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Returning to the Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry into the Challenges and Coping Strategies of an EFL Teacher Resuming After Hiatus

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Abstract

This qualitative study employs narrative inquiry to investigate the challenges and coping strategies of T1, an EFL teacher at an Islamic private elementary school, returning to teaching after a hiatus. Through unstructured interviews, it examines the changes in T1's teaching approach before and after the break, uncovering unique challenges and adaptive strategies. The research reveals T1's struggle with readjustment, curriculum changes, and lesson planning without standard textbooks. To navigate these challenges, T1 utilized familial support, embraced technological resources for professional growth, and innovatively combined traditional and modern teaching methods. These findings emphasize the importance of continuous professional development, adaptability, and robust support systems in enhancing the reintegration process for EFL teachers. The study contributes valuable insights into the EFL field, highlighting the need for resources and strategies to support teachers like T1 in transitioning back to the classroom. This research not only sheds light on the specific challenges faced by returning EFL teachers but also underscores the critical role of support systems and professional development in maintaining high-quality EFL education.

Keywords: Returning teacher, teachers' experiences, EFL class, coping strategies

INTRODUCTION

The existing research on teachers re-entering the education system after a prolonged absence is surprisingly limited, despite the critical relevance of this topic in the ever-evolving and intricate landscape of education (Plessis, 2013). The ability of individuals to successfully reintegrate into the educational realm is of paramount importance, given the dynamic nature of the field. When teachers decide to return to the profession, they encounter the challenge of navigating and adapting to constantly evolving regulations and curricular frameworks. The scarcity of research in this area underscores

the urgent need for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by returning teachers (Singh et al., 2021). Returning to teaching after a hiatus poses significant challenges for teachers, necessitating updates to pedagogical skills, adaptation to new teaching methodologies and technologies, and accommodation of changes in academic culture and curriculum. These challenges are deeply rooted in the fact that a teacher's identity is intricately tied to pedagogical constructs (Cirocki & Farrel, 2017; Cirocki & Widodo, 2019). The struggles faced by returning teachers in defining their teaching role underscore the dynamic nature of professional identity, requiring continuous learning and adaptation to evolving contexts (Flores & Day, 2006).

This complexity is amplified for teachers absent for extended periods, who may find it challenging to re-establish their teaching rhythm, forge positive relationships with students, and seamlessly reintegrate into the classroom (Sunra et al., 2020). The role of a teacher, critical in shaping students' learning experiences, extends beyond the curriculum to encompass daily actions and routines that serve as influential role models for students to follow and emulate (Heriansyah, 2018; McIntyre et al., 2020). Thus, understanding the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by returning teachers becomes essential for fostering a supportive and adaptive educational environment. Furthermore, re-entering the teaching profession poses significant challenges for educators, impacting their professional identity and overall well-being. Scholars emphasize the pivotal role of a teacher's professional identity in shaping emotional and professional aspects (Flores & Day, 2006; Olsen, 2008). Furthermore, Richards (2022) specifically highlights the centrality of emotions in English language teaching, asserting that a teacher's emotions influence not only learning activities but also social interactions within the classroom, shaping their teaching style.

Moreover, Maslach and Leiter (2016), argued that teachers often encounter various emotional hindrances, including diminished personal efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization, which stem from work-related stress and pressure. It means the teachers' emotional challenges can influence learning activity. Then, the lack of research on the pedagogical and affective hindrances faced by English teachers when they re-enter the profession is a notable gap in the existing literature (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). When teachers return to the profession after a break, whether due to personal reasons or a career transition, they often encounter various challenges that can affect their teaching practice and overall well-being.

Previous studies have delved into the intersection of emotional factors and professionalism within the context of English language education. For instance, Castañeda-Trujillo and Osorio, (2021) explored the challenges confronted by teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of this research underscored the necessity for teachers to adapt when ceasing instruction due to pandemic-related disruptions, encompassing impediments in sustaining motivation, navigating new policies, and adhering to instructional adjustments. Similarly, Marshall et al. (2022) investigated the motivations behind teachers transitioning from their roles, revealing various factors contributing to teacher attrition, including mental health concerns, excessive workloads, and financial challenges. in contrast, Atmojo (2021) elucidated the experiences of teachers who discontinued teaching English for an extended period of seven years.

