

Delving into Critical Incident Experiences of EFL Teachers: A Lesson Study Reflection

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Abstract

This qualitative research explored Critical Incident (CI) experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers through the frame of Lesson Study (LS). Five EFL local teachers at SMPN 1 Nguter participated in this research. The purpose of this study was to explore the impacts of Critical Incident (CI) experiences on the professional development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and to examine how these experiences influenced their teaching practices at SMPN 1 Nguter through the framework of Lesson Study. The study also aimed to understand how reflective practices within lesson study activities could contribute to the development of adaptive, student-centred, and culturally responsive teaching strategies. Data were collected using interviews, observation, guided reflection, and document analysis. A narrative inquiry research design was applied. The data were analyzed through triangulation and coding (open-, axial-, and selective coding). The result indicated that the impact of CI experiences on TPD includes emotional resilience, pedagogical improvement, professional learning community, and lifelong learning. These experiences improved teaching practice by supporting adaptive teaching strategies, particularly in rural contexts. Reflective CI analysis can promote more student-centered and culturally responsive teaching. These findings emphasize the importance of structured reflection within collaborative frameworks, such as lesson study (LS), to promote continuous professional development among EFL teachers in similar educational settings worldwide. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of reflective practice on teaching effectiveness and student outcomes.

Keywords: classroom management; critical incident; lesson study; self-reflection; teacher collaboration

1. Introduction

Teachers' professional development (TPD) is significantly enhanced by the experience of critical incidents (CIs), particularly when integrated within the framework of lesson study (LS), a prevalent collaborative approach to professional development in education. The LS cycle is made up of four steps: planning, teaching, observing, and reflecting on lessons. This cycle is used to improve teaching practice in a step by step manner (Coenders & Verhoef, 2019; meaningful insights and enhance their professional development (Wijaya & Kuswandono, 2018). It is essential to develop and refine pedagogical methods by understanding and reflecting on these incidents (Averina & Kuswandono, 2022; Fox & Poultney, 2020; Kager et al., 2022; Quaresma & Ponte, 2021; Santihastuti et al., 2021) A structure framework for reflective practice, collaborative learning and continuous professional development is provided to EFL teachers by integrating CIs to LS.

This study examines EFL teachers' CI experiences through LS reflection to understand their impact on teacher development and classroom practice. Despite their important role in shaping professional growth and teaching practice, there

remains limited research on critical incident (CI) experiences among EFL teachers, especially in rural schools. While previous studies discuss CI and Lesson Study separately, there are few that examine their connection in EFL contexts. It's also aligned with the previous research from Wijaya and Kuswandono (2018). That research was on critical reflection on teachers' professional development. This was particularly in the context of EFL. They identified that reflection is a significant tool for teachers to gain meaningful insights from their experiences. Using CIs in this way enables teachers to analyse meaningful moments in their teaching practice, ultimately leading to a greater understanding and personal growth. Teachers are also encouraging to see themselves as lifelong learners, and to see working with CIs as a way of improving their teaching strategies and continuing their professional development. This lesson study framework defines a form collaborative reflection that is similar to how critical incident reflection facilitates in-depth discussion and shared learning among teachers. Teachers' identities and perceptions of teaching and learning are impacted by CIs, which helps them to redefine their roles and responsibilities. By highlighting contextual factors that influence teaching practices, this reflective process enables rich comparative analysis and demonstrates how critical moments can motivate the creation of collaborative environments enhance pedagogical practices among EFL teachers. Teachers who engage in reflective practice in response to CIs have been shown to significantly improve their teaching strategies and adaptability (Beijaard, 2019; Farrell, 2020). Reflective practice broadens the horizon of pedagogy and classroom dynamics.

In EFL context, CI experiences are salient moments that either confirm or disrupt teachers' pedagogical assumption. They prompt reflection, adaptation, and transformation of teaching approaches. When teachers engage in creating meaningful experiences by reflecting on CIs, they strengthen their professional identity (Putri & Kuswandono, 2020). Teachers are given responsibility for their own professional development and are able to adapt their practice to suit their students' needs (Korthagen, 2020). Teachers need to navigate the complexities, challenges, and opportunities of their profession, underpinned by the principles of reflective practice. The experience of critical incidents (CIs) is emerging as a pivotal moment that significantly shapes teachers' professional growth, pedagogical practice, and teaching effectiveness. This study explored these CIs within the framework of classroom reflection, drawing on a synthesis of theoretical perspectives to illuminate the complexities of EFL teaching and learning. While some studies have examined LS or CIs analysis separately, this study integrates both methodologies. It addresses gaps concerning cultural and contextual specifics in EFL teaching environments, examining how cultural factors influence EFL teachers' perceptions and responses to CIs. It also posits that certain events or occurrences can profoundly affect individuals' behaviour, beliefs and attitudes. These may differ significantly from studies conducted in rural educational contexts with different subject areas. Briefly, based on the above background and literature, the aims of the research are summarized by the following two research questions: what are the impacts of CI experiences of EFL teachers on teacher professional development (TPD)? and how do these experiences impact their teaching practice at SMPN 1 Nguter?.

