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Facilitation teacher education: Students' experiences, perceptions, and insights

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ABSTRACT

Facilitation plays a significant role in class discussions. Teachers' demonstrated facilitation skills may serve various purposes: building bridges, connecting ideas, validating students' participatory efforts, and building critical thinking skills. At a superficial level, facilitated classes make the class discussions more interactive and inclusive. However, what larger impact do facilitated class discussions have on our EFL students and future EFL educators? This qualitative research examined ten interviews from Indonesian students about their experiences and perceptions of facilitation skills within the classroom. Data found that students, while challenged to define the term, understood facilitation and found it beneficial in the classroom discussions for various reasons. Students wished to employ these skills when they become educators. Though the students indicated that time, lack of teacher guidance, and familiarity are reasons facilitation fails within class discussions.

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1. Introduction

Significance of facilitation: A personal reflection when I was in school, teachers often advised me to become an educator. When they did this, I would outwardly smile and nod, and politely respond. Though inwardly, I would cringe and shudder in horror. I could not imagine becoming a teacher; for me, it sounded terrible. While I valued my teachers and recognized their important role as educators, I never had any interest in pursuing a career in teaching.

My mind changed, however, from my experiences in graduate school. There I participated in empowering and facilitating class discussions. Teachers avoided lecturing and using the banking model of education, or depositing knowledge into the empty student vessels (Freire, 2015). While the teacher shared his/her expertise, experience and insights, he/she also allowed space for students and empowered them to participate. These moments inspired me to become a lecturer, as I witnessed the power of education, its true potential. The classroom setting became de-familiarized to me, for I finally beheld what education could be: life-giving,

life-changing, liberating, an "almost sacred" experience for both teachers and students (Freire, 2005; hooks, 1994; Horton, 1990; Palmer, 2008).

A common denominator from these influential classrooms came from facilitators, who were actively present and enabled discussion, yet did not usurp power. While educators may have participated in discussion, sometimes redirecting it, they did not monopolize attention or digress. On the contrary, they often gracefully existed and became audience members, only listening. When necessary, they would emphasize students' comments by restating them, contextualizing them or presenting relevant but alternative points of view. At other times, they provided transitions and built bridges between points, etc. In short, they acted as effective facilitators by gently shaping discussions, making them memorable, engaging experiences.

Consequently, when first I became a lecturer eight years ago, I sought to do the same. However, despite my efforts, I realized that facilitation skills did not come easy; class discussions felt bumpy and overall disjointed. It pained me to know this stemmed from my failure to facilitate. Although I improved, in 2009, when I moved to Indonesia, the context changed and facilitation became increasingly more difficult and I felt my progress regress. My path to becoming an efficient facilitator has been long, and through self-reflection, I grew curious to know others experiences on the topic.

Literature review: Definition of facilitation and types of facilitation education Despite the ubiquitous use of "facilitation" or "facilitating" in academia, the term, much like "critical thinking; 'though frequently used, is rarely (thoroughly) defined (Petress, 2004). Writers and educators use the word, facilitation, assuming their audience, whether readers or students, understand it. Perhaps not surprising the term is usually left undefined; for it indicates a set of skills and varying contextual factors, not a simple, straightforward concept. Definitions of facilitation cannot be well explained in a single sentence, but require extensive elaboration.

2. Research Methodology

The meaning of the word is a clear beginning. By its definition, facilitate means to make an action or process easy, easier or less difficult (Oxford English dictionaries). Although simple enough, the term raises other questions: What makes a process easier? Isn't that inherently subjective, dependent on individual perception? Even if applied to education, facilitating, facilitators, and facilitation are used in multiple contexts. A quick EBSCO search reveals the interdisciplinary nature and uses of facilitation, which is not surprising given its general definition and the need for facilitating in most any group communication, undoubtedly a concern of many vocations. However, even when focusing on facilitation use within EFL education, the term still eludes clarity, as it appears in contexts of teaching writing, speaking, and reading. Even when localized to EFL class discussions, facilitation styles and methods are remarkably diverse. The matter of facilitation is further complicated by pertinent factors, such as cultural communication styles within Central Java, in a university context where English, although used as the medium of instruction, remains a foreign language.

Undoubtedly, multiple definitions of facilitation exist; however, this paper will draw on the opinions of several experts. According to Ingrid Bens (2005), a facilitator is "one who contributes structure and process to interactions so groups can function effectively and make

high quality decisions" (p. 5). She further explains that a facilitator is one "whose goal is to support others as they pursue their objectives" (p. 5). Despite Bens' succinct definition, she dedicates forty pages to further clarifying. In that first chapter she explains the various roles a facilitator holds: serving the group, helping to define the goal, assessing the needs of the group, (including understanding its communication processes), helping the group use time efficiently, guiding group discussion, supporting group members, helping with communication, accessing resources, maintaining a positive environment, empowering others, fostering leadership, etc. (p. 5-6).

