

# But How Am I Doing? Autoethnographic Reflections of a Beginning English Language Teacher

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## Abstract

Beginning English Language Teaching (ELT) brings many issues teachers experience that questions one's teaching confidence and abilities. Seeking feedback from teaching peers can be invaluable, but self and student feedback can quell fears and doubts. Sharing such experiences with others involves risk, but can assist others on their journey to becoming confident ELT teachers. To reflect on my experiences as a beginning ELT teacher, an autoethnographic account is presented. It displays my fears, the need for constant feedback and the eventual acceptance that I did not need constant reassurance to evaluate my teaching performance. This account also demonstrates the usefulness and contributions that an autoethnographic account of me as a beginning teacher may bring. First, it discusses the field of beginning teaching and challenges doing ELT may bring. This is followed by an explanation of writing an autoethnography, ethical considerations and background details on this account. The autoethnographic account is written using constructed vignettes to demonstrate moments of crisis and resolution. This account closes with a discussion and some conclusions about the value of using autoethnography in the ELT field.

**Keywords:** *Autoethnography, beginning teaching, culture, English Language Teaching (ELT), Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL), vignettes.*

## Introduction

Becoming an English Language Teacher (ELT) and contributing to helping students become part of a society by knowing how to speak and write fluent English is a crucial profession. At a global level, knowing English reduces a person's social marginalization. As Kadel (2020) argues, a classroom is a miniature society through which injustice, inequality, malpractices, and the undemocratic culture of a society is transformed to a place of democracy and social justice for the student. This responsibility to teach English to support this is a large weight placed on teachers, but especially beginning ELT teachers. It must be learned from observations of the experienced teacher and interactions with students from many countries.

This account's purpose is to reflect on my experiences as a beginning ELT using autoethnography that tells of my transition from worried beginner tutor to confident teacher. Autoethnography is defined by

Ellis as a way of researching and writing that describes and analyzes personal experiences to understand cultural and individual experiences (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Studies do exist debating best practices, and giving advice, to beginning teachers. However, insights gained from first person autoethnographic accounts are rarer, providing a unique perspective and analyses of the problems and successes beginner teachers have.

Obtaining feedback from other ELT teachers, and students, on the beginning teacher's teaching style and practices is crucial for their self-improvement. This is also needed to deliver quality student outcomes in English language proficiencies. A teacher learns much theory in their Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL) courses as well as practice classroom teaching. Yet this beginner training does not emphasise what an ELT teacher should become (Varghese, 2006). While it is argued this can only be developed over years of classroom experience, such knowledge needs to be documented early for future teachers. An autoethnography can make such a contribution in informing beginner ELT teaching practices from a reflective and personal point-of-view.

This autoethnographic approach is undertaken by working out general themes to encompass problems experienced by using what Erickson (1986) and Humphreys (2005) call vignettes, the vivid portrayal of the conduct of events in everyday life. Both Humphreys (2005) and Louis (1991) aptly state, that is applied to my autoethnography, that I am the instrument of the inquiry that is inseparable from me. The account is underpinned by the overarching problem that I wanted constant feedback as to my performance, lacking confidence initially as I headed into the classroom to teach. We as teachers need feedback, both from ourselves, our experienced teaching colleagues and our students, so we can constantly improve our English teaching practice.

This account is structured as follows. The literature review argues beginning ELT is a unique endeavour where theory meets with practice that challenges the person's feelings of identifying themselves as an effective teacher. A discussion of autoethnographic methods, ethics and background details and context of this account is provided. The themes and supporting vignettes tell my story of a struggle to know if I, as a beginner, was an effective teacher. The paper ends with a discussion and some conclusions about my account, as well as arguing autoethnography can contribute much to understanding the personal experiences of beginning teachers.

## **Literature Review: Beginning English Language Teaching (ELT)**

Studies of beginning English language teaching is a field of inquiry encompassing a range of disciplines and research methods. To perform this role, the ELT teacher learns both a set of procedures, such as English grammar rules, and appropriate responses to supporting differing student nationalities and their unique scholastic issues. Cultural sensitivity and understanding are a crucial skill an ELT teacher must obtain quickly (Taylor & Sobel, 2011). Teaching cultural narratives before beginning classroom instructions is a useful strategy to employ (Ates, Kim & Grigsby, 2015). Getting teaching performance feedback from peers if they have acquired this skill can be difficult to obtain in a busy classroom with a crowded English curriculum. Formal and informal processes for performance feedback may not often be done. The beginner ELT teacher may be unsure if they are effectively teaching well and displaying the necessarily empathy towards students who may be struggling with settling in to a new country and culture.