This investigation disclosed impediments to professionalism and challenges posed by educational policies prevalent during the hiatus from teaching. Furthermore, the emotional dimensions of teaching were scrutinized by Richards (2022), who propped into the emotions experienced by teachers in the realm of language learning. The research discerned a correlation between teacher emotions and the efficacy of language instruction imparted to students. Despite the extant literature, certain gaps persist, notably the absence of comprehensive exploration into the perspectives of teachers returning to the classroom after an extended hiatus. The present study aims to address these gaps, offering a more nuanced understanding of the impacts incurred by teachers upon their returning teaching.

This study endeavours to bridge existing gaps in the understanding of the unique difficulties faced by returning English teachers in the EFL classroom setting. The primary objectives are to identify effective strategies that can be employed to overcome these challenges. By addressing these issues comprehensively, this research aims to make a valuable contribution to the professional development and overall well-being of returning English teachers, thereby enhancing the quality of EFL education. In pursuit of this goal, the researchers have formulated three key research questions to guide the investigation. First, the study seeks to explore the notable differences between teachers before and after taking a hiatus from teaching EFL in a school setting. Second, it aims to identify and understand the specific challenges encountered by returning English teachers when instructing EFL classes. Lastly, the researchers investigated the coping strategies employed by returning EFL teachers to effectively navigate the challenges inherent in teaching EFL classes. Through a thorough exploration of these questions, the study aspires the shed light on crucial aspects of the experiences of returning English teachers and contribute valuable insights to the field of EFL education.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design with a narrative inquiry approach, aimed at exploring the experiences and perspectives of returning English teachers in EFL contexts. This method was chosen for its depth in exploring the challenges, perceptions, and coping strategies of these teachers, as outlined by Braun et al. (2017). The narrative inquiry emphasized understanding subjective experiences and generating rich, descriptive data, focusing on collecting and analyzing individual stories and personal narratives. The research involved a single participant, "T1," an English teacher at an Islamic elementary school in Pasuruan, East Java, Indonesia. T1 took a hiatus from teaching in 2019 due to marriage and family commitments but resumed her career after five years.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, a qualitative research method allowing for in-depth exploration (Bihu, 2020; Chauhan, 2019). This format, more flexible and open-ended than structured interviews, enables researchers to gather detailed information and explore complex phenomena, providing contextual and cultural insights. For data collection, the study employed WhatsApp Call, chosen for its convenience and ability to overcome time and location constraints (Kaufmann & Peil, 2019; Loh, 2013). This method allowed for efficient communication despite potential geographical differences. The research was conducted from March to May 2023, utilizing this digital platform for effective data gathering.

Following the initial narrative construction, the researchers applied paradigmatic analytic procedures to identify themes from the transcripts, as per Polkinghorne (2003). This approach helped create taxonomies and categorize common elements across the dataset, involving iterative referencing, integrating the conceptual framework, and intertwining the interview data within the multidimensional narrative inquiry realm. Ensuring data trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research. This study achieved this through data saturation, a concept described by Fusch and Ness (2015). Data saturation occurs when new information ceases to provide additional insights or alter the emerging themes. This indicated that the researchers had comprehensively captured the participant's perspectives and experiences, with further data collection unlikely to significantly enhance understanding or interpretation.

The narrative inquiry approach in this research incorporated a three-dimensional space, encompassing temporality, interaction, and situation, as discussed by Ubaidillah and Widiati (2022). This framework was crucial in understanding the challenges faced by returning English teachers in EFL classrooms. By examining the teacher's experiences over time (temporality), the interaction between the teacher and students (interaction), and the specific teaching context (situation), the study provided a holistic view of the teacher's challenges in the EFL setting.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The research findings involved iterative referencing and integration of our conceptual frameworks, as well as intertwining the interview data within the multidimensional realm of narrative inquiry. Which is analyzed by the backward and forward lines of the story; temporality; interaction; and situation. It is based on the data analysis above.