Another definition comes from Roger Schwartz (2002), a reputable expert, who claims the role of a facilitator is to increase group effectiveness by improving its structure and processes (p. 30). Schwartz points out that a facilitator does this by helping members efficiently communicate with one another (p. 82). Although Schwartz does provide a general definition, he works to unpack the facilitation duties, not accepting them as straightforward or evident, but exploring-them at length, which is necessary for a concept so complex and largely dependent on context. Schwartz explains in detail how facilitators may work as mediators, evaluators, content experts, though not all continuously. He also speaks of the commonly accepted myth that facilitators hold a constant neutral position, which inadvertently speaks to the teacher's context, for try though we may, in evaluating students we relinquish a neutral position in the classroom.

David Allen and Tina Blythe (2004) add to the academic discussion of facilitation in their book by focusing on the many types of questions facilitators ask. These authors understand questioning plays a significant role in facilitating; therefore, they explore kinds of facilitating questions as well as the reasons behind asking them. These two authors produced an entire textbook dedicated to facilitating questions and their use within the classroom, though other facilitator scholars contend that questioning remains only one method of facilitation.

3. Findings

Though a facilitator's actions usually receive the primary focus, another less frequently addressed though equally vital, element of facilitating is silence within group discussion (Thomas,2002; Schwartz,2004). This aspect appeals to a teacher facilitator, especially within the EFL classroom. If English is used, and EFL learners struggle to understand and participate in discussion, the present• though-silent role the facilitator plays is crucial. In other words, the EFL facilitator lecturer must decide when to talk, when to ask questions. when to provide clarity in potential misunderstandings. Yet, they must also know when they should remain quiet, recognizing that sometimes silence, though uncomfortable, is necessary.

Another less actualized, though significant, component to facilitation is self-reflection. Many believe that the facilitator has a responsibility, as stated by both R. Schwartz (2002) and G. Thomas (2008), to reflect on their own role and methods employed during facilitating. Likewise, facilitators also ought to examine themselves to uncover core values and assumptions. In these ways, the facilitator seeks to constantly revise and improve his/her methods. Though this practice is done by a serious educator as well (Palmer, 1998), focusing on facilitation localizes this self-reflection to guiding, leading and shaping the communication within class discussion.

Some may point out that EFL scholars have already extensively explored teacher talk, scaffolding, and questioning as pedagogy, and overlap exists between those areas and facilitation. I do not deny this. Though in this current academic realm, that grows increasingly interdisciplinary, I do not see overlap as inherently negative or a drawback. I focus on facilitation methods because of my interest in them.

I am drawn to the underlying ideological premise of facilitation: the welfare of the entire group and the denial of the facilitator as the authority, as both match my teaching philosophy. Additionally, that the facilitator functions as a group member, demands them to be self-aware, making this approach holistic, no one escaping reflection or revision. Lastly, facilitation skills are directly explored or alluded to in student-centered learning and critical pedagogies-both which emerge as topics of EFL scholarly research.

4. Discussion

As facilitation proved so influential for me, I wondered if my students felt facilitated classroom discussions vital part of their education as well. Also, as my students enroll in a teacher education program, I wanted to know how they learned facilitation in their teaching classes. Thus, I conducted loosely structured interviews with 10 English department students of varying ages and genders. The student participants consisted of a mixture: some graduated, others were completing their theses, and some were working to complete upper-level elective classes. I sought a variety of participants, though I included only older ones who have completed teaching courses and witnessed varying teaching styles, including facilitation methods.

The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions. English was used, with code switching to Bahasa Indonesia allowed. I encouraged students to focus on their ideas rather than grammar, assuring them minor errors would be revised. I assured them their identity would be protected, as they would remain anonymous in my paper. Lastly, I emphasized that my goal was to understand their experiences and beliefs; therefore, there were no right or wrong answers. I explicitly stated this to allay any fears and encourage honesty, for I feared participants would want to produce "the correct answer:' I used follow-up questions to seek clarification and restated responses, both to ensure I understood and to allow them the opportunity to revise or clarify. The above was done to put them at ease and focus on their content, or their ideas.

Perhaps less acknowledged or sometimes de-emphasized, students' experiences play a crucial role in shaping them as future teachers. As such, their experiences and even their perceptions of them play a critical role in teacher education. As Altun and Boukman (2007) point out, in drawing from the constructivist model, both knowledge and meaning are largely produced by from the person. In this way, learners construct their own reality from individual experiences and perceptions (p. 31). Therefore, this research explored students' perceptions of facilitation experiences and education to gain insights as we develop teacher education in Indonesia.

Emergent themes: Variation in definitions of facilitation

The first emergent theme from the data was how students held extremely varied understandings of the term, "facilitation:' I began the interviews asking the student participants to define the word (before providing a definition from Schwartz, 2002). Eight out of ten students used the word "help" to explain facilitation, though in vastly different contexts. Interestingly, half used some form of the word "facilitation "in their definition, and usually more than once. Although seeming to lack of confidence and be uncertain about the term, I would contend that the students' apparent lack of knowledge should not be so readily dismissed. Through further narratives, examples given, and beliefs articulated, students demonstrated that they grasped a more complete understanding of the word than initially present.

