Free Talk: Self-Disclosure of Online ESL Teachers in the ESL Domain

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ABSTRACT

Self-disclosure within the academic realm has been examined as one of the key indicators of students' participation in class. Thus, it can be said that in every class conversation, sharing of personal information has the potential to enhance the overall teaching and learning experience. This research investigated online ESL teachers' self-disclosure through the lens of Social Penetration Theory. Additionally, the reasons behind their self-disclosure and the influence of revealing personal information and stories to their students were investigated. Five online ESL teachers were interviewed, and the findings revealed that the process of ESL teachers' self-disclosure follows stages including an initial orientation phase, exploratory-affective to affective phase, and stable phase. However, it was emphasized that these stages do not necessarily unfold in a linear progression. Most of the time, the nature of the online ESL teachers' self-disclosures is influenced by company policies and student preferences. One notable finding that arose was about how some teachers fabricate some details about themselves such as their real name, age, and some narratives in the intention of adhering to their company policies, avoiding conflicts, and enhancing student engagement. ESL teachers are motivated to self-disclose because they view it as a teaching strategy to engage their students more and to elevate the quality of their class conversations. In general, online ESL teachers perceive self-disclosure as a positive approach in the ESL milieu, leading to a closer rapport with their students.

Keywords: Self-disclosure, ESL teaching, rapport, student-teacher relationship, social penetration

Introduction

The information shared during each conversation serves as a reflection of the depth of engagement and the quality of the relationship between the participants. For instance, if one dislikes the topic and/or does not have a close relationship with the other communicator, it is natural for them to withhold certain information, particularly those that pertain to their personal values, beliefs, principles, among others. This means that people, in general, choose the topics they are ready to share depending on the degree of relationship they have, and this denotes that the more profound the relationship, the more personal the information divulged, and conversely, the less intimate the relationship, the more reserved they tend to be. Thus, sharing more about oneself is an important ingredient in building the foundation of any relationship (Atkinson, 2018).

Teacher-student relationship is frequently brought up when discussing the topic of relationship cultivation due to its inevitability as most, if not all, value formal education. Since formal education is an important part of students' everyday lives (Kurtz-Costes, 2001), it is often expected that teachers will initiate building rapport for their students' improvements and success (Glazier, 2016). Consequently, one cannot build rapport without going through disclosure as the indications of a growing rapport are an increased in flow of conversation and disclosure of sensitive information, among others (Leach, 2005). It seems like part of every teacher's responsibility is not only to impart lessons but also to reveal their human side to their students through meaningful conversations.

Nowadays, teacher-student conversations do not just happen in a physical, face to face set-up. The rise of technology also initiated the rise of industries that promote online tutoring services to students around the globe. English as a second language tutoring or ESL, which is often used as a proper noun in this industry, is another platform where teachers meet students online. In the Philippines, ESL teaching has been considered as a fast-growing career. The number of international English learners is currently increasing because of the availability of locally offered English as a Second Language (ESL) programs that are both cost-effective and of high quality (Cabigon, 2015). Different online ESL companies have started to put up their business in the Philippines, because international business world sees English as essential and countries with better English have better incomes (Tol, 2016).

ESL teachers, despite primarily conducting one-on-one classes, share similarities with traditional educators as they also think of strategies on how to engage their students. Hence, studying how they shape conversations in the realm of online ESL holds significant value in the contemporary landscape of 21st-century language education.

Statement of the Problem

In self-disclosure, breadth refers to the range of topics discussed in a conversation and depth references to how personal or sensitive the shared information is (Greene et al., 2006). This study recognizes the importance of online ESL teachers' self-disclosure in order to maintain rapport with their foreign students. It can be argued that communication intimacy with students is hard to achieve without self-disclosure (Beebe et al., 2011), because online ESL teachers' self-disclosure is seen as highly associated to the development of their connection with their students (Beebe et al., 2011). Hence, I explored into the process of online ESL teachers' self-disclosure. The inquiry into how the self-disclosure of online ESL teachers influence their rapport with their students was addressed by pursuing the subsequent objectives:

1. To describe the stages of self-disclosure exhibited by online ESL teachers during their conversations with their students.
2. To identify the factors that motivate online ESL teachers to engage in self-disclosure.
3. To analyze the perceived influence of online ESL teachers' self-disclosure on their relationship with their foreign students.

