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Research Article

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Reflections on Teachers and Students' Views on Teaching and Learning Experiences at University: A Diary Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2021-0007>**Abstract**

This study focuses on the research diaries of two researchers who conducted interviews with university teachers and students over a period of two years. Ten expatriate university teachers and ten Emirati university students were interviewed about their views on teaching and learning, the purpose of a university, best educational practices, the role of teachers, students and university in the broader society. After each interview was conducted, the researchers wrote reflections about the interviews in their personal research diaries. Through qualitative data analysis, the data in the diaries were analysed and the major themes were identified. In regards to the teachers interviewed, the analysis of the data showed that the diarists primarily focussed on the teachers' "professional knowledge", "communicative competence" and "adaptability to the new context". With respect to the students interviewed, the data also revealed that the diarists frequently highlighted the significance of students' "educational background", "knowledge of English" and their views on "teacher and student relationship". The findings of this study are in line with Ladson Bilings (1995) which show that the researchers' sociocultural background and preconceptions can impact how they approach a research problem in a context that differs from their own. The findings also reveal that the researchers' prior teaching and learning experiences impact their judgement of professional and academic competence. Implications for research and pedagogy will be discussed accordingly.

Keywords: *Diary studies, Research diaries, Researcher bias, Sociocultural context*

1. Introduction

The use of reflective journals as an effective tool in pedagogy and research has been established by both educational researchers and practitioners (Jho, 2016; Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2017 ; Vicary, Young & Hicks, 2017 ; Moon, 2019). Reflection as an integral part of educational practice can provide teachers with insights as to possible ways for improving teaching. Similarly, it can help researchers approach educational theory and practice from a more informed angle. This is because engaging in reflection in one's teaching profession helps create an internal dialogue for the teacher that can be awareness-raising in regards to the processes of teaching and learning. A reflective approach also fosters communication between the teacher and her/his students and fellow teachers as well as researchers in education.

Reflection as part of the research process is not new. Researchers such as Bailey (1983 ; 1990) used diaries as a way to keep track of students and teachers' mental notes for reflection. The significance of diary use in other aspects of education has also been highlighted by researchers. For example, Beckers, van der Voordt, & Dewulf (2016) argue that students' diaries have shown that they prefer a more informal approach in 'higher education institutions' and have revealed in their findings that students' personal preferences in learning are of paramount importance in helping them achieve the learning outcomes of the course. Similarly, Ma & Oxford (2014) diary study shows how the learning styles and strategies of a learner changes over time.

Even though diaries are commonplace as a tool for studying learners' reactions and emotions in educational contexts, there seems to be a lack of research evidence into how to use research journals as learning tools for researchers (Engin, 2011). Browne (2013) also maintains that the use of research diaries can help understand the researchers' emotional and cognitive vicissitudes and trajectories in educational fieldwork. This is particularly true for researchers conducting studies in a culture dissimilar to their own when researchers need to be cognizant of socio-cultural differences, (see for example, Ladson-Bilings, 1995). In the present study, the researchers investigated the diaries they kept throughout a research study they conducted which involved interviewing western-educated expatriate university teachers and local university students about their teaching and learning experiences. The analysis of the diaries reveals that the researchers, who are born and raised and completed all their studies in the West, have certain predispositional tendencies in the observations they have made about the teachers and the students they interviewed as well as the research they conducted.

2. Literature Review

The use of diaries in studying teachers and students' perceptions of their teaching and learning experiences and emotions has been highlighted by many scholars. For example, Larkin & Jorgensen (2015) investigate students' attitudes and emotions towards math through the use of video diaries. Gong & He (2018) use diaries to investigate teachers' views on their teaching and professional development. Similarly, Lavy & Eshet (2018) exploit the use of daily diaries by teachers to probe into their emotions and emotional regulation. Dincel & Savur's study of teacher candidates' diaries reveals that diaries have played a significant role in developing the candidates' mainly self-regulation and English writing skills (2019). As an effective research tool, most diary studies provide invaluable insights into both teachers and students' responses to their experiences. Accordingly, two main areas that can be explored with the use of diaries in educational research are teachers and students' professional and behavioral competencies.