2. Method

This qualitative study used a narrative inquiry framework and applied in-depth interviews, classroom observations, guided reflections, and analysis of documents. It aimed to explore, comprehend, and interpret qualitative data through

systematic procedures. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and share their insights, focusing on CIs in the classroom. This process not only facilitates a cathartic release from the tensions of teaching but also serves as an outlet for teachers’ frustrations (Alsup, 2006; Farrel, 2013; Megawati et al., 2020). The analysis followed a coding process (open, axial, and selection coding) to identify themes and interpret meanings, ultimately reporting findings in descriptive narratives (Creswell, 2013; Sugiyono, 2017).

3. Research Site and Participants

The study sample consists of five EFL local teachers SMPN 1 Nguter, Sukoharjo, Central Java. They were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included: 1). having taught for more than five years, 2). recognized as strong and committed to teaching, 3). belonging to a professional community of teachers involved in learning to teach (MGMP). Their demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants’ Demographic Data

No	Name (<i>Pseudonym</i>)	Age	Gender	Years of Teaching
1	KW	59	Male	32
2	BM	54	Male	26
3	SL	54	Female	30
4	IN	45	Female	23
5	NR	42	Female	20

Table 1 presents the demographic data of 5 participants, who have been given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The participants range in age from 42 and 59, indicating that they are mature group of educators. In terms of gender, there are two male teachers (KW and BM) and three female teachers (SL, IN, and NR). All participants have experience ranging from 20 and 32 years. Overall, the table shows that the study involves that it involves a small group of teachers whose long-term experience may provide valuable insights into the research topic. Participants were invited to take part in depth-interview reflection on explanations and guidance on questions about their CIs (Table 2).

Table 2. Instrument Blueprint

Framework	Research Questions	Interview Questions
CIs (Creswell, 2013)		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Could you tell me about your teaching background and experience? 2. How long have you been an EFL teacher? 3. Can you describe recent critical incidents you have encountered in your classroom? 4. What were the circumstances that led to the incidents? 5. What was your first reaction to the incidents? 6. What were your thoughts and feelings immediately following the incidents?

Schön (1983), Stigler & Hiebert (1999)	What is the impact of CI experiences on TPD	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did you present and discuss this incident during the lesson study session? 2. What kind of feedback or insights did you get from your colleagues during the lesson study session? 3. How did the process of reflection help you to understand and deal with the incidents? 4. What impact has participation in the lesson study had on your overall professional development?
Dewey (1933), Lave & Wenger (1991)	How do these experiences impact their teaching practice?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What changes, if any, have you made to your teaching practice by reflecting on these incidents? 2. How do you plan to apply the learning from these incidents and reflection to your future classroom practice? 3. Based on your experience with critical incidents and lesson reflection, what advice would you give to other EFL teachers?

Based on Table 2, the participants described what had happened what had happened and the impact of these CI experiences on their TPD and teaching practice. Since experiences can only be critical if it is reflected upon, the participants reflected upon most of them one week later.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

The participants, who were aged between 42 and 59. had between 20 and 32 years of teaching experience. This provided rich insights into classroom challenges and reflective practices. The interview questions focused on the participants' experiences of CI, their emotional responses, professional reflections, and the changes in their classroom following LS discussions. The analysis began with open coding, a process which led to the emergence of initial themes and concepts from the raw data. This involved assigning labels to segments of text that reflected key ideas related to CIs, TPD and classroom practice. This was followed by axial coding, which explored the connections between the categories that had been identified during the open coding stage (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Sugiyono, 2017). The focus was on the influence of CIs on TPD and reflection shaped teachers' understanding of their experiences. Selective coding integrated these identified themes into a cohesive narrative, highlighting core themes such as the impact of reflective practice on teaching effectiveness, emotional responses to CIs, and changes in teaching strategies following reflection. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to contextual analysis, interpreting the data within the framework of existing literature and theory. In particular, phenomenological insights were emphasized to understand the subjective meanings that teachers attached to their experiences. Triangulation was used to increase trustworthiness by using multiple sources of data. A member-check technique allowed participants to check preliminary findings for accuracy and relevance. Finally, the findings were presented in the form of rich descriptive narratives that illustrated the interpretations of individual teachers, supported by direct quotations to provide depth, while at the

same time linking the analysis back to the research questions and theoretical frameworks.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results

After discussing and elaborating on the CI experiences of the participants in response to two research questions, seven main themes were identified. These themes are based on the impact of the participants' CI experiences on their lives as teachers. The impact of these experiences on TPD included emotional resilience, pedagogical improvement, the development of a professional learning community, and a commitment to lifelong learning. These experiences also impacted their teaching practice, leading to the development of more effective teaching strategies, increased student engagement, and improved cultural understanding.