Comparing Teaching Experiences and Habits Before and After the Hiatus

T1, as previously discussed, underscores the significant role of external factors in shaping pedagogical practices. Empirical findings from researchers consistently support this assertion, highlighting the substantial impact that external elements have on T1's approach to teaching. The identified factors, drawn from pedagogical research, play a crucial role in influencing T1's instructional methods. This is in line with researchers' observations, establishing a clear connection between external influences and the development of T1's pedagogical strategies. Elements and instructional practices, particularly in the realm of pedagogy. The empirical evidence presented by T1 sheds light on the intricate relationship, underscoring the necessity for a nuanced approach to address external factors that shape pedagogical methodologies.

> *".... Previously, my primary focus was on teaching. I dedicated myself to studying English materials at school, ensuring that I thoroughly prepared the necessary materials before attending classes. It was crucial for me to avoid any errors in delivering the content or forgetting important information. Additionally, I actively engaged in training sessions and seminars to enhance my knowledge in the field of English, specifically in the realm of learning media development..."* [Excerpt 1]

Following the preceding passage, T1 has adopted a pedagogical-focused approach to academic preparation, recognizing the paramount importance of English studies.

Emphasizing the pivotal role of school-based English materials, T1 underscores the necessity of a thorough content review process. Demonstrating unwavering commitment, T1 engages in meticulous scrutiny, ensuring accuracy and averting errors or omissions. This rigorous review process is geared towards ensuring a seamless delivery of information during classes, thereby cultivating an optimal learning environment.

However, upon reentering the teaching profession after a two-year hiatus, T1 underwent a transformative shift in pedagogical practices. This return to the educational realm coincided with a pivotal moment in T1's career – attaining the requisite authorization to teach English at school. this achievement not only marked a significant milestone but also symbolized a renewed commitment to professional growth in pedagogy. The evolution of T1's teaching methods showcases a dedicated pursuit of enhanced pedagogical strategies, reflecting resilience and passion for fostering a dynamic and effective learning environment.

> *"However, after getting married, I found myself torn between multiple responsibilities. Not only did I need to focus on teaching and attending to my students, but I also had to prioritize the care of my family. This meant considering the needs of my child at home and efficiently managing household tasks. As a result, I had limited opportunities to engage in professional development activities aimed at improving my teaching skills. Furthermore, due to an extended period without studying the subject matter, I occasionally encountered difficulties when revisiting basic materials, leading to moments of confusion"* [Excerpt 2]

Based on the data provided, T1 underwent a significant shift in responsibilities and priorities post-retirement, with a notable emphasis on familial duties alongside her role as a teacher. The quote sheds light on T1's balancing act between teaching and caregiving, highlighting the delicate equilibrium required. This marks a distinct departure from excerpt 1, where T1 emphasized meticulous thought and continuous professional development in her teaching career. The transition from a concentrated professional mindset to a more diversified set of responsibilities post-hiatus underscores the transformative influence of familial obligations on T1's life trajectory. This evolution serves as a compelling example of the dynamic nature of personal and professional priorities, particularly in the context of pedagogy.

Moreover, T1 delved into her experience upon returning to the school, emphasizing the pedagogical challenges she faced. Despite her previous experience at the institution, she encountered a distinct sense of unease and self-consciousness. This time, her focus centred on adapting to a new educational environment and grappling with the formidable task of assimilating an unfamiliar English curriculum, as T1 said:

> *"The first time I felt nervous and worried when I returned to teaching. I felt anxious about interacting with a large number of people again. I was also afraid of making mistakes while delivering the lessons. It was challenging for me to adapt to the teachers and students at the school because it was my first-time teaching at the elementary level. Previously, English was only taught as an extracurricular activity. When I was in the teachers' room, I had to adapt to the conversations happening there."* [Excerpt 3]

In the interview, T1 conveyed her conviction that substantial pedagogical adjustments are imperative as she resumes teaching in a new location. Similarly, upon reentering the teaching domain following a two-year hiatus, she discerned the paramount significance of tailoring her instructional methods to the specific academic needs of her current students. consequently, she perceives a necessity to reconstruct the academic rapport with her students, recognizing the exigency to re-establish pedagogical connections after an extended absence from the classroom.