2.1 Diaries and teachers' competencies

Researchers have used diaries in order to develop teachers' competencies in different areas. For example, Cavicchiolo ; Alivernini & Manganelli (2015) used teachers' diaries as a tool for action research to advance their own professional effectiveness and competence by enhancing students' motivation and engagement in learning. Cavicchiolo *et al* (2015) believe that through the use of diaries,

they were able to create a dialogue between the students and the teachers about students' learning experiences. Discussing these experiences with the students could create a better understanding of their learning difficulties as well as their emotional responses. This will eventually furnish the teachers with the requisite knowledge needed to improve their teaching and the students' learning.

Bešter and Medvešek (2016) study teachers who teach Roma students and believe in order to teach effectively, teachers should maintain and improve their intercultural competence. They argue that in order for teachers to be effectively competent in a sociocultural context different from their own, they need to develop their cultural awareness through being observant and attentive, reflective, empathetic and open to learning about the second culture.

In yet another study, Klug, Gerich and Schmitz (2016) used teacher candidates' diaries as a way of determining the success of a teacher training program in enhancing teacher candidates' teaching skills. Their study revealed that teacher candidates' diaries improved diagnostic teacher competences (Klug et al, 2016, p.200).

2.2 Diaries and students' competencies

Apart from being a good research tool for investigating and improving teachers' professional expertise, diaries have proven to be an effective pedagogical tool for researching into and improving students' academic and reflective skills. For example, Brooman and Darwent (2012) reveal that in their research of diary use by undergraduate students, they discovered that diaries can offer good information about students' previous learning experiences, and as such, diaries can serve as a practical pedagogical tool regarding the students' current level of knowledge. Similarly, Wallin, Adawi and Gold (2016) studied the use of students' diaries as a way of improving reflective and metacognitive skills required by engineering students. They discovered that diaries can help develop students' learning by becoming self-regulated learners. Yıldız (2017) probed into how music students developed their knowledge of music and written expression through the diaries they kept over a period of eight weeks and found that diary keeping had a positive effect on students' knowledge of music and writing in English. Can and Kutluca Canbulat (2019) used diaries to investigate bilingual students' academic achievement and writing skills and discovered that writing regularly in their diaries helped students develop their writing skills and academic achievement.

Students' emotional responses have also been looked into through the use of diaries. Munezero, Montero, Mozgovoy and Sutinen (2013) employed the use of students' learning diaries as a way of keeping record of their emotional trajectories throughout the course. The analysis of diaries showed that students disclosed different levels of anxiety and frustration at different stages of the course. Munezero et al (2013) maintain that student' learning diaries can be used as a formative tool that can help teachers adjust their teaching according to the emotional needs of their students. Likewise, Tomas, Rigano and Ritchie (2016) studied students' emotions in a science classroom through the use of emotion diaries, classroom recordings and interviews. The researchers argue that diaries in which students record their emotional responses can be instrumental in helping them in their emotional management and regulation and eventually improve their interest in and engagement in the subject. Student emotions over the course of the unit of work were recorded using emotion diaries (a self-report measure), video recordings of lessons, and end-of-project interviews. Pearson-Evans (2018) in her study of Irish students' diaries studying in Japan, discovered that students revealed emotional responses to and reminisced mostly about their own social networks, food and language use.

2.3 The use of research diaries

Diaries have also been used by researchers to reflect on their own research and their own emotions through their research study. Nadin & Cassell (2006, p.208) believe research diaries can help create 'reflexivity'. Similarly, Engin (2011) argues that research diaries can create a dialogue between the researcher and herself/himself and in a way can be considered as research scaffolding. Engin believes

that re-reading her own research diaries helped her develop a better understanding of her role as a researcher and the process of research she was engaged in.

