding their actions. They may reveal their hidden beliefs and identity which unconsciously underlie their reactions [3]. In other words, when teachers could realize and recognize the aspects that trigger their actions in the past, it could turn into a good lesson for them. This reinstates Romano's statement [4] that it is critical to have teachers reflect on their practice in order to learn "how and why" they act in the classroom.

EAP/ESP teachers are expected to deal with discipline-specific content that may be beyond their area of expertise. This lack of subject knowledge can result in CIs [3]. Atai and Nejadghanbar [3] also added that investigating teachers' strategies and approaches to deal with these CIs can be useful for other teachers in the same field as it could educate them and build their self-confidence. In a similar vein, Jakson [5] stated that real cases of ESP teachers could be a valuable source of learning for novice teachers in teacher education courses as well as a way of developing teachers' professionalism and reflection. By reflecting on real cases experienced by ESP teachers in school, we could unpack the reasons "why" teachers take such actions in the class and "how" specific incidents influence their practice. This also echoes what Hall [6] suggested that ESP/EAP teachers must transcend their own levels of knowledge and take on the role of both a researcher and a teacher.

Research on ESP teachers, however, does not give enough attention to the reflection of CI by vocational high school teachers. Previous studies concern more on pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum [7] and [8] or ESP in university settings [3]. Besides, through reflection, teachers may recognize their strengths and weaknesses and learn how to make use of their informed practice, which leads to their professional development [9]. Thus, this paper aims at investigating the vocational high school teachers' CIs as well as finding out their perspective on keeping reflective journals as a way to engage in reflective practice.

1.1 Reflection on Critical Incidents: Its Significances and Challenges

Reflection is a deliberate process of evaluation and discovery that could link the gap between the theory and practice [10]. In the educational field, the principle

that underlies reflective practice is that teachers' present action is affected or directed by their past experience [11]. Gün [12], in this case, suggests that in the process of reflection, teachers should focus more on "why" questions because it leads to a critical reflection and teachers' deeper understanding of their own practice. As teachers keep questioning their practices, they transform into a teacher-researcher which is in line with Schön's theory of a reflective practitioner [14]. When teachers become reflective practitioners, they would intentionally observe and reflect on their classroom incidents by following proper techniques and obeying ethics in collecting the data about their practices.

Critical Incident (CI) is one technique that teachers could employ to engage in reflection which offers teachers a systematic analysis of every day's teaching dilemmas [11]. Previous studies showed that CI sources might come from 'students, the policies of the language school, the teacher, the materials, etc.' [14]. To engage in a formal CI reflection, Tripp [15] suggested dividing it into two parts; description and explanation. The significance of analysing CI does not lie in the description of the unexpected situation that teachers face but in how this situation could affect teachers' practices [16]. In other words, the analysis part plays a significant role in facilitating teachers' learning. The expected changes in teachers' actions, such as in the form of decision-making, result from teachers' critical analysis of the surprising events they experienced [17]. The process of engaging in a critical reflection, however, does not only offer significance but also challenges.

Analysing CI is one of the activities fostered in many professional development programs as it provides teachers and teacher educators valuable information about 'teachers' mental processes and pedagogical decisions' [1]. Teachers' stories present a 'rich source of teacher-generated information' that informs them about the problem-solving strategies they applied, their inherent assumptions, principles, and beliefs that have regulated their past and current practices [18]. Besides, when teachers become reflective practitioners, they can accept classroom problems as something natural that they could use as opportunities to change or re-create the solution for better practices [19].

On the contrary, reflective practice, especially keeping a reflective journal, is challenging for teachers to conduct. Some of the reasons are teachers' availability, motivation, lack of structure to promote reflection or teachers' unfamiliarity with reflective practice. Teachers' workloads contribute to the reason why doing reflection is a demanding task for teachers. Teachers claim that their jobs covering both academic and non-academic make them difficult to spare some time to sit and reflect. With a heavy workload, they cannot remember the details of their teaching-learning process [21]. Besides, big classes also make teachers tired after teaching the whole day long and too tired to write reflective journals [20]. She added that no immediate effect teachers could get from keeping a journal makes them unmotivated to do it. Teachers' unfamiliarity with the writing reflection process hinders their willingness to engage in reflection.