Literature Review

The foundation of building relationships lies in establishing rapport. In the context of ESL teaching, the word rapport can be perceived as cliché as most, if not all, teachers are encouraged and expected to be developing a strong connection while doing a one-on-one English tutoring with their students. The relationship that they build with their students can bring about many positive outcomes.

Student-Teacher Relationship

Student-teacher relationship has been explored as a potential indicator of students' academic achievement (Dotterer & Lowe; 2011, Boynton & Boynton, 2005; Spilt et al., 2011; Rimm- Kaufman & Sandilos, 2012). Generally, students tend to perform better in class if their teachers are actively making connections with them. Thus, this bond is nurtured through enhanced communication between the teacher and the student (Asrar et al., 2018). For instance, teachers can exhibit their supportive practices by talking to their students about the lessons they are having difficulties with (Patall et al., 2018). With this, students feel more motivated in cooperating in class activities (Passini et al., 2015). Therefore, teachers are key people in creating a learning environment that could

help students engage better in class (Pianta et al., 2012) and achieve their goals (Jones & Jones, 1981).

Due to numerous benefits of fostering a strong teacher-student relationship, other learning environments beyond traditional classrooms can also utilize this approach to enhance the teaching and learning experience. In the ESL context, for instance, rapport may appear to be difficult to build if two people do not share the same mother tongue, but this challenge can be manageable, especially that using English to bridge conversations can lead to having stronger teacher-student rapport (Santana, 2019; Ellsworth, 2018). Consequently, student-teacher rapport results in progressive practices for learners, superior classroom involvement, and motivation in an ESL/EFL class (Meng, 2021), and this confidence and motivation of ESL/EFL students stem from having a warm and close relationship with their teachers (Pishghadam et al., 2021). It is quite evident that many studies regard teachers' relational skills as a great contributor to students' overall class performance.

Teacher Self-Disclosure

As teachers initiate conversation with their students, sharing information about themselves is deemed inevitable. However, this practice is not consistently embraced by all teachers, as some prioritize discussing their lessons rather than engaging in personal conversations. Despite this fact, it is still important to acknowledge how teacher self-disclosure in class can boost student-teacher relationship.

Goldstein and Benassi (1994) found that students' class participation was significantly correlated to the self-disclosure of their teacher. Farani and Fatemi (2014) observed that the transfer of experiences between the teacher and the students really helped the students to learn some of the strategies of learning different skills such as reading or listening. Additionally, Kaufmann (2011) found that teachers reveal personal information such as sharing stories about their families to build conceptual understanding and to foster the student-teacher relationship. Self-disclosure, according to the teachers, humanizes them, letting the students view them as a person who has a life outside the classroom. However, it was also revealed that some teachers fabricate stories with an intention of elaborating examples for students' better understanding.

The practice of self-disclosure yields significant advantages for teacher-student communication. Jebbour and Mouaid (2019) found out that teachers' self-disclosure helped foster rich communication between teachers and students. The way teachers share information in class also encourages students to reciprocate the act and share personal stories as well. Furthermore, this dynamic creates a

more relaxed classroom atmosphere as students were found to engage in laughter when teachers share their personal experience.

Most studies on self-disclosure in classes are in a traditional classroom set-up. However, it is crucial to also acknowledge how teachers in online classes exercise self-disclosure. For instance, the study of Song et al. (2015) contextualized self-disclosure in an online class. Remarkably, they found that teachers' self-disclosure communication practices are more critically important in building relationship in online classes than in face-to-face classes.

Framework of the Study

This research integrates Social Penetration Theory proposed by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor. Social Penetration Theory refers to the process of forming a deeper connection, moving a relationship from superficial to intimate (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Self-disclosure, which is about revealing information about oneself, is a crucial component in social penetration (Derlega et al., 1993). To observe how connections evolve, there are four stages of self-disclosure. These stages correspond to the topics commonly discussed as the relationship develops.

