Challenges Faced and the Strategies Adopted by a Malaysian

English Language Teacher during Teaching Practice

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Abstract

In this paper, the reflections on distinct and crucial teaching practices of a pre-service English language teacher are presented and examined. The focus of this paper is on three aspects of class teaching that the teacher found presented a challenge during her teaching practice. For each aspect, the nature of the difficulties and the challenges are described and deciphered. In addition, various strategies that the teacher explored and experimented in order to meet those challenges are outlined and elucidated in terms of their effectiveness. This process is interwoven with the nurturing of pedagogical knowledge of the teacher, which is developed from her reflective practices. This paper also highlights some of the teacher's plans and thoughts on dealing with those challenges in the future. Implications for teaching practice are also discussed.

Keywords: Challenges during teaching practice, Pedagogical knowledge, Reflective practices.

1. Introduction

Kennedy (1996) advocates that at some point of their training, pre-service teachers must be able to express their personal educational philosophies, theories and understandings. Teaching practice, notwithstanding the length or duration, is an excellent opportunity for pre-service teachers to experiment and test their knowledge and skills in an authentic teaching and learning environment in tandem with own understanding of their personal educational philosophies and theories. In the words of Davis and Hall (2003), it is "a socializing experience into the teaching profession" (p. 2). Nevertheless, such rigorous negotiations during teaching practice essentially leads to higher confidence in improving pre-service teachers' learning, satisfaction with their teaching career, and a higher sense of teacher efficacy (Oh et al., 2005). As such, pre-service teachers must question their beliefs and assumptions in developing pedagogical knowledge during teaching practice to avoid practices that are not founded on effective and critical pedagogical knowledge and theories. The understanding for this can be drawn from Schön's (1983) argument that in the profession of teaching, the theoretical facets are embedded in and inseparable from practice.

Many recent studies on teaching practice quite extensively focus on the challenges faced by English language pre-service teachers and how they affect numerous aspects of teacher education. For example, Thomas (2006) highlights the language, cultural (diversity) and environmental barriers experienced by four American pre-service teachers in Central Asia and how they coped and successfully managed in gaining valuable experience during their teaching practice. Pomeranntz and Pierce (2004) lead an inquiry into the challenges experienced by pre-service teachers in the "real world", and to what degree the "courses prepared them for those challenges" (p. 55). These acts of rethinking and re-examining the challenges actually allow the 'knitting' of new knowledge and reconstructing of existing knowledge through various conciliation processes of solving problems and difficulties during teaching practice. Chung (2002) examines the challenges of developing effective teaching strategies of pre-service teachers through quality feedback from supervisors. She concludes that the dialogues that they have facilitate knowledge building and encourage collaborative (between supervisor as an expert and pre-service teacher as a novice) reflection on individual teaching practice to improve the understanding of teaching. By using such dialogues, Chung (2000) insists that

supervisors are able to assist the novice teachers in identifying and evaluating "the context of the problem or deficiency and establish developmental goals or standards" and "the personal strengths and resources of the student-teacher may be used to improve plans for teaching" (p. 10). And the possibility of improving teaching is enormous in terms of the various innovative ways and situations in which new knowledge can be produced, constructed and reconstructed, and refined for positive, meaningful learning experiences (Kabilan, 2005).

With the new knowledge gained and the reconstruction of existing knowledge, the teachers have the potentials and the power to be adept in confronting the challenges and eventually prevailing over them. And as for teacher education providers, it may assist in improving teacher preparation courses (Pomerantz & Pierce, 2004). A recent nationwide evaluation study of teaching practice in the Malaysian teacher education program seriously suggests that it is very important and beneficial to identify and examine the challenges that the pre-service teachers face during their teaching practice (IPT, BPG & MOE, 2005). The study contends that findings from such an investigation can enrich and improve the effectiveness of teacher education programs in Malaysia, particularly the teaching practice component. And in this respect, many teacher education institutions in Malaysia aspire to provide effective and meaningful experiences for future English language teachers (Kabilan, 2007), especially the teaching practice component, which has always been a focus of these institutions.