1.2 ESP and Teachers' Concerns on Teaching English in Vocational High School in Indonesian Context

The purpose of designing an ESP course is to meet the particular needs of students who wish to involve in a specific field of environment that the tasks and their methodology are matched with the discipline [22]. Thus, the center of what and how to teach the language is decided by the contexts where the students will use it in the future. In other words, ESP teaching is a student-centered approach course that the English teachers are required not only to be proficient in linguistics but also knowledgeable in a specific field of the study (content knowledge) [9]. Besides, it also demands a thorough need analysis in designing the course [23]. Unfortunately, Aslrasouli [23] stated that ESP courses in some parts of Asia were developed by other people who were not directly involved in the teaching learning process, which might not know the students' needs well. This is also true in the case of teaching ESP in Indonesian universities, in which the use of a general English curriculum in ESP courses still overshadows the content of ESP teaching [24]. Similar other issues are also found in the teaching of English in vocational high schools in the Indonesian context which become critical concerns for the English teachers.

That the ideal condition of ESP teaching in Indonesian vocational high schools has not been achieved was revealed due to certain factors. Three major issues were identified by Ananda and Ashadi [25] in their study as the teachers' challenges in teaching English in vocational high schools. The first is the national exam, regarded as one of the most determining factors in deciding students' graduation and university admission [26]. As students need to pass the national exam, teachers have a dilemma in managing their course because they need to make sure the students could pass the national exam as well as get specialized content knowledge suitable with their major. The teachers, however, do not have a sufficient amount of time to teach students some specific knowledge as they have to follow the syllabus and materials made by the government. Furthermore, the student's language proficiency is also low, making it more challenging to teach specific content as their general English proficiency does not meet the requirement.

Language proficiency relates to the users' ability to use the language for different types of communication [27]. With a high level of proficiency, one would be able to understand and use the language to communicate effortlessly. Unfortunately, Mustafa [28] found that Indonesian high school graduates' vocabulary size still could not exceed the expected range in the curriculum. Vocabulary plays a significant role in language learning; it is impossible to understand or use the language without satisfying vocabulary size.

This phenomenon might be influenced by the fact that English is a foreign language in Indonesia (EFL). English is the third language to learn at school, and students could be confused by the previous language system they acquired when they try to master the new language [29].

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted online by involving three EFL teachers (T1/Gita, T2/Nita, T3/Nida) from different vocational schools in East Java- Indonesia. The three teachers (all females) were recruited based on convenient sampling. Two teachers (Gita & Nita) have been teaching English for 6 and 7 years, while the other (Nida) is a novice teacher with five months of teaching experience in a vocational school. The participant teachers hold BA in English Language Teaching with an average age of 26 to 32 years old.

2.2 Data Collection

The data in this study included (a) teachers' reflections and (b) interview records. The data collection was done online in 5 weeks, in which all teachers sent their reflections via WhatsApp either by voice note or written (word doc). Some reflections were written in English and the rest in Indonesian. Before they submitted the reflections, they were informed about what is meant by CI and how to write it by following Richard and Farrell's guidelines [1] (context, problem, and solution/response). For this study, only those used as the samples of the data presented were translated into English. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was conducted in the last week to confirm what teachers wrote in their reflections as well as to record their opinions and experiences on the benefits and drawbacks of writing and discussing reflections. The interview was done in an informal Indonesian situation via WhatsApp. Both teachers' reflections and interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed. In order to answer the research questions, we summarized and reporting the data from teachers' reflections and interviews by employing thematic analysis with a deductive approach. In this way, we identified the categories of CIs across the data set by using the existing CI categories found by Atai and Nejadhandar [17].