The initial stage is the orientation stage, during which individuals engage in short, simple, and often inconsequential conversations (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). They usually show their public self, the image that is portrayed to most people (Carpenter & Greene, 2015). The second is the exploratory-affective stage where casual friendship develops (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). There may be increased breadth of topics discussed in this stage (Altman & Taylor, 1987) as individuals now start to reveal themselves, expressing personal attitudes about public topics (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The third stage is where individuals start talking about private and personal matters (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). This is the affective stage. In this stage, making jokes, sarcastic comments, and giving nicknames become common as the level of comfort and familiarity increases (Carpenter & Greene, 2015). The final stage is the stable exchange. In this stage, personal things are constantly shared, and one can already predict the emotional reactions of the other one (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Given that online ESL teachers frequently engage in conversations with their foreign students, the breadth and depth of the topics discussed can potentially influence the quality of the relationship of the two parties. Thus, through this framework, this study strives to understand the usefulness of online ESL teachers' self-disclosure in building rapport with their foreign students. The stages outlined by the theory provide a framework for describing the self-disclosure practices of online ESL teachers.

In addition to the stages illustrating how relationships develop as the topics become more extensive and profound, the Social Penetration Theory also underscores the concept of depenetration. Including this concept provides context that within the ESL industry, relational conflicts can still arise, potentially causing a halt in the progression through these stages.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design. This design allowed the informants to share their thoughts and feelings by sharing personal narratives about the subject matter (Sutton & Austin, 2015). These narratives of the informants were valuable in understanding their process of self-disclosure. A case study method was utilized as I deemed to investigate a phenomenon in online ESL teachers' real-life context (Yin, 2009).

Purposive sampling was used to look for participants. The selection of informants was based on specific criteria. Firstly, they work as online ESL teachers in a company located in Metro Manila. This selection made it more convenient to schedule interviews with the participants, as I also reside in Metro Manila. Secondly, the chosen participants teach ESL students who are of working age. Typically, students of working age tend to book "free talk" or "free conversation" classes, where online ESL teachers and foreign students focus less on grammar and pronunciation lessons and engage in a wider range of topics for discussion.

There were five participants, comprising of two males and three females who agreed to participate in the study. Since the research was conducted within a single semester, the minimum number of participants required for conducting one-on-one interviews was successfully met. The participants were given consent forms, and they were assured that their names and the name of their company would not be mentioned or revealed in the study.

As mentioned, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were administered. The participants were asked open-ended questions, focusing on their experiences in building rapport with students through their communication and self-disclosure practices. The questions allowed them to share their insights and experiences in a detailed and unrestricted manner.

Their narratives served as the corpus of the study. In order to thoroughly analyze the data, both deductive and inductive thematic analysis methods were employed. The stages of disclosure based on Social Penetration Theory were used as predetermined themes to correspond to the first objective. However, the analysis also remained open to the emergence of new themes. As a result, any additional themes that arose during the analysis were incorporated.

Results and Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to analyze how the self-disclosure of online ESL teachers influence their relationship with their students. There were five participants who teach Korean students who openly shared their experiences as online ESL teachers. The teaching experience of teachers Ben, Maria, Sara, Juan, and Jem ranges from one year and a half to three years. Furthermore, their ages range from 22 to 24 years old.

Teachers Ben, Maria, Sara, Juan, and Jem conduct English lessons with their foreign students regularly. The typical English class set-up involves one-on-one class with a foreign student, lasting between 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the foreign student's preference. These foreign students have the freedom to choose the topics they wish to learn. In addition to topics related to grammar and pronunciation, they can also opt for "free-talk" or "free-conversation," wherein there is no prescribed lesson material; instead, they engage in spontaneous conversations with their online ESL teacher. Many adults and working students prefer the free talk option as it allows them to converse more naturally in English. In this context, the interactions between teachers and students have the potential to be profound and extensive.