Based on research findings, there is a discernible transformation in T1's priorities following marriage, significantly impacting her dedication to teaching and subsequent professional growth. Preceding marriage, T1 demonstrated an unwavering commitment to education, emphasizing meticulous planning, thoughtful consideration, and a continuous pursuit of professional development. However, post-marriage, the landscape shifted as T1 had to navigate teaching responsibilities alongside familial obligations, leading to constraints on her capacity for professional advancement. As Castañeda-Trujillo and Osorio (2021), It is crucial to recognize the substantial differentiation that emerges as teachers navigate through distinct phases of their professional journey.

This shift in focus towards familial responsibilities prompts noteworthy considerations regarding the challenges educators encounter in effectively managing multifaceted roles and responsibilities. Aligning with the perspective of Othman and Sivasubramaniam (2019), who argue that the marital status of a teacher can impact their mental well-being, it becomes apparent that T1's situation may contribute to pedagogical challenges. Othman and Sivasubramaniam (2019) contends that teachers with a marital status may experience mental health issues, such as anxiety, stress, and overthinking. This underscores the importance of addressing the intersectionality of personal and professional domains in understanding the pedagogical dynamic affected by significant life events like marriage.

When educators navigate the delicate balance between professional obligations and personal life, achieving a harmonious equilibrium becomes intricate. This balance shift significantly impacts T1's limited avenues for pedagogical advancement, potentially influencing her instructional practices and career trajectory. In contrast, Atmojo (2021) identified socio-cultural and economic factors as key influencers in teachers' decisions regarding their return. However, in this specific context, other determinants may act as indicators for a teacher's choice to resume their instructional responsibilities. Furthermore, the research findings underscore the imperative for educational institutions to recognize and bolster teachers in their pursuit of a balanced work-life equation, particularly in the pedagogical domain. Acknowledging the intricate dynamics teachers face in juggling multiple roles, schools can formulate strategies that foster teacher well-being, facilitate pedagogical growth, and uphold high-quality teaching standards (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019).

Ensuring that teachers have access to adaptable schedules, mentorship initiatives, and continuous assistance can significantly contribute to their success in both personal and professional realms. Future investigations in this era could explore the specific pedagogical challenges faced by teachers in balancing their instructional roles with personal obligations (Marshall et al., 2022). understanding the elements influencing teachers' choices and identifying the educational support they require can guide policies and methods that

enhance pedagogical effectiveness and job contentment. Ultimately, cultivating and encouraging an environment for teachers is pivotal in guaranteeing the delivery of high-calibre education and promotion teacher retention within the academic domain.

T1 Faces Challenges and Addresses the Obstacles When T1 Returns to Teach EFL in the Classroom

During the data interview with T1, the researcher identified several impediments and difficulties she faced upon re-entering T1's English teaching career following a two-year hiatus. T1 articulated challenges related to readjusting to the teaching profession after an extended break. In the course of interviews, T1 expounded on the imperative to adapt her pedagogical strategies to accommodate the diverse academic language levels of her students. Initially, she instructed high school students, but currently, she is instructing elementary school students. Consequently, she acknowledges the critical importance of infusing creativity into her pedagogical approach to effectively foster academic language proficiency and engagement among her students; T1 also said:

> *"I am having difficulty in building students' interest in learning English in class. I feel anxious about teaching again when I see various types of students in the class. I struggle to develop suitable teaching materials for the students and fear that I won't be able to deliver the material effectively."* [Excerpt 4]

In this case, T1 identifies her primary challenges upon returning to teaching elementary students in EFL as the concern of being unable to deliver effective English lessons and capture her students' attention.