2.3 Data Analysis

After the data was collected, all data were transcribed to facilitate the researchers in analyzing the data. There process of thematic analysis in this study was: data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development and revision. In the data familiarization, we read and re-read the content of teachers' reflections and the interview transcript. Then, we label all the data set by using the previous categories we had decided from Atai and Nejadhandar [17]. In the third step, we organized the data and identified emerging themes, followed by checking which data was relevant to each theme found. For the last step before writing up, we reviewed the themes or the subcategories against the data set and made revisions by combining, splitting, or discarding them. As some CIs had double meanings or consisted of two different themes/categories, thus to establish the reliability of the data, the data were analysed separately and we met to discuss some disagreements to reach the final result.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A total of 13 reflections were collected and analyzed. It was found that students' behaviour and language proficiency were the most reported CIs by the teachers in their reflections. The result of the data analysis presented four categories of CIs (behaviour, language proficiency, individual difference, and School Facility) with six subcategories (students' behaviour, teachers' behaviour, students' gender, students' language proficiency, students individual difference, and learning media). There was one category added "school facility" which was not found by Atai and Nejadhandar [17]. Table 1 presented the details of each category and subcategories of the CIs found.

Table 1. The Result of Teachers' Critical Incidents

Teacher Reflection	Behaviour			Language Proficiency	Individual Difference	Facility
	Students' behaviour	Teachers' behaviour	Students' gender	Students' language proficiency	Students individual difference	Learning media
T1	2 CI	1 CI		1 CI	1 CI	1 CI
T2		1 CI	1 CI		1 CI	
T3				5 CI		

Table 1 indicated that the most frequently reported category referred to 'language proficiency' (6 CIs) with one subcategory of 'students' language proficiency'. The second most frequently reported category was 'behaviour' (5 CIs), which was supported by three subcategories, namely 'student behaviour' (2 CIs), 'teacher behaviour' (2 CIs), and 'gender behaviour' (1 CI). The third category was 'individual differences' (1 CI), which was supported by two subcategories, called students' 'individual differences' (2 CIs). The fourth was 'media' which was supported by one subcategory, namely 'learning media' (1 CI). The following part would explain and present samples of the teachers' reflections on each category and subcategory started with the most frequent CI reported.

3.1 Students' Language Proficiency

In this category, teachers mainly reported about the poor vocabulary and grammatical competence which influenced students' language mastery as well as made the teachers felt perplexed, as one of the teachers expressed in her reflection:

"I observed that **some students had difficulty writing down the answers that I conveyed. The** answer to the question was only one word to complete a sentence in the text. **It was as if some of these students had never heard the words (important, grocery, demonstrate, together) and they heard it for the first time, so it was not easy to write it down..** I continued to read the answers over and over again until the students could write down the answers… **I tried to write down the correct answers while the students were also writing. This solution in my opinion is the most appropriate for that time**" (Nida)

In this reflection, we can see how the Nida felt disbelieved as the students were not able to write down some common words when she dictated the words to the students. Although she thought that the vocabulary was commonly found in many texts they read, many of the students did not know these words due to a lack of vocabulary mastery. From this reflection, the teacher highlighted that it was the small size of her students' vocabulary which influenced the teaching-learning

process. Thus, she had to spend more time repeating and wrote down the answer when she learned many students still could not write it correctly. The size of vocabulary knowledge is defined as the number of words that language learners know at a given level of language proficiency [30]. When students do not have sufficient vocabulary size, it will influence their language mastery as vocabulary is the key to learning a language.

Iswati and Triastuti [9] stated that students' language ability is one of the common problems ESP teachers face in ESP classes. They infer that knowing students' language ability could help teachers select appropriate material for their level. In addition, a study by Poejiastuti [24], who investigated the pedagogical challenges of ESP teaching in a university in Indonesia, found that the students were not ready to learn ESP as their English competence was still low. This condition was also stated by Solikhah [31] that grammar and vocabulary are two elements of language that make students struggle in mastering a language and its skills.

This finding of this study, however, contradicts the previous studies found, which mostly portrayed behaviour as the most category CI in the teachers' reflections [17] [8]. In Megawanti et al.' study [8], they did not find any CI related to language proficiency. This might happen because the participants of the studies and the instruments are different so that it comes with different findings.

3.2 Behaviour

Behaviour was found to be the top two most popular incidents mentioned in some previous studies [17] [8] [21] which was also true for this study. This type of incident deserves to receive more attention from teacher mentors while training their student-teachers in education program [17] as it always becomes one of the most critical incidents teachers describe. In this study, behaviour becomes a critical incident for the teachers because it presented some cases that encompassed students' inappropriate and unsightly behavior, teachers' naive and inappropriate behavior, and students' gender [17]. T2 found that students' gender came with particular behaviour that needed different treatment as she described her experience in dealing with that.

3.2.1 Gender (behaviour)

"**Teaching boys is not as easy as teaching girls.** It was the first time for me to teach boys of vocational school, especially the engineering students who were all boys. The class was very crowded at that time. Some students talked to each other and the rest were playing handphone. Then, I thought that it was impossible to deliver some material. So, I decided to take a marker and write on the whiteboard. "The one who can translate my sentence into Indonesian will get five thousand rupiahs. You can use a dictionary or cellphone.". Surprisingly, the class was suddenly silent. …. **They looked so happy and became enthusiastic to my class since then**". (Nita)

In this reflection, Nita expressed her dilemma in dealing with all male students whom she thought were very noisy and indifferent in the class. In order to make the students participate in the class activity, she used a traditional way to attract their attention by giving them some money reward if they could do it correctly. During the interview, she said that she occasionally did that, especially when creating a relational bond with her students. This strategy was done when she was a new teacher and did not really know her students yet. She added that this strategy did not really work with female students. How a teacher (a female one) should use different strategies with male students compared to a co-ed classroom was also mentioned by one of the participants in Megawanti, et al., [8] and reflected that this incident was critical because it was a challenging situation to deal with. This explains the importance of building a positive relationship between students and teachers in order to make teachers know their students better and how to deal with them, as stated by the two teachers (Gita & Nita) in their interviews. Having a good student-teacher relationship could be helpful for teaching and learning as it could improve students' motivation and achievement and the class atmosphere [32].

3.2.2 Teacher's Behaviour

In teacher behaviour, the CI described what the teacher had done and affected the students'

response/achievement in the class. The following was an example of which one reflection consisted of two different categories of CIs; students' language proficiency and teachers' behaviour. This reiterated what Farrell [33] stated that assigning a neat category of CI was difficult.

> "…to students majoring in motorcycle engineering, I made the example, "I'm repairing motorcycle in ...." But the students made different examples via Google translate, such as, "Andrew is staying with his family in America ..." The sentence was correct, but not in my direction. I used this method so that they became familiar with things in their major. Still, **the students did not understand. of the 10 example sentences I asked for, none of them matched the direction, perhaps it was because I asked too many examples"** (Gita).

We can see from the reflection how Gita realized that the one possible reason why the students were not able to finish the task was that she thought she gave them too many things to do in a short time. With low language proficiency, the students needed more time to finish the task. As a result, the students found the easiest way by using Google translation or browsing the internet, but in the end, they still could not finish it. Thus, her reflection brought her new insight about her teaching practice and the students' proficiency that she should consider the quality of the work more than the quantity. One of the signs of teachers care about their professional development is being able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses so that they could deal with them [9]

3.3 Individual Differences

The category of 'individual differences' refers to students with mixed characteristics that could create a problem for the teachers, leading to teachers' awareness of any act-specific action and its consequence in the class [17]. For example, Nita said:

> "Every person has a different character. I never imagine that I'll have such kind of character in my vocational students. He was a very polite and silent student. He never speaks at all in my class. When I asked him, he just nodded and didn't say anything. When I asked him to discuss with his friend, he just kept silent and did nothing. I didn't know what I should do then. Then, I called him to my office. He didn't want to tell me initially, but then I promised not to tell anyone. **Finally, he told me that his friends in the class always bully him"** ….The other students said that he didn't want to make a friend. When the other students want to have group work, he didn't want to join. Therefore, some students felt regret and said terrible words to him that he thought being bullied. But, when I asked the other students, they just wanted to make a joke.." **(Nita)**