However, local studies in Malaysia have highlighted numerous difficulties and problems faced by the pre-service teachers during their teaching practices. Hanifah (2004) for instance, find that pre-service teachers seldom question their assumptions and beliefs they developed during teaching practice in school. A study by Toh (2002) on Malaysian pre-service teachers' educational beliefs during teaching practice locates that pre-service teachers become less student-centered and more teacher-oriented in their educational beliefs. Ong et al.'s (2004) study, though discovers many positive aspects of teaching practice of primary teachers of ELT, highlights too a very disturbing trend – almost 55% of the pre-service teachers find that their teaching practice failed to give them the opportunities to engage in theory and practice because the teachers are overwhelmed by the realities of the classrooms. Ong et al.'s (2004) also identifies five challenges that burdens the pre-service teachers – supervision, environment, workload, pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge – but never probes into the strategies adopted by the teachers to overcome those challenges, implying perhaps the pre-service teachers were never given the chance to reflect upon the strategies that they drew upon to confront those challenges. If the pre-service teachers' challenges and strategies adopted during teaching practice are understood clearer, teacher educators would be able to supervise the pre-service teachers in a more meaningful and effectual manner, where the educators could specify which strategies are more appropriate in which conditions. Hence, this paper attempts to explore and understand the challenges and difficulties that beleaguered a Malaysian pre-service teacher of ELT during her teaching practice, and the strategies she employed to overcome those challenges and difficulties.

2. Method

In identifying the reasons of choosing a practice and decisiveness in respect of the challenges faced and strategies chosen, we need to understand the teachers' belief systems and their educational perspectives and theories. In ensuring the study would be to identify critical and unique challenges that can be linked to the ELT pre-service teacher's teaching practice in a non-native setting, Chung's (2002) suggestion to focus on specific problems was espoused. This assisted us to arrive at a decision to limit the identification and exploration of challenges to just three. Such limitation ensures that the teacher can meticulously and comprehensively examine each challenge, and ensure the strategies used are exhaustively tried, tested and explained.

The teacher, Aida, a 24-year old female Malay teacher, was placed in a sub-urban school, teaching English to lower secondary students (with an average age of 14). She was asked to identify and concentrate on three major challenges that she would face during her teaching practice, and elaborate them in terms of the nature of the challenges, and how they affected her practices of teaching and learning in classroom settings. She was given the total freedom in determining the three challenges. She was asked to outline and elucidate the various strategies that she explored and experimented with in order to meet those three challenges. At the end of the teaching practice, which lasted for almost three months, she was required to submit a reflective-report of what she experienced.

The reflective report was the primary source of data for this paper. A series of brief interviews with Aida were also conducted after the reflective journal was submitted to assist us in comprehending, confirming and elucidating the reflective narratives (Narratives from the interviews are referred to as 'Interview 1', 'Interview 2', etc.). Other narratives or excerpts are from the Reflective Report.

The interview also functioned as a tool to cross-check the reliability and validity of the content and reflections of teachers' reflective-report. And in terms of data analysis, a simple tool of coding strategies was used. Coding strategies are the means of sorting the descriptive data collected so that the material bearing on a given topic could be physically separated from other data. For the purpose of this study, the coding was based on "situation codes" and "activity codes". The situation codes' aim was to place units of data that described how Aida defined, perceived and connected the

teaching strategies she developed to her classroom practices in overcoming the challenges in an English language classroom. For activity codes, they were directed at identifying and understanding Aids's regularly occurring kinds of behaviour i.e. the teaching strategies and actions that were planned and put into practice by Aida (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Schemas, such as Table 1, were used to identify the challenges and strategies used and, code, arrange and organize the data.