One student clearly admitted to difficulties in trying to define the word. She stated, while "being familiar with the term "that she had "difficulties in defining it: 'While she struggled and admitted her own inability to define the word succinctly, she proceeded to provide a definition, most closely mirroring that of facilitation expert, Roger Schwartz (2002).

One may wonder perhaps whether scholars and educators ought to consider students' perceptions and beliefs, if unable many are unable to define the word. Some may even wonder: what possible insights can my data offer? What good is this research if students are unable to clarify their understanding of facilitation, the entire topic, the subject from which all of the rest of my questions stemmed? While superficially a valid point, I would contend that even the supposed experts struggle in clarifying this term, likely a reason why the term often goes undefined.

In research for this paper, I discovered that though textbooks may use the word, "facilitation" in the title and scholarly journal articles may list facilitation as a major theme in the abstract, authors frequently fail to provide a detailed or thorough definition. Though failing to define the word, we often do not challenge authors 'familiarity with "facilitation" and its meaning. Again, it resembles critical thinking, both present in education and both so often assumed rather than elaborated on.

Facilitation: Perceived desirable and beneficial teaching practice All but one student believed that facilitation ought to be used in the classroom. Additionally, every student participant stated that if/when they become a teacher, they would seek to use facilitation skills in their classroom. (Although two students admitted they "will try" intaking their lack of certainty or perhaps a lack of practice.) The reasons why they wanted to employ this practice were various, understandably, as are facilitation skills. Although the common reasons include: "enhancing critical thinking" and 'open mindedness"; creating a more "open; fun; interesting, and social" atmosphere; helping with clarity or "understanding materials"; helping students' become less passive and less silent; helping students to participate more and be more active in class; increasing student confidence and comfort; and "lessening the gap" between teachers and students.

Facilitation: failed attempts, challenges, and drawbacks

Facilitation, though an important practice, is not without drawbacks. In the interviews, I asked students for their ideas of the negative points of the practice. The most common response was time limitation as well as time management. Some chose to respond as

students, while others considered the teachers 'viewpoint. One recent graduate stated how facilitation requires effort, thinking, and preparation from the teacher.

Another student pointed out that the practice can be unfamiliar for students and teachers alike. Several students recognized that facilitation attempts do not always work; some observed their teachers attempted it but sometimes failed. One student stated, sometimes the teacher would

try to use facilitation by asking for students' participation and/or opinions. However, "after waiting about five seconds" and not receiving any student responses, the teacher would break the silence by reverting back to the more traditional "method of lecturing" or simply "giving his/her own opinion:' According to this participant, this was an example of how teachers may try to use facilitation but it does not always succeed. Another student explained that sometimes people lack confidence in using facilitation because they are unfamiliar with the techniques, a statement I think holds true for both students and teachers.

In further articulating some of the problems in class facilitation, one student claimed facilitation works only if "a teacher can guide where the discussion is going. "Another student echoed that, stating "if the teacher cannot direct the students "then it becomes "chaotic and not structured:' Another participant even rendered a facilitator helpless in her rhetoric, stating that when the conversation goes "far from the track "then "the teacher can do nothing" and then the students may fail to meet up to the teachers 'expectations.

5. Conclusion

In doing this research, I hoped to "stimulate constructivist discussions between all parties involved" (Cirocki,2013, p.78) by intentionally discussing students' perceptions. I also interviewed students I believe, like Myles Horton, that teachers ought to both value and demonstrate their respect for students' experiences; for to do so is to value their worth as human beings. In spending time listening to my students and recording their experiences, I hope through my actions, not just my words, I demonstrate that they are worth my time (Jacobs,2003).

I also hope students recognize their experiences and perceptions as important and worthy of further reflection and study. Indonesian culture often esteems authority figures and those in a higher social status, including educators. But by listening to my students' experiences, educators may help to self-validate students, their person and their experiences, in turn, building student confidence. Furthermore, helping to build confidence may encourage student participation in the classroom, as noted by my students 'in their interviews. Research exploring student beliefs and perceptions prompts students to engage in self-reflection, always a worthy endeavor for building healthy, well• rounded individuals. Self-reflection is also beneficial for future teachers and scholars, who may someday conduct similar qualitative research.

The potential problems in teacher facilitation, as noted by my participants and the facilitation experts (Schwartz, 2002; Thomas, 2004; Thomas, 2008), were not all able to be discussed here. Nevertheless, they are worthy of further attention and study. Facilitation, despite the name, is not easy to do, likely why the skills are detailed at length in workbooks and taught through courses complete with workbooks and practical application. Though difficult to

define, to discuss, and to teach, facilitation is also too important to ignore. Its ubiquitous presence in academia and disciplines, EFL teaching materials, and student perceptions, demonstrate its significance. Perhaps this area of study may emerge as a greater focus of EFL research in Indonesia, as we all work together to improve education and prepare the next generation of young educators.

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