Cajaiba (2013) contends that research diaries can help improve reflectivity in research and praxis and argues that having a systematic approach to keeping a research diary can be instrumental in mapping and connecting events to one another in an episodic manner, helping establish connections between each episode in a meaningful and transparent manner. On the other hand, Browne (2013) highlights the importance of research diaries in revealing “the emotional and practical challenges in unfamiliar contexts”. In like manner, Annink (2017), reflects on researcher’s diary use in a cross-cultural and multilingual context and argues that we can use diaries to contemplate on and expound issues related to research, researcher’s emotions, research methodology and ethics..

Similarly, the present study focuses on the diaries of two Western researchers, one from the US and the other from the UK, and how these researchers reflect on interviews carried out with university professors who were educated in Western countries and university students’ who were born, raised and educated in the UAE. The interviews sought to discover the participants’ perspectives on teaching and learning, the purpose of a university, best educational practices, the role of teachers, students and the university in the broader society. The diaries were used to document the researchers’ reflections as they progressed through the interviews.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Context

The data in this study was collected qualitatively through research diaries. This study was conducted at a publicly-funded university in the UAE. The university population comprises mostly female Emirati students whose first language is Arabic. Much of the student population comes from government schools that follow the standard national curriculum as described by Freimuth, 2014. However, the schools in the UAE are currently in a state of change as the UAE educational system transitions to meet local and international needs (Gallagher, 2019). The university is located on two campuses. Classes are taught mostly by expatriate instructors who earned their degrees outside of the UAE. As of 2019, there were 488 international faculty members and 48 domestic faculty and staff in varying roles (QS Top Universities: 2020). All subjects are in English with the exception of Arabic and Islamic studies.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were the researchers who interviewed the teachers and students at the university described above. As stated previously, the researchers are from Western countries, namely the United Kingdom and the United States, and they are both of European ethnicities. Both participants completed their education in the West prior to coming to the UAE and are university educators who have taught in the region for collectively more than three decades.

While the faculty the researchers interviewed were volunteers, the researchers only recruited faculty members who had been in the UAE for a short while, namely a year, but in the end, due to logistical reasons, this had to be extended to two years. The students interviewed had been attending the university for less than one year and all were Emiratis. The researchers asked the faculty members and students questions about how each viewed teaching and learning, the purpose of a university, best practices, the roles of teachers, students, peers and university in the broader society. The researchers also asked the participants questions about their educational backgrounds, the places they studied and/or taught before joining the university and their prior knowledge about the university.

3.3 Research Instrument

The research instrument used in this study is the research diaries that the researchers kept over two

years while conducting interviews with teachers and students. Over a period of two years, the researchers interviewed ten teachers and ten students at their university, and subsequently, based on the interviews, wrote their reflections in their diaries. The teachers were interviewed individually, while the students had opted to be interviewed in pairs. The researchers conducted fifteen interviews with the teachers and students; both researchers participated in all interviews. One researcher conducted the interview, and the other transcribed the interviews. The interviews were transcribed in the course of each interview because some interviewees did not want to be recorded. The use of research diaries was justified based on other scholars' research in this area. For example, Annick (2017) describes the research diary as an instrument for "observing, questioning, critiquing, synthesizing, and acting" (p. 4). The diary may contain extra data, media, contextual information, reflections and ideas for possible future changes (Altrichter & Holly, 2005). Correspondingly, the preliminary reflections were recorded in the researchers' diaries after each interview, and subsequently, towards the end of the study the journal entries were re-visited and more reflective features were added. In total, each researcher had created fifteen journal entries for both faculty members and students.

3.4 Data Analysis

As stated earlier, each researcher had fifteen journal entries based on interviews conducted with faculty and students, and in total the data for this research come from thirty journal entries. The data collected through the use of diaries was analysed using the qualitative research method analysis, i.e. through content analysis. Data was carefully examined, and the most significant themes were selected for presentation. Namely, the important themes were selected based on the number of mentions of each concept in each diary, the number of mentions across all diaries and the saliency of each mention. In order to ensure that the process of data analysis was reliable, the researchers invited another experienced researcher to examine the data to see if they identified the same themes. In almost all reflections, the third researcher agreed with the initial themes highlighted by the two researchers. In order to avoid revealing any identities, all identifiable information was removed and the most representative entries were selected to be presented in this research paper.