3. Findings

In the following section, three difficulties, which Aida found most challenging in this period of her teaching experience, are depicted. It is, however, crucial to stress before further elucidation that although some of the difficulties outlined will be common to many, what Aida experienced was, to a large extent, personal to her and her teaching milieu in the Malaysian context. Nevertheless, there are many learning opportunities and sharing of ideas and experiences for other beginning English language teachers in similar predicaments, which we will underscore from time to time. These prospects could easily allow them to make sense and meaning of personal teaching ideas in relation to others' experiences, and discern how the senses and meanings constructed could assist in their own teaching-learning engagements. In general, Aida was faced with three main challenges – mixed ability class, use of mother tongue and expectations of teacher centredness.

3.1 Mixed ability

During the teaching practice, Aida faces an extremely huge challenge as a beginning teacher – a large class of students with mixed levels of abilities. Aida relates,

The reality of teaching a class of 40-50 students is, already on its own, a difficult endeavour. Add to it the fact that the 40-50 students in your class have their own individualistic levels of abilities and you would have a situation that is almost impossible to surmount. This is the first of my three challenges-teaching a class of individuals who fell into many bands of abilities and trying to effect a teaching situation which would be meaningful and beneficial to every individual student and their level of ability.

Teaching students of mixed levels of abilities is a real and genuine problem that teachers face, one that also needs serious attention from professionals in ELT (Hedge, 2000), and one that is literally impossible to solve (Rose, 1997). According to Aida, one of the factors that made the above situation a real challenge is the fact that there were "many bands of abilities and that the students were very widely distributed along the line; some being at the very top-upper intermediate and some at the very bottom-elementary whilst others were widely distributed between these two extremes" (Interview 3). She construes that "although there were differing levels of abilities, the actual ranges were not wide and were more evenly distributed" (Interview 3).

Aida relies on her previous knowledge to guide her and develop effectual strategies that are based on informed ideas and pedagogical ideas to address the challenge of mixed ability classes. She elaborates in great detail justifying each decision with sound pedagogical knowledge and ideas:

Having the experience of that first teaching practice was not, however, only a negative point. It also became for me an experience from which I could draw upon in order to surmount this challenge. Therefore, my main strategy, like previously, was to effect lessons timed and paced on a middle ground so as not to intimidate the lower level ability students and at the same time, not to hold back the students with the higher level of ability. It was not easy to find a middle ground even with the experience that I had garnered before as the levels in ability were far more far-ranging and the students themselves were totally different individuals. Many a times in the first few weeks I failed completely with my lessons. Time and practice made the challenge less insurmountable in that I became more proficient in finding a middle ground and also I developed sub-strategies to further ease my difficulty.

Her key strategy is to find a common or middle ground, which she pursued relentlessly even when the amount of success was not encouraging. Aida understands that it is extremely important to give equal attention to all her students in the classroom regardless of their abilities and interests. This is done through trial and error and constant experimenting, with which she eventually manages to streamline further refinement of her understanding and ideas that facilitated her in developing "sub-strategies" (or opportunities). These sub-strategies are actually tools that assisted her in dealing with very specific problems that she faced in the classrooms. She explains of one of the sub-strategies that contribute to enriching engagements between students of different abilities:

Effecting mixed ability groups/pairs during group/pair activities was one of the sub-strategies that I developed to overcome this challenge. Having a mixed ability group/pair, I reasoned, would have the effect of the more able students helping the less able ones with the task presented and as such, the weaker students would not only be able to do the task presented but also simultaneously, exercise and stretch their capabilities by imparting their knowledge to the less able. This was my reasoning and my reasoning was more than fully realized by my students. The higher level ability ones were more than willing to aid the less able ones and I was a witness during my monitoring to the many endeavours that flourished.

The previous outlined strategy leads to another sub-strategy, which also aids towards easing Aida's difficulty.   During the process of the more able student explaining or clarifying things to the less able one or during the process of presenting the lesson, she makes an allowance for the employment of mother tongue in order to facilitate understanding for the students as much as to facilitate the process of explaining for the better ones and herself.