5.1.1 The Impact of CI Experiences on TPD Emotional Resilience

The researcher found that one of the impacts of CI experiences on TPD was emotional resilience. TPD was impacted by CI experiences in a significant way, particularly in terms of emotional resilience. Teachers often experienced stress and emotional pressure, especially in rural classroom with diverse student background, according to an analysis of all five participants. Almost all the participants agreed that there is a lot of happiness along the way, but there is a lot of stress and strain as SM shared.

"It is not easy to become an English teacher, especially in a rural area with students from diverse family and cultural backgrounds. I feel stressed and depressed, sometimes. Emotional resilience helps me in my ability to adapt to and bounce back from stress and significant challenges in my life. It's about recognizing when I feel stressed or overwhelmed" (BM).

NR, SL, IN, and KW also reflected on the importance of effectively managing and regulating their emotions. This includes coping mechanisms such as deep breathing, mindfulness, and seeking out social support when it is needed. Most of the time they reflect on what has happened. In this way, they need to be emotionally resilient. They developed emotional regulation, self-reflection, and collegiality support through LS reflection, which helped them manage challenges and maintain their teaching commitment.

5.1.2 Pedagogical Improvement

The researchers found that pedagogical improvement is one of the impacts of CI experiences on TPD in this school.

"A teacher's responsibilities are to be a character builder and a motivator for our students, not just an imparter of knowledge. My CI experiences often highlight areas where teaching strategies may need adjustment. I often experiment with new methods based on my reflections to better meet the needs of diverse learners" (SL).

Other participants also declared that a teacher must use active learning and be able to motivate their students. Creating an environment where students can actively learn and develop critical thinking skills is the role of the teacher. They believe that teachers are facilitators in developing students' character. They see themselves as helping students to learn and shaping their personalities.

5.1.3 Professional Learning Community

The next impact of CI experiences on TPD in this school was a professional learning community. All participants suggested that taking part in seminars can

help them become more professional as a teacher. Meeting colleagues can promote motivation and positive energy.

"Almost all the teachers in SMPN 1 Nguter belong to MGMP. Through various cooperation and learning activities, the main goal of MGMP is to improve teachers' competence. By drawing on the collective expertise and experience of teachers, it makes an important contribution to the overall quality of education"(BM).

This statement explains that almost all the teachers at SMPN 1 Nguter are members of the MGMP (a professional forum for teachers), which provides a platform for collaboration and continuous learning. Through activities such as discussions, training, and sharing of teaching practices, MGMP aims to enhance teachers' competence and professional development. Teachers can learn from one another, solve problems together, and improve their teaching strategies by using the collective knowledge, skills, and experiences of their members. This collaborative effort significantly improves the overall quality of education in this school.

5.1.4 Lifelong Learning

The last impact of CI experiences on TPD at this school was lifelong learning. All the teachers here are intuitive. They apply the theory that they have learned at university. They teach and also learn at the same time.

"I always wanted to be an English teacher. Language teaching is dynamic. It's constantly evolving and influenced by many factors, including cultural, technological, and changing society. Therefore, to be effective in the teaching of language and literature, English teachers must constantly update their knowledge and skills" (KW).

Another participant also shared that they are always in the process of updating and improving their skills. They enjoy implementing new approaches and methods and improving an interactive teaching environment. Teaching is to continue to learn. As teachers, we should not allow ourselves to be satisfied with what we have achieved so far. To teach is to keep learning.

5.1.5 The Impact of CI Experiences on Teaching Practice

Another participant also shared this section discusses three impacts of the participants' experiences based on their teaching practices, namely more effective teaching strategies, students' engagement, and cultural understanding.

5.1.6 Adaptive Teaching Strategies

The first finding of the impact of CI experiences on teaching practice in this school was the development of adaptive teaching strategies. Different approaches and theories are used to improve teachers' skills, knowledge, and effectiveness in the development of more effective teaching strategies for TPD.

"Being part of this LS has been transformative. It has taught me the value of reflecting on my experiences and learning from my peers. I have developed more effective strategies to improve my teaching by reflecting on these incidents. Going forward, I plan to continue this process of reflecting together to help us continue to improve" (IN).

SL, KW, BM, and NR also recalled that the pandemic has brought huge changes. They need to learn how to use technology to make their teaching more interactive and effective. They also realized that there were always unexpected things that happened during their journey as a teacher. They learned how to be more flexible and developed strategies for learning.