Online ESL Teachers' Self-Disclosure

The stages of self-disclosure outlined by Altman and Taylor were found to generally align with the stages that online ESL teachers experience when disclosing information about themselves with their foreign students. However, unlike the ideal linear model of Altman and Taylor, the teachers shared some interesting narratives that are unique to the context of online ESL teaching.

The Small Talk: Orientation Stage. ESL teachers go through the orientation stage which Altman and Taylor identified as a stage wherein people start with simple and inconsequential talks (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). For online ESL teachers, their initial encounter with foreign students signifies the orientation stage. According to the teachers, they share superficial details about them as part of self-introduction during their first meeting. Their name, age, nationality, teaching experience, and hobbies are the most common things they share. Personal details like these are in the orientation stage and are in the outer layer as these are often known by many (Carpenter & Greene, 2015).

> Teacher Ben: Let's say it's the first day of our class, the first day you meet the student. Well, to get the student to be more comfortable, I try to share details about myself, like my name, my age, my hobbies, and yeah, that's for the first day.

Teacher Sara: During our small talk, I reveal my teacher name and where I live and some of interests.

Teacher Juan: I usually share to my students, uhm, what my nationality is. If I'm married or not, and also my age as well.

Orientation stage can also be called "small talk", and in the context of online ESL teaching, this stage is important for both the teacher and student. Small talks do not only lessen the uncertainties about the identity of each other, but ESL teachers also use this opportunity to figure out the learning needs of their students. For instance, if the student does not know how to respond to simple questions such as "what do you do?", this might mean the student has low English level.

The Hidden Layer in Orientation Stage. One nuanced finding revealed by Teachers Sara, Maria, and Ben is the subjugation of providing some of the complete and real basic details about the teachers due to company policy and cultural differences. For instance, online ESL teachers just opt to give their "teacher name" or pseudonym in class, because sharing their full and actual names is not necessary. Teacher Sara said, *"we don't share our full names usually. I just say I am Teacher Sara."* One reason is that short names are easier for their foreign students to remember and enunciate. However, a more profound explanation is that some ESL companies do not encourage the teachers to share their full name, because students might look for them on social media. Some companies do not allow teachers to have personal contact with their foreign students due to the possibility of having private lessons and to protect the students as well.

Aside from not sharing their full names, Teacher Jem revealed that she also avoids sharing her actual age to prevent students from questioning why she graduated at a relatively young age (Teacher Maria was under K-10). This difference is apparent since in Korea, for instance, students have longer years to study. Thus, Teacher Jem does not like her competence to be questioned because of her age. On the other hand, Teacher Maria also shared that they cannot explain to the students that it is possible to graduate at the age of 19 in the Philippines. Their company also advised them to say they are at least 25 or 27 years old for the reason that being a teacher in the age range of 21 to 23 is not common in Korea. She said, *"in the company policy, we shall say at least 27, but I'm 22, so we cannot kind of explain to them that in the Philippines, we graduate at the age of 19."*

The fabrication of some basic information seemed to be practiced by some of the teachers. This is driven by their desire to adhere to their company's policies, safeguard themselves from potential problems, and maintain positive relationships with their students. This observation aligns with Kaufmann's

(2011) assertion that teachers may resort to fabricating information for specific purposes. However, it is important to note this practice compromises the authenticity of their self-disclosure. This compromise on authenticity, regardless of how minimal the compromise is, highlights a potential ethical dilemma within the teaching profession of the online ESL teachers. While they may have valid reasons for sharing untrue information or hiding their true opinion, such as complying with company rules or avoiding conflicts, it can raise concerns about the transparency and trustworthiness of their interactions with students. This ethical discussion underscores the complexities inherent in the teacher-student relationship even in the ESL milieu.

The Free Talk: Exploratory-Affective to Affective Stages. The online ESL teachers also initiate sharing stories about their family, friends, personal errand, among others whenever there is a chance to have longer conversations with their students. This level of self-disclosure is characterized as the exploratory-affective stage. This is where friendship-building starts (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The teachers affirmed that by sharing certain personal stories, they are able to establish a closer relationship with their students. Teacher Ben explained that opening more about their lives stimulates the students to share things about themselves as well. This, in turn, opens opportunities for students to speak more and to be engaged in more extensive conversation.