Studies examining the development of individuals from beginner to confident ELT teacher often show self-feedback to be a crucial part of their career development. In one example, Naseh and Shahri (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study where they focused on one student undertaking a Master of

Teaching English degree and accompanying practical classroom teaching. Their study's results described how her emotions and identity as a beginner teacher was challenged by her classroom teaching. The subject of the study felt a need to support the students beyond just teaching technical English knowledge. She used techniques such as encouraging her students to be proud of their accents and to not to feel estranged from society, but work towards feeling included within it by being able to speak and write English (Naseh & Shahri, 2018). Kadel (2020) states, techniques similar to these used by an English teacher addresses injustices and inequalities students often have experienced because they did not know how to write and speak correct fluent English. Teaching English encompasses not just giving students technical speaking and writing skills. It also requires displaying cultural sensitivity and a willingness to describe how to negotiate the often-difficult daily contexts that an English language-based society presents to the student.

English teachers also need to be encouraged to be creative and collaborative meaning-makers for their students (Cahnmann-Taylor & Hwang, 2019). Dogancay-Aktuna (2006) argues teaching English is a complex process governed by a variety of individual, instructional and contextual factors requiring careful preparation of teachers to meet a multiplicity of challenges that will occur in the role. Teachers need feedback to make sure they are fulfilling their responsibilities, but also to address serious issues that might make them not feel a part of a teaching culture. For example, a study by Aneja (2016) reported that one female ELT teacher changed her name and accent to sound 'American' to fit in with her colleagues and students. Such issues need to be addressed by supportive teaching staff to ensure the teacher feels included as part of their profession.

These issues arise for beginning English teachers that need addressing. Such issues should be examined early in their career within a supportive environment where they can express their need for feedback to improve their teaching practice and interpersonal skills. In Faez and Valeo's (2012) study of TESOL student teachers, the dilemmas they faced in becoming proficient and culturally sensitive teachers were described. Moving from the teacher's practice learning in a classroom to actual teaching was seen as a difficult reality check. Some participants in the study felt they were not able to make that adjustment and questioned their ability to continue teaching TESOL (Faez & Valeo, 2012). The researchers called for a more integrated practicum before moving into the classroom setting. This included having a safe and supportive peer environment to receive constructive feedback and express their emotional and professional concerns with their teaching ability (Faez & Valeo, 2012).

Starting ELT can be challenging as a beginner negotiates the many technical, cultural and interpersonal factors that come with teaching English to diverse students. In terms of helping the beginning teacher to remain in the profession, researchers such as Nuske (2015) state it is important to study beginning ELT teachers to find out and address their concerns early in their career. Saylag (2012) further argues the importance of ELT's discussing their personal beliefs and experiences in constant self-reflection while they teach. The challenge is to implement these practices in the teacher's busy daily commitments.

Reading the insights of a beginning teacher's autoethnography has the potential to inform future teaching practice in the ELT field. Yazan's (2019) autoethnographic account illustrates such an example of this. He wrestled with ideological and identity issues while studying teaching English and conducting his classroom lessons. Such honesty from Yazan assists in documenting and understanding the beginner ELT's experiences, struggles and successes as they move towards feeling confident and confident to teach English.

## Constructing My Autoethnographic Account: Methods and Issues

Autoethnography has had a controversial history with issues of credibility around representation, objectivity, data quality, legitimacy, and ethics (Wall, 2008). Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) argue though that the method is a storytelling approach but with traditional analysis of data:

*When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences. (p. 4)*

Disclosing these epiphanies, or significant moments, in my account are aided by the presentation vignettes, as used by Humphreys (2005) in his autoethnographic studies of teaching and learning. They assist in, what Ellis and Bochner (2000) state about this method, the idea that an autoethnographer attempts to make sense of their experiences. My three vignettes tell of those significant moments that illustrated my struggles to become a competent, professional yet caring English teacher. Vignettes are meaningful for showing my involvement and emotions, and placing myself in the situation rather than being a detached observer (Humphreys, 2005; Saldana, 2003; Butler, 1997).