Moreover, T1 also expressed difficulties in adjusting to the new curriculum she encountered upon returning to teaching at the school. She mentioned that she had to relearn how to organize lesson plans in accordance with the updated curriculum. Then, she explained that before she left her previous school, she used to teach students based on the 2013 curriculum. However, upon her return from the hiatus, she discovered that the school had transitioned to implementing the Merdeka curriculum for the students. As a result, T1 felt compelled to revisit and study the learning patterns and syllabi utilized for teaching English, particularly to elementary school students. This was further motivated by the aforementioned policy, which reinforced the importance of providing appropriate learning materials and adapting teaching to meet the student's needs. Furthermore, there is a policy in place to refrain from providing textbooks to students, encouraging them to put in extra effort to find suitable and engaging learning resources. This policy aligns with T1's viewpoint, emphasizing the need for educators to deliver compelling and relevant educational materials to students:

> *"I also face difficulties in preparing Lesson Plans (RPP) for the current curriculum because what I learned in college (Lesson Plans) is different from what I am experiencing now. Additionally, in my school, students are not required to buy textbooks or workbooks, which makes it challenging for me to deliver the material and assign tasks to students. I have to explain everything in detail and in-depth, which, in my opinion, makes the learning model more teacher-centred, burdening me as the teacher in the classroom."* [Excerpt 5]

To address these challenges, T1 proposed several strategies to overcome them. The first challenge she mentioned about her psychological issues during coming back to EFL class. She explained that she endeavours to encourage herself by maintaining a calm demeanour and thinking rationally about her new environment. It is in line with her excerpt:

"I am trying to stay calm and think clearly so that I don't feel anxious and calm down. Then, I am trying to blend in with the students in the class so that I can get to know them well and understand their abilities in learning English. Then, the support from my family helps me feel calmer in teaching again at school." [Excerpt 6]

According to her, T1 also makes an effort to assimilate with her students in order to acclimate herself to the classroom dynamics and gauge the students' proficiency level. This enables her to assess their comprehension of the English materials that she taught them. Furthermore, T1 elucidates that the support she received from her family and close friends became a compelling motivation for her to overcome her fears and overthinking associated with returning to teaching in a classroom setting:

"The things that make me strong and motivated to pursue English again in school are myself. I strive to convince myself to continue educating the students in the village where I live. Additionally, my parents are also supportive of my efforts and encourage me in the field of education. They want me to become a useful individual for others. And most importantly, my child is the main support system that keeps me strong and motivated to overcome any challenges I face in school." [Excerpt 7]

Following an interview, T1 emphasized that his family served as a powerful source of motivation for her to contribute to society, regardless of his marital or social status. This unwavering support has strengthened his resolve to resume teaching English at school.

Moreover, when it comes to honing her teaching skills with English materials, she has devised strategies to address the challenges she encounters upon resuming her teaching duties. T1 emphasized the effectiveness of utilizing technology for learning new material and creating English learning resources specifically designed for elementary school children. She highlighted that she constantly seeks information from the internet, including English materials, assessment systems, and various English learning media; it is in line with her excerpt:

"…. I usually use the internet to improve my English skills, especially vocabulary. I typically watch English language videos on YouTube to enhance my English proficiency…. Further, I usually use the internet to improve my English skills, especially vocabulary. I typically watch English language videos on YouTube to enhance my English proficiency… During my time at university, I took a course on ICT-based learning, which allowed me to implement technology-based learning media in my classes. For instance, I utilized Padlet to teach plant names to 6th-grade students and employed Quizzes in 5th-grade classrooms to stimulate their interest in vocabulary learning." [Excerpt 8]

Moreover, T1 elaborated on her approach to bridging the teaching system gap by integrating elements from traditional and modern teaching methods. She tailors her

approach based on the student's proficiency level and the dynamics of the class. In instances where many students struggle with English comprehension, she implements the teacher-centred system. Conversely, if the students have a good grasp of the language, she employs pair discussions or a student's-centred system; this belief is in line with the T1 said in the interview:

> *"To address this, I have been combining my previous teaching methods with new ones. For example, I briefly explain the topic in class and then ask students to discuss it in groups. Additionally, I tend to leverage technology in teaching and learning activities."*
> [Excerpt 9]

Furthermore, based on the interview data above, T1 encountered several challenges upon resuming her teaching career after a two-year hiatus. The research findings highlight her feelings of nervousness and self-consciousness when returning to the classroom. This is in line with Derakhshan et al. (2020) found that there are challenges that have the potential struggles that they may encounter after a break in their teaching profession. Furthermore, the shift to a new school and the need to adapt to a different curriculum added to her challenges. The difficulties in building students' interest in learning English and preparing lesson plans further contributed to the obstacles she faced. These challenges prompt a discussion about the impact of breaks in the teaching profession and the strategies teachers employ to overcome them.