> Teacher Ben: As time goes on, when you get to talk to the students every day and you want them to open-up, so you start telling more about yourself. So, for example, you want to know more about their family, I start by saying something about my family.

> Teacher Juan: I usually share my personal life. Like maybe what I ate for breakfast, what I will do for weekend and maybe as for sometimes, to be more dramatic as well, I will share about my family and about, you know, like, couple relationships.

Exploratory-affective stage of disclosure was observed to be a natural phase between the teacher and the student. In this stage, they can explore more into the dynamics of their relationship and class conversations.

The teachers also indicated that they also talk about more profound subjects during their classes. This includes conversations about their religious beliefs and viewpoints on certain political and social matters. This affirms that the third layer known as the affective stage of self-disclosure can be achieved within the context of an online ESL teacher-student relationship.

Teacher Sara: Maybe the most general things I have disclosed to them is, for example, religion, my opinions about sensitive topics like global issues or let's say third genders, political perspectives, and family situations. So far, *'yun lang 'yung medyo personal* (those are the personal [topics I share]), and also relationships.

Teacher Sara, for instance, shares topics such as religion, global issues, genders, politics, and the like with her students. These profound and personal subjects typically require a deeper, less superficial relationship to be brought up. This finding is also intriguing because the topics Teacher Sara addresses are usually discouraged by her company as they are considered "too personal." This indicates that some online ESL teachers may not always adhere to their company's policies or recommendations regarding topic restrictions.

In this study, the exploratory-affective and affective stages were combined into a single theme. This merging was influenced by the teachers themselves, who referred to these stages as one and suggested that there could be a subtle boundary between them. For example, discussing one's family is part of the exploratory-affective stage, which is suitable for those who are just beginning to build their friendship (Littejohn & Foss, 2009). However, other online ESL teachers may refrain from sharing personal family matters until they have established a deeper emotional connection with their foreign students.

Constraints and avoidance in delving into deeper stage of self-disclosure. It is another interesting finding that in the context of online ESL teaching, teachers are often reminded of the boundaries they should draw in order for them to avoid discussing sensitive issues that might make their students uncomfortable. For instance, talking about religious beliefs might result in conflicts between the teacher and the student. However, it is also the discretion of the student if they insist on bringing up such a topic. It appears like online ESL teachers need to test the water and heighten their sensitivity, or in Filipino term, "*makiramdam*", before disclosing their thoughts about some topics.

Certain ESL companies' policies consistently prioritize the comfort and well-being of students during class. Hence, the teachers recognize the need to subjugate or avoid certain topics.

Teacher Jem: It's the company policy that it's not really appropriate (other personal topics). I think there's a section in the company policy wherein they say you should not exchange

too much information. At the same time, you don't have to share personal problems with your students. You have to be professional as much as possible. So, it's not really… specifically, they say that you don't share this one, this one, but as a teacher I think you would be like, okay it's part of the policy.

Some teachers avoid too much disclosure, because they highly prioritize their students' confidentiality, particularly considering that these students are mature individuals. It is important to note that ESL students enroll in ESL classes with the primary intention of enhancing their overall English proficiency, rather than seeking companionship.

Some teachers also recognize that factors such as the limitations of online platforms and cultural differences might cause misunderstanding. As Teacher Jem said, "It's not really a face-to-face kind of conversation, and even if they are your students, you still have to put limits, of course, and they are Koreans, so sometimes, they also value privacy." Hence, evaluating whether it is appropriate to talk about a personal or sensitive topic is what the teachers spontaneously do. If the topic seems to be what the student is interested in, the teachers emphasized that this is the best time for them to disclose more in order to engage the students because this would trigger participation as well (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994).

Despite the hesitations to disclose personal narratives and other sensitive topics, Teachers Juan and Ben claimed that disclosure is an act of caring to the students, because they are allowing the presence of vulnerabilities. As it was emphasized during the interview that, "if they (the students) see vulnerability, they'll be more comfortable to open up their own vulnerability." