



# English Teachers' Personal Practical Theory During Pandemic

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**Abstract.** Covid-19 pandemic has taught English teachers to survive and thrive especially in the ways of running our English lessons. In our experiences of teaching English during this pandemic, we sometimes do not realize that we have developed our own practical theory. This study investigated the tacit awareness. Furthermore, this study explores English teachers' development of personal practical theory during pandemic Covid-19. One hundred and thirteen (113) English teachers from different educational levels in Indonesia have participated voluntarily in this study. A semi structured questionnaire asking the participants' experiences of teaching English during pandemic as well as their so-called practical theory developed during pandemic was distributed to them online. The result shows that 85% admitted developing a practical theory. The most articulated personal practical theories include game-based learning, constructivism integrated with technology, mindfulness, joyful learning, collaboration-based learning, blended-learning using WAG, and meaningful learning. There also other personal practical theories articulated not succinctly by the participants. The research concludes that English teachers have potential to be theorists of their own practice. It is suggested that supports for English teachers' development of personal practical theories should be given by English teachers' association as well as department of education.

**Keywords:** personal practical theory · English teachers · pandemic

## 1 Introduction

In professional learning, theory plays important roles as the knowledge base of the profession after completion of its formal learning. English language teaching as a profession also has theories to be learned in the formal learning to be English teachers. The theories learned in English teacher education include theories of learning language, theories of language acquisition, theories of language, and theories of language teaching methodology [1]. These theories have been acknowledged by the English language teaching profession and English language teacher education institutions in the world. These theories in the scientific sense are the explanation of the results of systematic observation and are characterized by the formulation of definitions, axioms (basic relationships, and logically derived propositions [2]. They are conceptions of teaching [1], called (T)heory with capital t [2].

English teacher education institutions in the world also expose their students to a practicum in schools [3]. This field practice is meant to have the students get to experience how the theories they learn in the English teacher education work in the classrooms. In practicum, the students of English teacher education also have the opportunities to be mentored by the real English teachers in real classrooms [4]. In this mentorship, a discussion on how theories in scientific sense may or may not work in the field. Hence, students of English teaching are implicitly introduced to the practical theories of the mentor English teachers. Such an encounter is very possible as all individual English teachers may develop their personal practical theory throughout their teaching careers. It is a result of “critical reflection on our own classroom practices in order to better understand the nature of language teaching and learning and to arrive at explanations or hypotheses about them” [5].

The notion of personal practical theory began with the notion of post method pedagogy [6], when there was acknowledgement of English teachers as theorisers too [7]. Personal practical theory is a theory emerging from experience or practice [8]. Although it is not empirically tested, it is believed as ‘good teaching’ [9]. It is logical explanations for phenomena before a sufficiently rich collection of experiences has been formed [2]. It is called a theory with small t, called Gestalt by Korthagen and Kessel [2], compared to theory with capital T previously mentioned [2].

There are a few studies in English teachers’ personal practical theories [10–15]. Ostovar et al. [10] provided an example of how twenty English teachers provided corrective feedback in their English class in their own context specific ways, not based on theory they read in empirical laboratory studies. The authors believed that the actual practice of the teachers in their study can provide insights to the theory development in the area of corrective feedback. Burns et al.’s [12] study suggests that it takes many years for English teachers to finally realise that the teaching profession includes not only observable public activities but also private mental work, called personal practical theory. This finding is also echoed by the findings of Hardy and Edward-Groves’ [13] study. They suggested that English teachers’ learning is not only influenced by the existing practical contexts but also events they experienced in the past. In China, Li’s [14] study has shown that the beliefs of English teachers sometimes are symbiotic with what they actually do in the class. Finally, Mangubhai [15] found that English teachers’ personal practical theory of Communicative Language Teaching was seen as an amalgam of many features of CLT and of general teaching that the teachers experience in their classroom practices.

An example of personal practical theory of an English teacher on providing corrective feedbacks is like this vignette:

I said before that one of the reasons I prefer not to correct them is that for mastering various aspects and skills of language students are supposed to repeat the linguistic rules they learn many times over. But their language books are designed in a way that they continually face different structures in order to inculcate them. That is, once a form is presented, the lesson moves to a new point. This approach leaves no room for repetition and recurrent use of the same rule. Students move to the next rule without mastering the rule and being able to use it for communication of meaning. This system defines learning as accumulation of knowledge rather than creating opportunities for practice and use of linguistic knowledge for

communication. Sometimes you correct a form repeatedly but later on the students repeat the erroneous form not because he does not know it but because he has not mastered it [10].

In that Vignette, the teacher explains the role of repetition, which is the root to automatic use of linguistic forms, but without directly stating them. This teacher believes that for a language to be learned much repetition is needed [10].

Another example of personal practical theory is provided by Richards [5] in a vignette as follows:

I think it's important to be positive as a personality. I think the teacher has to be a positive person. I think you have to show a tremendous amount of patience. And I think if you have a good attitude, you can project this to the students and hopefully establish a relaxed atmosphere in your classroom so that the students won't dread coming to class but have a good class. I feel that it's important to have a lesson plan of some sort. Because you need to know what you want to teach and how you are going to go from the beginning to the end. And also taking into consideration the students, what their ability is, what their background is and so on. I have been in situations where I did not understand what was being taught or what was being said, and how frustrating it is and so when I approach it I say: how can I make it the easiest way for them to understand what they need to learn? [5].

This teacher's personal practical theory is the emphasis on the teacher's attitude and the need to create a supportive environment for learning in the classroom. In addition, this teacher stresses the need for lesson planning, but her justification for lesson planning is based on helping the students rather than helping the teacher [5].

The examples of personal practical theory above show that all English teachers have the capacity to develop their own theories for some reasons. First, it is the era of post method pedagogy in which there is an emphasis on context specific method and practicality of English teachers. Teachers are both theorists of their own practice and the practitioner of their own theory [16]. This has also been echoed with the support of teachers' professional development by many education authorities in the world, who put reflective practice as a new teacher competency [17].

Personal practical theories serve the functions of description, explanation and prediction of what happened in the classroom [10]. In this way, teachers link what they learned in the past, with the existing practice, to plan for what they will do in the future.

Stages for achieving personal practical theory are suggested by Richards [5] as follows. The first is the explanation stage, in which teachers start to think of why things happen in the way they do. After that, they come to the generalization stage, in which they begin to generalize the nature of things in their contexts to other contexts. Thirdly, the principles stage, in which they form the basis of subsequent actions. Finally, the development of a personal teaching philosophy stage.

In Korthagen and Kessel's [2] theory development stages, personal practical theory is the stage in which teachers unite needs, feelings, observations and real experiences of teachers so that they can describe and explain their teaching experiences [2]. It needs to go through the stage of Schema to get to the highest stage called Theory [2].

In Indonesian context a study of teachers' personal practical theory has not been conducted with a large number of respondents. Munir et al.'s [18] study revealed levels of theorising of seven English teachers as alumni of an MA program. They did not investigate teachers' personal practical theory. A survey in Indonesian journal database Garuda using keywords 'English, pandemic, covid', 84 articles in different journals appear. When using keywords '*Bahasa Inggris*, pandemic, *siswa*', 11 articles show up. This search findings show that there have been many studies which explored how teachers in Indonesia teach English during pandemic. Yet, specific research on English teachers' personal practical theory development during pandemic is rare. Therefore, a study on Indonesian English teachers' personal practical theory has been conducted especially during the pandemic Covid-19.

This article reports that study with an aim to explore English teachers' development of personal practical theory during pandemic Covid-19. More specifically, this article reports whether the English teachers in Indonesia develop personal practical theory, what personal practical theory they develop, and why they do or do not develop personal practical theory in their practice during the pandemic.

## 2 Methods

To achieve the aims of the research reported here, an online survey has been conducted. The survey used questionnaires which was modified from the questionnaire developed by the researcher and his colleagues in 2019 [18]. The questionnaire contains items in a mix of closed ended and open-ended items [19]. The items asked for respondents' experiences in teaching English during pandemic Covid-19, their articulation of those experiences as personal practical theory and the reasons why they chose such experience as personal theory, as well as the reasons why they did not articulate any personal theories. The questionnaire was uploaded in Google Form and distributed to prospective respondents through the researcher's Facebook contact list and Whatsapp Group contact list in two months.

There were 113 English teachers who responded to the GForm, with the following demography.

The respondents as shown in Table 1, mostly taught English in junior high school (65.49%), followed by senior high school context (26.55%).