4. Findings

4.1 Reflections on Interviews with Teachers

In general, the diary themes about the interviews with teachers disclosed the researchers' ways of viewing and evaluating the faculty members' "knowledge of pedagogy", their "communicative competence" and "adaptability to a different sociocultural context". In the following sections, the representative journal entries that reveal these themes will be explored and discussed in detail. For the purpose of brevity, three journal entries will be connected with each theme.

4.1.1 Teachers' Knowledge of Pedagogy

In almost all of the researchers' reflections, it is obvious that they both concentrated on the knowledge of the pedagogy of the faculty members that they interviewed. Both researchers - who from now onwards shall be referred to as R1 and R2 - in their diaries regularly refer to the interviewees' pedagogical competence. The table below, provides sample reflections about the faculty members' pedagogical competence.

Table 4.1.1: Knowledge of Pedagogy

R1	R2
<i>I was shocked that she had learned so much about pedagogy since coming to the university and how to teach our specific demographic especially since she really doesn't have any formal teaching training.</i>	<i>I was also struck by how little teaching experience she had had prior to the university and how difficult it must have been for her – and probably still is- with so few pedagogical resources to draw upon.</i>
<i>I think he is someone who is naturally good at figuring out how to teach. I think he may not have had any formal training.</i>	<i>It occurred to me as soon as she started talking that she is a (highly) trained teacher and therefore she was using a lot of pedagogical language</i>
<i>I was surprised at how comfortable he adapted his lessons with what seemed like little, if any, pedagogical training. I'm not sure that he even taught before.</i>	<i>I am not surprised that her counseling background has helped her so much with teaching here. It was interesting to hear her use different terminology to us for basically the same techniques</i>

As the journal entries show, both researchers viewed knowledge of pedagogy as a significant concept and reflected on it extensively. This could point to the fact that the researchers have certain competency expectations as highlighted in their dairies. For example, R1 refers to the interviewees' ability to develop their pedagogical knowledge after having been teaching at the university for a short time only. R2 also refers to the role of the faculty member's background knowledge in providing them with a solid pedagogical knowledge. These expectations, it could be argued, may emanate from the researchers' own socio-cultural and educational backgrounds. In other words, researchers' reflective statements reveal that consciously or subconsciously, they judge the candidates based on certain, most probably, "western" ideals and standards of education. The reflective statements also attest to the fact that professional competence constitutes the core of any type of evaluative framework when concentrating on the faculty's teaching experiences. Yet, the diaries reveal other major themes that relate to this professional competence one way or another, which will be discussed in the following sections.

4.1.2 Teachers' Communicative Competence

Another interesting and thought-provoking finding in the diaries is the way the researchers appraised the interviewees' communicative competence, i.e. their ability to articulate their views effectively and coherently in spoken English. While almost all of the interviewees, except one, were native speakers of English, the researchers' wrote about the way the interviewees were able to use the English language to express themselves clearly in English. The table below provides an overview of the researchers' reflections about the faculty members' communicative competence.

Table 4.1.2: Communicative Competence

R1	R2
<i>I think this interview was faster than others. (less than 45 minutes).</i>	<i>Her answers were quite short and very focused- almost abrupt. Was she being careful what she said on record? I am not sure. This interview was over the fastest of all I think- less than 30 minutes, probably because her answers were so short.</i>
<i>While this was a faster interview than the others, I think he repeated a lot of the same ideas and sometimes answered the questions before they were even asked.</i>	<i>From a practical point of view it was quite hard to take notes as she is quite a fast and quite a fulsome talker, as it were.</i>
<i>I felt that he was talking through his opinions which I'm not sure but might be unique to North American communication</i>	<i>I thought that her answers were direct and to the point.</i>