This incident became critical because the teacher felt curious about why the student was so different that it disturbed the classroom atmosphere and interaction. The teacher went through many ways to deal with this case, such as talking to the class members and the student's parents. After the hearing and communicating intensively, she decided to move the student to another class as the situation in the class was not advantageous for both sides. She also asked the students to stop teasing him or making jokes about him. As mandated by Law number 14 of 2005 on teachers and lecturers, personal competence such as understanding students' characteristics/psychology is one of the competencies that every teacher needs to possess. This character could drive teachers to wisely make decisions on any occasion related to students' individual differences and prevent further conflict among the students. Besides, teachers should be supportive and friendly to their students that they need to make sure that no one makes jokes about others' mistakes in class [34].

3.4 School Facility

This category was found to be in one of the teacher's CIs as she described the condition of the class/school facilities, especially for listening activity. Listening skill is one of the skills that language learners need to master, yet poor listening media/technology might influence the outcome, as Gita said in her reflection.

> "When teaching listening skills, **the classroom facilities were inadequate. T**hey learned listening only from the laptop's sound system, while I used a notebook, so the sound quality was not clear enough for a class listening activity. I wanted the students to learn listening, but in the end, it was just an intermezzo. **Listening is only taught once a year, and there is no initiative from schools to rebuild the listening laboratory.** As a result, in the UN last year, students were very poor in listening" **(Gita)**

She was concerned with the school facility that did not support the listening activity in the class or laboratory. She mentioned that her students' listening score in the national exam was low and her reflection implied that it was due to the inadequate facility. The availability of learning facilities at school is seen as an essential factor that could foster and reinforce students' learning experience and influence students' performance [35].

3.5 Teachers' Perspectives on Writing Reflective Journal

Based on teachers' interviews after collecting teachers' reflections, it was found out that teachers found this activity challenging and rewarding at the same time. It was challenging as teachers seemed very occupied with their jobs that they did not have enough time to reflect regularly. This is also found by Chien [21] that the most challenging task of keeping a journal is the time that teachers spare to write it. Although we provided them with some examples and guidelines, they were still unfamiliar with analysing their own reflections. Thus,

during the collection of reflections, we also engaged in a discussion on the content of their reflections in order to know how they could come to such decision makings and made them realize their teaching belief. This is in line with what (Farrell, 2014) stated that some teachers are unaware of their own beliefs in teaching and how these beliefs could affect their classroom practices. From this experience, it was suggested to have a dialog with other teachers discussing teachers' reflections in order to make them learn more from their own reflections and others [3]. In other words, reflection can be a model for professional development activity in which teachers engage in a critical discussion of their reflection in a teacher learning community.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigates the types of CIs experienced by three vocational high school teachers and found 4 categories of CIs with 6 subcategories. Students' language proficiency is the most reported CI especially by the youngest teacher in this study followed by behaviour. Besides that, the subcategory of students' behaviour such as demotivation and laziness become the concerns that teachers must deal with different strategies. Teachers stated that a good relationship between students and teachers helps them manage the class and create a better atmosphere. That teachers teach different types of students requires them to be wise enough in dealing with every student's problem and find a way to a win-win solution. Reflection to CI can be a way to learn about themselves and the students and develop teachers' professionalism, yet engaging in reflection requires high commitment from teachers as it is time-consuming to be done. In addition, the teachers somehow agree that talking to others about their reflection can be beneficial to certain extent, yet managing the time to meet become another problem to do this. Although the participant teachers teach in vocational school, they do not face too much difficulty in finding the subject-related materials as the syllabus and the textbooks used are not different from general (English) high school, thus, no teachers specifically mentioned CI in this matter. The outcome may differ if the study is conducted at a university, thus we suggest future researchers to delve deeper into it.

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