One important concept in autoethnography to clarify is the frequent use of the term culture. Although a contested term, it is defined here to show how it is used in an account. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) describe it as having patterns of beliefs and values, individual and group, that influence behaviours. In an educational context, Frank (2013) includes thoughts of the members as well as their beliefs and values, in turn influenced by practices from these that result in connections and information sharing. Teaching English is about imparting the beliefs and values of a society through the written and spoken word. When I say culture, I refer to myself operating within a classroom where the prescribed and followed beliefs and values result in practices to maximize student learning of English language protocols.

Although it takes an almost storytelling approach, there is a methodological framework autoethnographers will, in some form, follow. The following documents the procedures I used to research and write my account. A first step was to observe myself, my senior teacher and the students. As I had previous ethnography experience, I was able to write fieldnotes, a core practice in field research, after classes. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's (1995) fieldnote writing advice was taken as I constructed detailed observations that happened and my interpretation of them. This was important because I aimed to construct and explain important themes that guided the reader through my journey to resolution.

The purpose of using narrative vignettes is to illustrate situations where my anxieties came to light about how I was progressing as an ELT. From this comes an analysis and interpretation of my place within the culture of the classroom and how what occurs links with my consistent need for teaching feedback.

### Ethical Considerations

Autoethnography has received much criticism for its ethical practices. It can be a high-risk activity for the researcher who discloses much private information and to those who they portray in the account. Two published education autoethnographies provide evidence of this claim. First, Campbell (2018) risked her professional reputation to write about her struggles with the taboo subject of depression and anxiety in academia. Second, school teacher Lee (2018) was conflicted in naming the person, even though it was not

his real name, who was bullying her while she undertook educational doctorate studies. Both demonstrate, as autoethnographers experience, the difficulty of assessing risk and remaining committed to the universal research oath of doing no harm to those who take part in studies. As Grant (2010) argues, it is a morally ethical practice to carefully consider what is said about people, places and events to avoid potential harm from these being identified.

Obtaining informed consent from others can be difficult when doing autoethnographic research. The researcher is, as Edwards (2021) states, representing the self and their experiences, not those who were present when the experiences occurred. I agree with Lee (2018), who defended her personal narrative of bullying, that it is not about exposing secrets. Rather, it is writing a retrospective and a reflection on life events in the culture in which the writer lived. Therefore, care was taken in constructing the narratives in my account to avoid such practices. Names of students were masked with other names given to further protect them from identification.

## **The Account's Context and Background Details**

Before presenting the account, the context and details of it are provided as a background. First, this account takes place in an English teaching classroom located in a publically funded, fee-paying college in Brisbane, Australia. The classes' students came from a variety of countries, especially from Asia, Eastern Europe and South America. The classes were taught in a classroom environment and in computer laboratories. However, due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19), some classes were conducted using video conferencing software. This was not frequent because of the low rates of community transmission in Brisbane, but did occur.

My training and teaching began in early 2020. I worked under the guidance of a formally qualified teacher in the classroom. My educational experience was an undergraduate degree in Communication, Language and Cultural Studies. I was also an adult high school tutor and an individual tutor working with those living with mental health disabilities. Before undertaking this work, I completed basic TESOL training and researched English as a Second Language teaching resources. The decision was made for me to provide teaching and support to Level 2 students. Those students had English proficiencies that were judged as competent, but they needed more tuition to improve their understanding of grammar and interacting in social situations. My teaching load was twice to three times a week.

To construct the vignettes, I had decided to keep reflective notes to see how my teaching was progressing from my perspective. The decision to write an autoethnographic account was inspired by using this method on other projects. Data collection consisting of notes and reflections was collected over one and a half years. For the purposes of this account, the selection of presenting data as evidence examples was difficult. This required grouping the notes into themes that reflected how I felt about my teaching journey. The vignettes presented in this account were analyzed and judged as significant to include to demonstrate how I reflected on the insecurities and successes of learning to become an English as a Second Language teacher. The account is now presented to reflect this collection and analysis process by the telling of the vignette stories.