3.2 Use of mother tongue

Aida had this to say regarding the use of mother tongue in English language classes,

Beliefs, as much as expectations, could lead you to facing totally unexpected challenges.   One of the beliefs that were of extreme significance to me is that only English should be spoken during an English lesson. I was able to act upon that belief during my first teaching experience and as such, I did not foresee any difficulties in practicing that belief yet again. Even with the situation that faced me – mixed ability classes so different from the first time – I was still reluctant to let off on my belief. It was not until a couple of weeks with my two classes that I began to realize that using English exclusively in the teaching situation I was in, had not improved my students' capabilities but rather left them feeling bewildered and confused when they still could not comprehend the second or third explanations given still in English.

This second challenge is the compromise that Aida constantly has to make with her belief that only English should be spoken in an English lesson by making allowances for the employment of the mother tongue during lessons. She compromises and makes allowances for them to employ their mother tongue when completing group or pair tasks. This does not mean that they are to conduct all of their group work or discussions in mother tongue. She says that she tries as much as possible to encourage them to use English during these types of activities by asking questions about their discussions or progress with the task at hand and prompting and encouraging them to answer her in English whilst monitoring (Interview 4).

Aida realizes that her compromising on the use of mother tongue actually presents another sub-challenge,

I found that I not only had to compromise on my students' employment of mother tongue but mine as well as my students were afraid to ask questions when they do not understand in fear that the re-explanation will be given in English, which is the reason why they did not understand in the first place.

This strategy of using the mother tongue is not uncontrolled but Aida ensures the use of mother tongue is in accordance to her rules – she remains steadfast about instructions during the lessons, which would only be given in English. Aida explains,

The reasoning behind this is the fact that in the students' English language examinations, the instructions would be written or given orally in English only and no one present during the examinations would be allowed to explain the instructions in mother tongue should they not comprehend.   The students would have to muddle through on their own. Therefore, in my opinion, using only English in giving instructions would aid towards facilitating this matter.

Yet again, the reflective practices have given her confidence to construct her own understanding of the situation and hence create her own pedagogical knowledge that she believes would dissolve her challenges and contribute to her students' learning even though it means she has to abandon her initial beliefs and views (on the use of mother tongue).

The compromise served as a valuable lesson for me in that I now view the employment of mother tongue not as a negative aspect but rather as an aspect of teaching that could in fact be very positive when employed in the right contexts and for sound, justifiable reasoning (Interview 4).

Employing mother tongue in terms of Aida explaining or re-clarifying concepts and vocabulary is not only beneficial in terms of making her students understand the lesson better but also in making them not afraid or reluctant to ask her questions when they need a clarification on what has been said because the students "know that they could ask me to re-explain it in mother tongue" (Interview 4).   This, in Aida's opinion, also "aided towards establishing a working relationship, which was both friendly and of benefit to the two parties involved – me, the teacher and them, the students" (Interview 4).

3.3 Expectations of Teacher-Centeredness

The third challenge identified by Aida is students' expectations of teacher-centeredness in the classroom. She strongly feels that these expectations

...could lead to many difficulties being faced in the classroom as there are many different aspects of teacher-centeredness and you could, in fact, be faced with one or more than one aspect of teacher-centeredness at any particular given time.   Things such the teacher having complete control over all that is done in the classroom – a totalitarian view of control, the teacher is the source of all knowledge – the teacher is there to provide knowledge and the students are there simply to accept and the teacher does most if not all of the talking in class are just some of aspects that are ensconced under that umbrella term 'teacher-centeredness'.

Aida students' expectations of teacher-centeredness in their classroom are particularly challenging.   The fact that their

expectations of teacher-centeredness focused not on just one of the many aspects but several at one time made the difficulty even more challenging. She highlights domino-effect-like instances of the students' expectations;

The students, first and foremost, expected me to do most of the talking while they sat and quietly listened. As such, my students were not very forthcoming when I attempted to elicit information from them or get them to talk to aid in the presentation of the lesson. They also had expectations of the teacher being the provider of all knowledge and their role is just to accept. This had the effect of me having difficulties in trying to teach deductively as they would not attempt to answer even though they in my opinion are capable of answering. Lastly but definitely not the least, the students also had expectations that the teacher i.e. me in this case is an authoritarian figure that has total control in all that happens in the classroom and that they do not have any say in the matter at all. This resulted in my students not being able or rather reluctant to inform me of what they think would be of interest and benefit to them even though I was the one doing the asking.