It seems likely that as highly-experienced educators, both researchers show certain expectations regarding a faculty member’s ability to communicate effectively even though only one of the faculty members interviewed was originally from East Asia while all the others were born and raised in English speaking countries. As it can be seen, R2 comments on one of the interviewees’ way of answering questions by referring to his responses as being “repetitive” and R2 comments that the interviewee was a “fulsome” and “fast” speaker making it difficult to take notes. The reflective statements show that communicative competence has been highlighted by both researchers in many ways, and they consider it an essential quality for an educator at university. As mentioned earlier, both researchers are native speakers of English and originating from the United States and the United Kingdom. In the educational systems of both countries, it is considered important to have interactive classes. Therefore, the researchers’ reflective comments indicated that they view effective and robust communication as an important skill of a faculty member. In all likelihood, such references to communicative competence by the researchers betray an unspoken and tacit evaluative framework that they have developed over the years based on their own educational and professional experiences. Yet, the researchers also comment on another important professional attribute, i.e. the faculty members’ adaptability to a different socio-cultural context which shall be discussed next.

4.1.3 Adaptability to a different socio-cultural context

Another interesting finding in the diaries is the way the researchers viewed knowledge of the different sociocultural context they are working in, and the ability to acclimatize to it as an significant characteristic for faculty members. Throughout both diaries, both researchers write extensively about this. This presumably indicates that both researchers, as expatriate teachers in the Middle East, have realized how important it is to know the new context and to adopt new approaches to teaching and perhaps make the necessary adjustments in their work to meet the requisite expectations. The table below summarizes some of these reflective statements.

Table 4.1.3: Adaptability to a different sociocultural context

R1	R2
<i>I wonder how well her approach goes over here as many of the students come from a rote learning background.</i>	<i>Therefore, she was using a lot of pedagogical language and also likely to have put a lot of thought into how to teach in general (obviously) and how to teach here.</i>
<i>The perspective that this informant was coming from, which I would broadly describe as a quite personal response to cultural differences and then how to respond/put in place strategies to respond was far closer to what I was expecting than the quite detailed pedagogical perspective that informant 1 gave</i>	<i>I was amazed at how little he knew about the university before he came. Quite a leap into the unknown. But he seems the kind of guy who would leap into the unknown and make it work</i>
<i>Much of the information that the informant gave today was about overall, personal strategies/viewpoints. A few hit on cultural specific assumptions - classroom behaviors, learning differences, views on assessments - but many of the points the informant made were more personal instead of one cultural group versus perhaps a different cultural group.</i>	<i>It struck me how often she referred to being ‘Asian’ and coming from an “Asian” perspective and having high expectations of the students- this came through very strongly.</i>

As it can be seen, the researchers reflect on how aware the interviewees are of their own socio-cultural background and how they respond to cultural differences. They consider it as an important criterion for being successful in their profession. Also, the journal entries show that researchers believe the teachers interviewed have somehow made a momentous decision to start work in a different pedagogical scenery. For example, R1 refers to one of the interviewees’ “specific cultural assumptions” about classroom behaviors, learning differences, and assessments, and R2 refers to the use of

pedagogical knowledge “here” in contrast to the interviewees’ own sociocultural background. Such observations made by the researchers depict how their own experiences over the years have furnished them with personal insights and predispositions. These have frequently revealed themselves in their reflections about the interviews. However, the researchers’ diaries also reveal a significant theme which shows how their perspectives are formed based on their own sociocultural and educational backgrounds.

4.2 Reflections on Interviews with Students

The research diaries revealed three major themes about the interviews conducted with students. These themes are students’ “educational background”; “knowledge of English”, and “student-teacher relationship”. These will be discussed in the following sections with the use of representative sample entries from the journals.

4.2.1 Educational Background

The diaries highlight that both researchers are cognizant of and frequently mention students’ educational background, i.e. whether they came from private or public schools to study at the university. This is an important consideration since the language of instruction at the university where the research was conducted is English, and public schools use Arabic as the medium of instruction while private schools use English. As it can be seen in the journal entries, the researchers’ expectations as well as their presuppositions about the significance of educational background appear to be a salient feature in their reflections. This is perhaps because, based on their teaching and testing experiences in the region, they both know that generally students with a strong educational background and most probably knowledge of the English language can do well in their studies at a university where the medium of instruction is English. The table below illustrates some of these reflections;