**Table 1.** Respondents' Demography

Level of education	Frequency	Percentage
Primary school	6	5.31
Junior high school	74	65.49
Senior high school	30	26.55
Undergraduate	1	0.88
Others	2	1.77
<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100</b>

Data collected from the open-ended items in the questionnaire were analysed qualitatively by finding themes especially on the using simple descriptive statistics for the respondents' personal practical theory articulation, and the reasons why they developed or did not develop personal practical theory in their practice during the pandemic. A simple quantitative data analysis was performed on the data from the open-ended items in the questionnaire especially about the respondents' demography, length of teaching experience and claims of developing personal practical theory.

### 3 Findings and Discussion

The findings begin with the data on the experiences of the are presented in two sections, namely, personal practical theory articulation and the reasons why they developed or did not develop personal practical theory in their practice during the pandemic.

#### 3.1 The English Teachers' Personal Practical Theory During Pandemic

The respondents of this study have been teaching English in different education levels for 11.7 years in average. The minimum experience was 0.5 year and maximum 32 years of English teaching experience.

The respondents listed aspects of their English language teaching that they developed during pandemic in Table 2. It should be noted that the respondents could opt more than one aspect in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that the two aspects of ELT mostly developed during pandemic are instructional media opted by 72 (63.71%) and instructional strategies respectively. This finding is not surprising as many studies on English teachers' classroom reported in Garuda journal data base are mostly about instructional strategies and instructional media they develop during online, distant learning during pandemic.

When asked about their personal practical theory during the pandemic, 97 (85%) respondents responded that they had developed a certain personal practical theory, and 17 (15%) of them stated that they did not develop personal practical theory.

The examples of reported personal practical theories the respondents developed during pandemic, as many as 97 (85%) answers around the aspects in Table 2, are as follows.

**Table 2.** Aspects of ELT developed during pandemic

Aspects of ELT	Frequency	Percentage
Learning materials	51	45.13
Instructional strategies	71	62.83
Assessment	39	34.51
Instructional media	72	63.71
Others	10	8.84

In the instructional media aspects, the personal practical theories the respondents reported include ‘Game-based learning’ (R1), and ‘Using English gaming tools for Grammar and vocabulary learning’ (R30), ‘Creating learning media’ (R18, 34, 38), ‘Blended-learning using WAG’ (R29, 51), ‘Learning motivation is influenced by facilities and learning media used by the teachers’ (R4, 55, 68), ‘Interesting media could increase learning achievement’ (R34), ‘Using Kinemaster for learning’ (R51).

It can be said that the respondents’ articulation of personal practical theories in the instructional aspects have two categories, namely, labelled and explanation. The labelled personal practical theory is ‘Game-based learning’ and the rest are explanations. These explanations are similar to Korthagen and Kessel’s [2] Gestalt, which is actually what personal practical theory is. Yet, this is similar to Richards’ [5] first stage and second stage.

In the instructional strategies aspects, the personal practical theories the respondents reported include ‘Mnemonic keyword song’ (R95), ‘Learning by doing’ (R92), ‘Constructivism integrated with technology’ (R2), ‘Mindfulness’ (R5), ‘Joyful learning’ (R11), ‘Collaboration-based learning’ (R33), ‘Meaningful learning’ (R59), ‘Hybrid learning’ (R36, 49).

These personal practical theories are mostly of the labelled instructional strategies commonly used in ELT with little addition. In the ‘Mnemonic keyword song’, the respondent added ‘song’ to the Mnemonic learning strategies. Similarly, the ‘Constructivism’ has been added with technology. These reports show that the respondents begin to develop confidence in articulating their personal experience. They are heading to the second level in Korthagen and Kessel’s [2] model, and to the second stage, the generalisation stage, in Richards’ [5] model.

In the assessment aspects, the respondents reported their personal practical theory as follows: ‘Checking students understanding can be done by looking at their face when reading or performing’ (R90), ‘Other students can become peer tutors though Whatsapp Group’ (R10, 98), and ‘Games for assessment’ (R41).

It is obvious from the wordings of these reported personal practical theories that the respondents can provide explanation of their experiences. Similar to the personal practical theories in instructional aspects, they are heading to the second level in Korthagen and Kessel’s [2] model, and to the second stage, the generalisation stage, in Richards’ [5] model.