5.1.7 Student Engagement

The second impact of CI experiences on teaching practice was an increased focus on students' engagement. All participants conveyed that they are more confident on their ability to manage their classroom and engage their students. They committed to fostering a reflective teaching practice to increase their focus and engagement with students.

"As a teacher, I create a connected learning environment by providing achievable challenges and constructive feedback. I use different strategies to engage and empower my students in their learning journey by understanding their different needs"(NR).

The teacher's approach is characterized by the active creation of a classroom environment that is both supportive and engaging. This fosters a sense of connection and meaning in the learning process. By setting realistic and appropriate challenges, the teacher helps students to stay motivated and confident. Students can understand their progress and improve by receiving constructive feedback. The teacher also uses a variety of strategies to engage students and encourage them to play an active role in their learning. The teacher's approach is adapted to ensure all students feel supported and empowered throughout their learning journey, based on the understanding that each student has different needs.

5.1.8 Cultural Understanding

The last finding of the impact of CI experiences on teaching practice was cultural understanding.

"Making students feel welcome has always been a passion of mine. However, motivating students to learn English is the biggest challenge. Reflecting on my CI experiences allows me to develop a deeper understanding of the students' cultural contexts, especially around SMPN 1 Nguter where most of the students are the children of farmers. It helps me identify where cultural differences have caused miscommunication or misunderstanding"(IN).

In their reflections, all participants were aware that cultural understanding enables them to appreciate, respect, and interact effectively with students from different cultural backgrounds. It involves being aware of cultural differences, beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors and understanding how these factors shape individuals' perspectives and interactions within society.

5.2 Discussion

This research found that CIs impact TPD by their emotional resilience, pedagogy, participation in professional learning communities, and commitment to lifelong learning. They also influence teaching practice by improving strategies, student engagement, and cultural understanding. Teachers who are emotionally resilient are better able to cope with challenges and build a stronger professional identity, while collaboration and reflection support continuous growth. These findings are consistent with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning through interaction and peer support. LS is significant because it provides a framework for teachers to work together and think about their experiences. This helps them improve their teaching and adapt to different learners, which in turn improves their professional development. Teachers need to keep on learning their whole lives if they are going to keep teaching effectively. They have to keep updating their knowledge because language education is always changing. These findings align with those Upa and Mbato (2019), who emphasized resilience, collaboration, and adaptability in teacher

development. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, who work with diverse learners, must be flexible and committed to ongoing professional development.

CI can trigger deep, informative learning and serve as catalyst for teachers' professional development and adaptability (Farrel, 2020). Teachers engage in problem-solving, collaboration and innovation through reflective practice. Supporting student autonomy and participating in professional development communities can also enhance teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge. Teacher competence and student engagement can both be improved by collaborative inquiry, such as LS. However, teaching remains complex, as institutional and cultural factors may influence or restrict practice. Social support and mindfulness can also strengthen teachers' resilience and emotional regulation. Participants' beliefs emphasized student-centered growth, where teachers facilitate learners in achieving outcomes. Through LS reflection, they refine their instructional techniques and adopt student-centered approaches, using technology to enhance engagement. Inclusive classroom and effective communication in diverse setting are supported by cultural awareness. Overall, incorporating CIs into TPD fosters the development of reflective, adaptive, and culturally responsive teachers.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study aims to investigate the impact of CI experiences on TPD and classroom teaching experiences. Firstly, this study shows that engaging in LS and reflecting on CIs has a significant impact on the professional development of EFL teachers. By systematically analyzing and discussing CIs in class, teachers gain deeper insights into their teaching practice. This leads to continuous improvement. Secondly, EFL teachers can identify key challenges and opportunities in their teaching practice through the study of CIs. This reflective process enhances teaching strategies and directly improves student's learning outcomes by addressing instructional gaps and refining pedagogical approaches suited to the EFL context. Last, it underlines how significant it is to integrate classroom study and CIs analysis into teacher training programs and educational research. By promoting a culture of reflective practice and collaborative inquiry among EFL teachers, institutions can create a supportive environment for professional growth and innovation in language teaching methodologies. Furthermore, a suggestion for the next researcher is to explore how technology can support and enhance the process of critical reflection and LS for EFL teachers. The findings emphasize the power of CI experiences to transform teaching practice, compelling teachers to reflect deeply, reassess assumptions, and adapt their teaching methods. Future research should explore whether these reflections lead to lasting changes in teaching dynamics and measurable improvements in student outcomes, with the aim of improving the quality of education. What's more, broader studies could examine how institutional support, school culture, and policy environments influence the effectiveness of CI-based reflection.

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