Table 4.2.1: Educational Background

R1	R2
<i>I am influenced by the fact that she went to American curriculum school and had some western teachers. She just seemed to “get us” I think and her answers seemed quite western in many ways</i>	<i>One of these students seems to have gone to a very alternative school where she says students taught each other most of the time</i>
<i>There seems to be three camps of students. The ones who attended private school (and therefore Western schools) entirely, those that had partially attended private schools and those that attended government schools. The language level is different but their hopes and preferences for learning did not seem that different</i>	<i>I had 2 similar conversations with other students yesterday and today. It is making me wonder what the gap is between S’s who have had private education and the ones who have been to government schools- in terms of “how do the ones from government school feel? Do they feel they missed out? Do they feel looked down on?”</i>
<i>I kind of thought that both students, but one student in particular, did not really fit the the university student profile which in my imagination is a student from a government school who was taught mainly in Arabic. This could be because i am used to foundation level students.</i>	<i>This interview seemed to go very fast. Both students were very articulate. One had been to an IB school and the other to an International school also.</i>

As it can be seen in the above entries, the researchers view students’ educational background as a significant attribute that could be instrumental in their success at university. This is revealed in the way they evaluate students’ approach to teaching and learning and self-regulation. R1, for example, mentions how she is “influenced” by the student’s educational background at an American curriculum school, and R2 mentions the fact that the student had “alternative” and most probably a Western-style

education. The researchers' frequent referencing to the disparity between the two types of schooling could be indicative of the fact they tacitly have a "profiling" approach in the study which is informed by their experiences with different students from different schooling backgrounds. However, the researchers do not just view schooling background as a major distinguishing factor in profiling students; they have a tendency to pay active attention to and accentuate their knowledge of English as a prerequisite for success at university. This will be discussed in the next section.

4.2.2 Knowledge of English

Another relevant observation that the researchers have made in their diaries, is the students' knowledge of English. Throughout the diaries, the researchers refer to students' knowledge of the English language, i.e. how well they understand and how articulately they can express themselves in English. This is interesting because while the interviews conducted were primarily to get students' views on their teaching and learning experiences, the researchers often reflect on the facility with which the students use English.

Table 4.2.2: Knowledge of English

R1	R2
<i>This student struck me as a very fluent speaker and someone who was very willing to help us- almost in a westernized kind of way.</i>	<i>This interview seemed to go very fast. Both students were very articulate.</i>
<i>I wish that her English would have been better or that we had a trained Arabic speaking researcher involved with the interviewing of students.</i>	<i>Students seem to be able to completely communicate what they think.</i>
<i>I am not sure if some of the students struggle with English or if their cultural norms manifest as shyness.</i>	<i>Language does not seem to be an impediment which is somewhat surprising. I am surprised at how easily and openly they could communicate.</i>

The researchers' inclination to appraise students' knowledge of the English language seemingly reveals that they implicitly consider English as the students' "passport" to success. It is obvious that they also associate this knowledge of language with a certain "westernized kind of way" as R1 puts it in the above entry. The researchers posit that students' disfluency is possibly not just a matter of their knowledge of the English language, but as R1 states it, this could be a part of the "cultural norms". This is a significant observation because perhaps in many countries in the region where the study was conducted, being very expressive and overly confident is not particularly considered a positive personal trait. This is contrary to the researchers' cultural norms and expectations. Students' views on the teacher-student relationship also constitutes a major part of the research diaries, and this will be discussed next.

4.2.3 Teacher and student relationship

As two western expatriate university teachers, the researchers' prior teaching and learning experiences in their own respective countries, i.e. the United States and the United Kingdom, appear to give prominence to how students view an effective relationship between a teacher and his/her students. They also see that students' previous experiences at western style institutions have shaped their perspectives on what constitutes an efficacious relationship. The table below provides some of these reflective statements.