There are times in the first couple of weeks when she "felt like giving up and actually did by conforming to their expectations, which did not at all reflect my beliefs and convictions about teaching" (Interview 4). But she soon realizes that giving up is not going to accomplish anything, and "so I carried on with my efforts" (Interview 4). This is her fundamental strategy in grasping the challenge of students' expectations of teacher-centredness.

After three weeks, her strategies of encouraging students to speak not only of matters to do with the lesson in progress but also their opinion of what was happening in the classroom, teaching them not be afraid of trying even when they are uncertain of their answers, prompting them on when they have made a mistake and praising them when they are right began to show results. Her students begin to feel more confident and, "after a full month had passed, they were starting to volunteer answer instead of just standing and telling me they do not know" (Interview 4). Aida achieved this by adopting and promulgating the idea of establishing a kind of camaraderie in her classroom.

… the type of relationship that is friendly but yet not forgetting the boundaries that exists which is, to a large extent, akin to the relationship we, the degree group have with our lecturers also aided me in altering my students' expectations, thus achieving a more learner-centeredness classroom.

4. Discussion

Aida acknowledges that "Many challenges were met and whilst some were successfully conquered, others were not" (Interview 1). It is most likely that her success and 'failure' are due to her naïve beliefs about learning and teaching that were or were not "integrated with theoretically informed beliefs" (Brownlee et al., 1998, p. 107), which well emphasizes the significance of interconnectedness of theory and practice in any facet of initial teacher education, including teaching practice (Beattie, 1997). But what was interesting is she is able to identify the challenges, and then recognize the extent of her success (and/or 'failure') in dealing with those challenges via the strategies that she developed. This is an indication of Aida's rudimentary comprehension of her professional (in) competencies and pedagogical (mis)understandings and how (in)effectively she uses these in context of narrowing the fissure and disparity between her teaching and her students' learning of English, a situation described by Hedge (2000) as "a number of persistent concerns in the professional practice of teachers" (p. 1).

In addressing the challenge of mixed ability class, her first teaching experience and also from her own learning experience was valuable. Giving equal consideration and due attention to all her students creates "the context where all learners feel valuable and have the space and confidence to try" (Rose, 1997, p. 4). In an examination of powerful teacher education programmes in United States, Darling-Hammond (2006) emphasizes the need to develop a repertoire of teaching strategies that assist teachers in creating "opportunities for students who learn differently" (p. 257). Aida showed us how she aligned Rose's (1997) and Darling-Hammond's (2006) notion of creation of context/opportunities to paralleling the mixed abilities of her learners by creating learning opportunities in the classroom, where the premise is language cannot be taught but teachers can "create conditions under which it will develop in its own way" (Kumaravadivelu, 1996, p. 242) and implanted a sense of togetherness among her students in learning the language, where the students help each other in many situations at many varying levels that are framed by "a sense of discipline and shared purpose in the class" (Rose, 1997, p. 4). Though a study like Millrood's (2002) reveals that there is "no clear strategy in the teacher's professional paradigm for dealing with the heterogeneous class" (p. 129), Aida is successful because her reflective practices on the challenges enable her to develop sensible and consequential pedagogical knowledge that untangles many of her serious concerns and anxieties relating to mixed ability class.

The use of mother tongue enables the students to more able follow the lessons, language and activities conducted. It is reflected in the way they are better able to accomplish tasks and, asking and answering questions in English regarding what has been explained in mother tongue. This issue can be directly linked to the valid and often controversial debate of when and how much mother tongue should be used in learning English as a second language (Cook, 2001). She maintains that the main use of mother tongue is to facilitate matters for the students in comprehending the lessons or activities or completing the tasks expected of them as well as to her in overcoming the challenge of teaching mixed

ability classes.   Though Turnbull (2001) fears that licensing teachers to use mother tongue in language classrooms may lead to 'an overuse', thus limiting students' contact and exposure in the target language, Aida's experience tells us otherwise – her use of mother tongue is not misused, but rather has specific purposes and agendas where she has manifestly thought of when to use mother tongue and how she is going to utilize it to maximize students' learning.