## **How Am I Doing as an ELT? Themes and Supporting Vignettes**

My first day assisting my new teacher was easy, with an intense but rewarding lesson on prefixes and suffixes. Over the weeks of lessons, a sense of unease and doubt that I could be a competent English

teacher arose. I noticed more mistakes in my teaching presentation than my competencies. I was anxious that the students may not understand my teaching style. For example, under pressure I got confused at what was the adverb and adjective in the sentences my students were writing. However, when mentioning this, my teacher remarked that under pressure things like that ‘just happen’ and to say to the student ‘let me check that’. I took that remark as a strategy to maintain credibility in my student’s eyes and practiced that to minimize this reoccurring.

I now present the themes and vignettes that form my autoethnography to illustrate my journey from needing constant feedback with how I am doing, to a resolution of experiencing a growing confidence in teaching English.

### ***Theme 1: Responding in the Moment***

My students would surprise and challenge me each lesson with various requests to assist them in their tasks. Often, I had to respond quickly in the moment to explain grammatical rules. One task they had was to write a biography about their childhood. The first vignette illustrates where I learned how important it was to respond in the exact moment to both correct and praise a student for grammar use. Soon-Ying was struggling with using ‘have’ and ‘had’, getting confused by past and present participles:

*Soon-Ying stumbled over the sentence “I have been to school in Vietnam”. She struggled with the awkwardness of the sentence, confessing she was unsure of the past and present use of grammar. The sentence was almost an obsession as she could not grasp the difference between ‘had’ and ‘have’ and was not convinced had was the right sentence in the essay’s context. I also struggled to find a way to explain that had was the right word to use in the sentence. I got her to read out the sentence twice, once with had and once with have. After a few tries, she surprised me by understanding the context; that is, had was right to use because it was an essay about her past. She smiled and expressed gratitude for my patience in repeating the sentence and explaining why it was the right word to use.*

In that moment I had to make a decision how to correct her but not place undue pressure on her to understand the reasons for the need for the specific word. Other students were asking for help concurrently, but I reassured them I would be with them soon. Seeing Soon-Ying’s facial expression change from confusion and stress to understanding confirmed I had done the right thing in repeating the sentence, then getting her to read it out with both terms. In the moment I responded with patience, for if I had been abrupt or annoyed this may have eroded her confidence. My teacher expressed to me that patience is a vital skill and repeating instructions and going over grammar was a key skill to practice.

### ***Theme 2: Taking Over from the Teacher***

Weeks into my ELT position where I moved from a support tutoring role to more active teaching duties, another important moment occurred. Part of the curriculum was to discuss the lives of famous people, such as: John Lennon, Queen Elizabeth and Australian philanthropist Caroline Chisholm. The task was to read a short biography and match terms from the text to questions, followed by a challenging short answer task. I was asked to take over from the teacher in reading a comprehension and discussing the answers with the class.

I was very nervous despite having done class presentations and teaching during my undergraduate degrees and previous tutoring. However, one incident where I took over from the teacher resulted in an informal appraisal of my ability that helped my confidence in this area. This is described here:

*My teacher decided to teach idioms using a case study from a text of two computer workers, one a lazy worker, the other one a hard worker, with a number of grammar and sentence construction exercises to do. Asking me to take over a group and guide the exercises, the five students vigorously debated the topic. As they wrote the answers, they continued talking and asked me for constant help to check if the sentences were grammatically correct. It was overwhelming as my attention was being constantly diverted. I thought quickly how to manage this in a calm way. I stopped the conversations and drew attention back to the sentences as I had seen my teacher previously do. This made them focus back on the task. They began asking me questions about working conditions in Australia. I asked them if they wanted to share information about working conditions in their country. Our discussion balanced talking and completing the task. My teacher told me later that upon observation, my taking over the group task was well-done. The feeling of relief was almost euphoric.*

What this vignette shows is, despite my hesitancy to take over my teacher's role, I was able to take charge of a situation confidently. This was important as I focused on being mindful about raising my voice tone and level.

During my pre-service training, it was discussed that some students can react from fear due to past traumas they experienced in their country of origin. Monitoring my voice volume and reassuring myself I not causing distress to the students helped greatly. I also made sure at the end of the exercise to check with the students that they were satisfied with the sentences they had written. I had not noticed my teacher, who had been managing other students' issues, was watching me. Later my teacher remarked how taking over from her helped her manage helping other students who struggled with understanding the task.