Table 4.2.3: Teacher and student relationship

R1	R2
<i>I noticed that she mentioned that the teacher should help the students and be nice.</i>	<i>3 things struck me... Her repetition that people were willing to help her in the university- and her implication that this was different to other universities in UAE</i>
<i>I felt that they were quite keen to say that it was all not so very different at the university to what they had experienced before. That they had been used to taking responsibility for their own learning and having a strong relationship with their teachers.</i>	<i>Both talked a lot about how caring the Teachers are in their college.</i>
<i>Normally students really focused on relationships between students and teachers, not so much on pedagogy. This student mentioned interactive learning and games specifically as a learning strategy that motivated her.</i>	<i>What students thought was the norm in a classroom differed based on what their high school experience had been. If they went to an international school, they were used to dialogue with teachers. However, if students went to a government school they seemed to prefer a sage on the stage.</i>

The journal entries show that the researchers can distinctly see that students have two disparate ways of looking at the teacher-student relationship: one that is a teacher-fronted classroom, as R2 to refers to it as a “sage on stage” pedagogical scene. The second view is in line with a western style education which some students with similar western educational background consider an effective teacher-student relationship, namely an interactive one. For instance, R1 observes that students take “responsibility for their own learning” which is indicative of a more western, student-centered approach to pedagogy. Elsewhere, R1 comments that the student interviewed shifted her attention to the rapport between the teacher and the student, and R2 sees students’ educational background can inform their expectations of an effective teacher-student relationship. These reflective statements show that the researchers have some preferences in terms of how the students and teachers should work together, and these preferences inform and guide their judgements in regards to what is important and should receive attention in a research study. Also, they tend to think that success in their own context, that of their native countries, can be transferred and translated into success in the new context even though they realize the importance of cross-cultural competencies. This and other relevant considerations as well as implications will be discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the researchers have some pre-directions and tendencies in their approach to studying the problem they researched in a cultural context, one which is dissimilar to their western backgrounds. Both researchers frequently refer to instances in their diaries that indicate the extent to which their previous learning and teaching experiences in the United States and in the United Kingdom have shaped their evaluative framework in the research they conducted. The research diaries reveal that they possibly have certain “preferences” in terms of professional and academic competence, i.e. as for teachers, the researchers think professional knowledge and expertise, the ability to communicate effectively and the ability to adapt to the new cultural context are significant attributes that can contribute to the faculty member’s success in their new environs. On the other hand, throughout their research diaries, the researchers point up students’ previous education and fluency in English as well as their views on what constitutes an effective teacher-student relationship.

The researchers believe that the findings of this study can have potentially important implications for research and pedagogy. As regards conducting pedagogical research in sociocultural contexts that are different from one’s own, it is of great significance to note that while professional and educational effectiveness have their own attributes, there are diverse ways of accomplishing success both as a faculty member and as a student. Therefore, the use of research diaries can be an efficacious way of

creating a dialogue between the researchers' existing professional and academic preferences and what they observe in a different context. As such, the researchers can marry their own ideological preferences to the features of the "other" context instead of seeking to divorce one from another, as this approach will enrich understanding of research in different contexts. As Ladson-Billings (1995) indicates it is of paramount importance for researchers to understand their own cultural background while being conscious of how this could influence their perspectives when conducting research in a culture other than their own.

The researchers also believe the findings of this study can have important implications for pedagogy, i.e. while devising and implementing pedagogical programmes that allow for diversity in terms of students' educational and linguistic background, it is important to enlist the help of a variety of educational experts who are familiar with the local context to ensure that students receive help from experts from local as well as non-local professionals. This will establish an institutional discourse that is conducive to more institutional coherence and harmony. Subsequently, students with different schooling backgrounds and with disparate levels of linguistic competence in English can avail of help from diverse faculty members. Another important implication for pedagogical practice is that researchers should view behavioral norms in both teaching and assessing students. As shown in the research diaries, "shyness" in expressing one's views articulately, might be considered as preferred social behavior in some Asian and Middle Eastern contexts, while this is different in Western countries. It is important to establish an institutional culture in which educational effectiveness and educational success are clearly defined for the teachers and students in the local language, as well as the language of instruction at university. It is for sure, in such a university culture, that a university education can be truly educative for researchers, teachers and students alike, and this, the researchers believe, is the way forward in our increasingly diverse and globalized educational scenery.

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