These identified challenges prompt a research discussion on the impact of breaks in the teaching profession and the strategies employed by teachers to overcome them. Taking breaks from teaching can have both positive and negative effects on teachers. On the one hand, a hiatus can provide an opportunity for teachers to recharge, gain new perspectives, and pursue professional development activities. It allows them to refresh their pedagogical approaches and avoid burnout (Eddy et al., 2020; Xue, 2021). On the other hand, returning to the classroom after a break can be daunting, as demonstrated by T1's experiences of nervousness and self-consciousness. This highlights the importance of considering the psychological and emotional aspects of resuming teaching after a hiatus.

Additionally, the shift to a new school and the need to adapt to a different curriculum can pose significant challenges for returning teachers. Each educational institution has its own unique culture, teaching methods, and students' backgrounds, requiring teachers to adjust their instructional strategies accordingly. T1's encounter with these obstacles underscores the need for professional support and resources to facilitate a smooth transition back into the teaching profession. Furthermore, building students' interest in learning English and preparing engaging lesson plans are perennial challenges for teachers. However, returning teachers may face additional difficulties in re-establishing rapport with students and familiarizing themselves with the latest teaching methodologies and resources. It is crucial for teachers to stay updated with advancements in the field during their hiatus and actively seek opportunities for professional growth.

In light of the challenges faced by T1 upon resuming her teacher career after a hiatus, she proposed several strategies to overcome them. One of the challenges she mentioned was related to her psychological issues when returning to the EFL class. T1 explained that she endeavours to maintain a calm demeanour and think rationally about

her new environment in order to alleviate anxiety and promote a sense of calm (Nijat et al., 2019; Rismadayanti, 2021). Then, she also emphasized the importance of assimilating with her, enabling her to tailor her teaching approach and assess their comprehension of the English materials. Furthermore, T1 highlighted the significant support she received from her family and close friends, which became a powerful motivation for her to overcome her fears and overthinking associated with returning to teaching in a classroom setting.

Then, to address the challenges of honing her teaching skills and adapting to the educational landscape changes, T1 devised strategies that involve utilizing technology and creating English learning resources specifically designed for elementary school children. She mentioned using the internet to enhance her English proficiency, watching English language videos on platforms like YouTube, and seeking information on English materials and various learning media. T1 also emphasized her experience with technology-based learning during her university studies and its implementation in her classes, such as using Padlet and Quizzes to facilitate vocabulary learning and engagement. It is in line with Erito, (2022), which said that using digital learning media, such as Padlet, positively impacts the students and teachers in the learning process.

Moreover, T1 emphasized the integration of both traditional and modern teaching methods to bridge the gap in the teaching system. She tailors her approach based on the student's proficiency level and the dynamics of the class. When students struggle with English comprehension, she implements a teacher-centred system while utilizing pair discussions or a student-centred system when students have a good grasp of the language. This adaptability allows her to cater for the specific needs of her students and create a conducive learning environment.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the challenges faced by T1, a returning English teacher, after a two-year hiatus due to marriage. Before marriage, T1 prioritized teaching, emphasizing preparation and professional development. However, after marriage, she had to balance teaching with family responsibilities, impacting her opportunities for growth. Upon resuming teaching, T1 encountered challenges such as anxiety, adapting to a new school and curriculum, and creating engaging lessons. Furthermore, to navigate these obstacles, she employed coping strategies, including staying calm, assimilating with students, and integrating technology into teaching. Understanding these challenges and strategies can help provide support for returning teachers and enhance the quality of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education.

Addressing the needs of returning teachers is crucial for fostering their professional development and in general well-being in the classroom. Furthermore, future research on returning teachers after a hiatus can focus on the long-term impact of breaks on their professional identity and well-being, the effectiveness of support system, the role of technology in professional development, coping strategies for emotional challenges, students' perspectives, comparative analysis of different educational systems, impact on teaching quality and students' outcomes, and policy implication for better support and reintegration.

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