Other personal practical theories reported by the respondents not covered in Table 2 but worth mentioning include: ‘Contexts determines learning pattern’ (R10), ‘Distance learning demands students to be more independent and creative’ (R31, 53), ‘Online interactions can reduce learners’ stress levels’ (R39), ‘Learners can learn independently without teachers’ (R31, 35, 45), ‘Information technology plays a significant role in learning modes during pandemic’, ‘Many joyful methods can be created using Android cell phones such as google slides, or using colourful and smart learning materials using Pinterest. Students can just give a tick, a cross, fill in using cell phone without pens. Their answers are saved in GDrive for marking at later time’ (R71), ‘During the distance learning, students become lazy to participate in online learning so that home visits by the teachers and counsellor is important to get the solution for this problem.’ (R94).

Reading these words of respondents, one could say that these are explanation of what is going on in the respondents teaching during pandemic. For example, 'Contexts determines learning pattern' (R10) shows that this teacher can draw a principle of learning pattern. This is the third stage in Richards' [5] model. Another example like this:

'Many joyful methods can be created using Android cell phones apps such as google slides, or using colourful and smart learning materials using Pinterest. Students can just give a tick, a cross, fill in using cell phone without pens. Their answers are saved in GDrive for marking later' (R71) shows that the respondent can provide justification why such a combination of instructional strategy, learning media, and assessment can be combined into one explanation. This is the second stage in Korthagen and Kessel's [2] model, called Schema. Yet, the respondent did not state or mention the (T)heory (with capital t, behind that. In other words, this teacher has not come to the Theory stage in Korthagen and Kessel's [2] model.

The findings that the respondents reported personal practical theories are mostly at the first and second stage of Korthagen and Kessel's [2] model, and at the second and third stage of Richards' [5] model correspond with the findings of Munir et al.' [18] research findings. The findings of study provide evidence that what was experienced by a handful English teachers in Munir et al.'s [18] study, was also experienced by many other English teachers in many different education levels in Indonesian context. However, a small portion of respondents did not report to develop personal practical theories with the reasons described in the next section.

### **3.2 Reasons Why They Developed or Did Not Develop Personal Practical Theory in Their Practice During the Pandemic**

As presented earlier, 17 (15%) respondents reported not developing personal practical theories during pandemic for some reasons. Major reasons mainly came from the respondents themselves. Many expressed their having no idea what is called a theory. They reported like this: 'I don't know and have no idea' (R90, 111). Even when they knew what theory is they were not sure if they did develop a new one. They orchestrated reports like these: 'Because I can't find something completely new from the existing theory' (R14, 37, 66), 'It's still an assumption, haven't found evidence for it' (R39), 'Because somebody else has done it' (R43), 'Because I use the same old method, only with different media' (R50), 'Because my theory is innovated from the old theory' (R66, 78). Parts of the reason came from the students for not having facilities and internet access so that the respondents did not have any ideas what to do to make them learn English. They reported like these: 'During online class, students had limited internet quota or connections' (R23, 25, 60, 85), and 'There are constraints during pandemic' (R7, 44).

These findings should draw the English teaching profession concerns. This profession has fostered teachers as theorists of their practice since the 2000's [6], yet after 22 years, few English teachers themselves have not been confident to theorize from their practice. This finding strengthens Burns et al.'s [12] finding, in that these 17 respondents may need few years more to finally realize that their profession also needs personal theories. It should also be acknowledged that the context of students learning reported by these 17 respondents, in which lack internet access as well as laptops and smart phones

have contributed to their not reporting to develop personal practical theory. In other words, this finding echoes Hardy and Edward-Groves' [13] findings.

## 4 Conclusion and Suggestion

We, English teachers, believe that all of us have personal practical theory, which has guided us in our teaching. The problem is that some of us are confident in articulating what our personal practical theories are, while some others are very modest to articulate it explicitly. From this study, it can be concluded that many of the respondents are confident to articulate their personal practical theories, while a few respondents are not. This dilemma is probably due to the nature of teachers' knowledge and skills which are mostly tacit, unseen [20].

Therefore, it is the duty of this profession to support each other, to foster teachers' personal practical theory development. English teachers in the world should make their personal practical theories explicit by writing a reflection on their practices and from that reflection they can explain why such and such happens and draw principles from that. This will lead to the development of teaching philosophy and personal practical theory. Last, they should disseminate their personal practical theories in professional networking sessions as well as publishing in journals. In this ways, more and more English teachers will develop personal practical theories.

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