In addressing the challenge of students' expectations of teacher centredness, Aida introduces the notion of camaraderie. Much earlier, Freire (1973) describes the 'camaraderie' mentioned by Aida to be extant in dialogues, which are not limited to the literal meaning of conversation or the action of speaking and listening, but which connote a two-way relationship/communication of words, emotions and actions between two individuals that promote "I-thou" kind of relationship. In these dialogues teachers and the learner respect and learn from each other in a genuine two-way relationship/communication mode. It also has the effect of making the students less afraid to attempt to answer or ask questions when they think they have a need to. Tudor (1996) also recommends similar active participation and involvement of students in every level of teaching and learning, including the goal-setting, planning and evaluating stages so that learner-centred learning can truly be alive in language classrooms.

This case study reaffirms Prabhu's (1995) earlier contention that a teacher is likely to "develop the ability only gradually over time, with many errors along the way" (p. 63) and Burke's (2006) findings that by teaching, language teachers create opportunities where they learn through experiences. But nevertheless, the present case study that integrates the pre-scheduled reflection at the beginning of Aida's teaching practice disengages from Prabhu's (1995) further claims that the trial and error practice is actually wrapped "without much conscious awareness" and with "a continuing tentativeness and uncertainty" of the teacher (p. 63). But Aida has shown that she is always aware of the strategies that worked and failed for her.   She works on the successes (and failures) in her attempt to better and deepen the students' learning through the various strategies and sub-strategies that she developed along the way.

Data indicate that Aida basically used six main strategies, as indicated in Figure 1, to resolve her challenges. Different challenges required different combination of strategies. But three main strategies reoccurred in each of the challenges identified i.e. understanding the challenges; experimenting of theories and ideas (trial and error) and; being determined, persistent and perseverant. These three strategies seem to be the main contributing factors to Aida's conception of what she considers as effective pedagogical knowledge, skills and practices in seizing the challenges.

5. Conclusion

It is quite impossible to successfully overcome all the challenges that will come along a teacher's way. But by intentionally focusing on three of the most difficult challenges faced, the outcome is extremely enlightening in terms of unearthing best strategies and practices that could provide answers to unlocking those challenges. Aida is able to extrapolate key patterns and problematic issues that needed immediate attention and quickly solve them. It was also evident from the excerpts that Aida undertook different yet specific strategies to address different difficulties at the same time trying to find a common platform that would somehow explain more clearly of the intricacies of the challenges. All these were based on the 'trial and error' method – judging and evaluating what works and what fails, and why the challenges emancipated in the first place. This practice raised more 'questions' (of the challenges) for Aida to ponder, and opened up many possibilities for alternative strategies because she has her own value system, and that the extent to which evaluation findings became utilized was due to the roles of her philosophical orientation, politics of educational ambitions, personality make-up and other related factors (Alkin, 2000).

One implication of this study for teacher education, particularly for the Malaysian settings (and alike), is that the strategies used by Aida in apprehending the challenges ought to be considered as part of the course work study in the preparation of future English language teachers so that they would be aware of what to expect during teaching practice and the strategies they can apply. However, the strategies in Figure 1 are certainly not conclusive. In-depth studies and also perhaps a larger quantitative study are needed to identify the strategies that would be beneficial for teacher trainees during teaching practice, as well as for in-service teachers teaching in schools.