### ***Theme 3: Seeking Performance Feedback***

Examining these two vignettes, it can be viewed that I was having a crisis of confidence in my ability to teach. Although I had taught adults for two decades, TESOL to me involves a differing skill set. I was constantly aware of potential cultural issues, but also the need to develop empathy towards the students' backgrounds and current English proficiency levels. That was to me a crucial part of this teaching. Taken-for-granted words like 'have' 'had' 'going' 'gone', as examples, took time for my students to understand their different uses and become proficient in using them correctly as past and presents use. I admired the persistence of the students as I observed how willing they were to constantly go over sentence construction.

I needed teaching feedback. My anxiety levels over the weeks were decreasing. In asking "but how am I doing?" I told my teacher I needed at least informal feedback and where to improve. This occurred:

*I must have had a facial expression of fear. While I was not anticipating praise or bad feedback, the need for some form of feedback was vital. I had questioned if my fears were irrational. I had read that beginner teachers of all types questioned their abilities, but I asked myself was it neurotic to seek feedback so soon? It was only three weeks. But in seeking feedback, I was reassured by the teacher my teaching style was good. I pressed for more information and in doing so discovered*

*my main issue. I wanted to be liked. Hearing good feedback brought relief. It was finally realising I had the issue of wanting to be liked as a teacher. While not a problem in itself, I had no control over that aspect of teaching. Thus, my detachment from seeking approval to focusing on the goal of educating students began.*

The reflection here was my realization that I had focused heavily on being liked rather than on the teaching job itself. Although formal reviews of teacher performance do occur where feedback is given by other staff, reflective self-feedback after lessons is also important to do. An obsessive need to seek approval is not a shameful human trait, but can be an impediment if a beginner teacher only focuses on the negative aspects of their teaching performance. I learned these lessons after a while teaching the students: pick the right time to see formal feedback, record notes on my personal performance and reflect on what can be done better, and release that developing the confidence to interact with different cultures takes much time and experience to become competent and empathic in.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This account's purpose was to demonstrate how autoethnography can be one way of understanding the ELT beginner teacher's experience. As Liu (2010) argues, the frankness of writing an autoethnography telling how a teacher negotiates technical, cultural and procedural demands is difficult and risky. Yet it can play a significant role in becoming a competent English teacher from reading honest experiences. Liu felt by deconstructing her sense of inferiority, it made her feel empowered by writing and publishing it, in turn helping her become an effective English teacher from what she learned about herself (Lapidus, Kaveh & Hirano, 2013; Liu, 2010). These is why autoethnography can be useful for any teacher to read to see how others managed their journey to feeling it was the right career decision to serve students who needed to learn English.

In analysing my experience, a conclusion is that culture is about practices that are informed by one's beliefs. I had believed needing constant feedback in my early teaching careers had to be ongoing. Asking "but how am I doing" constantly was a sign of a lack of confidence. In researching for this account, I did find other beginning ESL teachers struggled with similar issues. One important issue that is concerning is that your students may have experienced traumas such as war. This regulates the types of behaviours as a teacher you can do, such as being mindful of tone of voice. Being aware of the feedback your students give in terms of their body language and facial expression when they do not understand something is important for example. Asking 'did you understand or do you need more assistance' assists in building a relationship where the student trusts that I will not show negative emotions at having to repeat grammar rules.

The conclusion is that self-disclosure in the form of autoethnographic accounts of ELT are valuable despite the possible risks they can bring to the beginning teacher's reputation. Moving through the first classroom day full of fears and doubts to confidence is a valuable experience to document. In selecting my vignettes, I demonstrated that through consistent teaching actions and self-reflection after the class, I could improve on my own teaching practices over time. Formal feedback is still important, but in developing the unique personal and professional skills to teach English, self-assessment is vital.

Autoethnography is useful in providing knowledge of the types of hopes and fears, as well as solutions, the beginning teacher faces. It can be therapeutic for the researcher, but may also confirm for the reader such a journey to being an ELT has stumbling blocks, fears, doubts and mistakes. Telling the stories of that journey, that may have discussions of personal failings, helps other beginning teachers interpret



their own journey of teaching English. At a broader level, autoethnography assists in understanding the cultural journal of teaching English; that is, how the teacher's and student's beliefs inform their behaviours and practices. This method contributes much to understanding a culture through one's own experiences and is, therefore, a way of academic inquiry that can bring much value to improving English language teaching and practice.

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**PRACTICAL PEDAGOGIC IDEAS**