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Table 1. Coding, arrangement and organization of data

| Example excerpts of strategy	Analyses (Note/comment): Pedagogical knowledge	Challenges: Strategy used
Therefore, my main strategy, like previously, was to effect lessons timed and paced on a middle ground so as not to intimidate the lower level ability students and at the same time, not to hold back the students with the higher level of ability. (Activity Code)	It is important to give equal consideration and due attention to all the students in the classroom regardless of their abilities and interests.	Mixed Ability Class: to find a common or middle ground.
I found that I not only had to compromise on my students' employment of mother tongue but mine as well as my students were afraid to ask questions when they do not understand in fear that the re-explanation will be given in English which is the reason why they did not understand in the first place. (Situation Code)	...beneficial in terms of making her students understand the lesson better but also in making them not afraid or reluctant to ask her questions when they need a clarification on what has been said.	Mother Tongue: to compromise in situations that would benefit both the teacher and the students.
By adopting and promulgating the idea of establishing a kind of camaraderie that is friendly but yet not forgetting the boundaries that exists which is, to a large extent, akin to the relationship we, the degree group have with our lecturers also aided me in altering my students' expectations, thus achieving a more learner-centeredness classroom. (Activity Code)	…active participation and involvement of students in every level of teaching and learning, including the goal-setting, planning and evaluating stages.	Expectations of Teacher-Centredness: to encourage, prompt students to speak, and to give opinion of what was happening in the classroom, and to teach them not to be afraid.
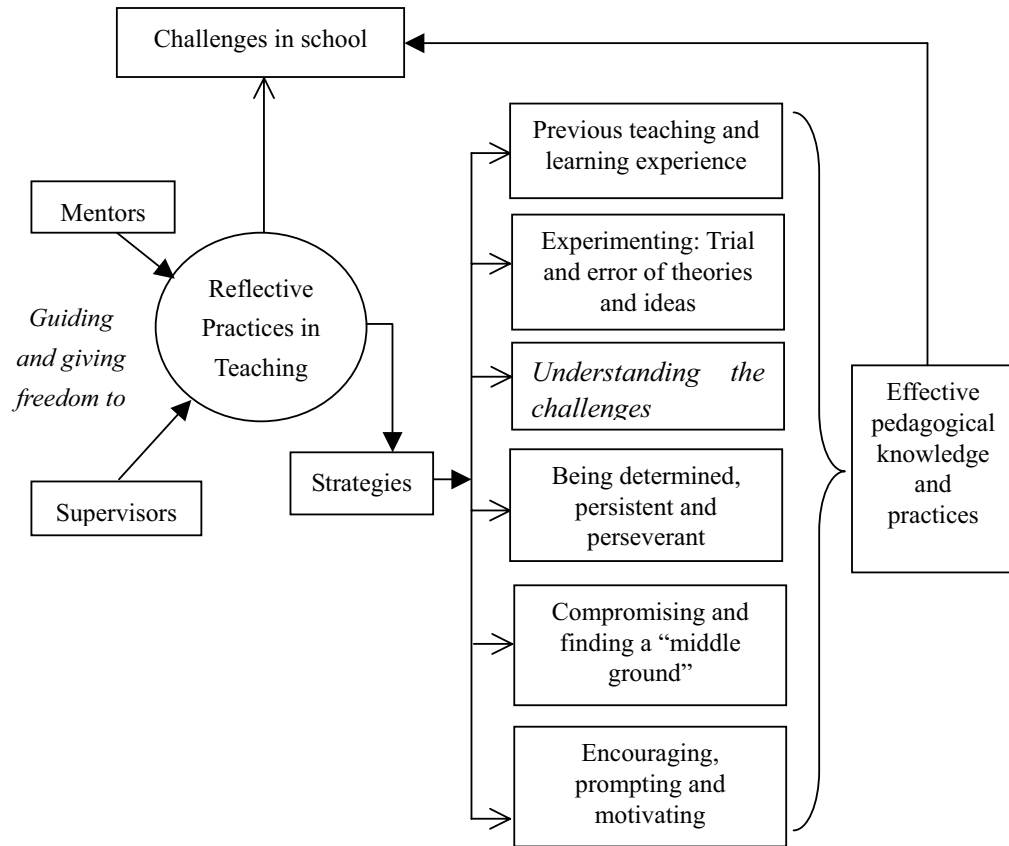
Figure 1. Strategies used during teaching practice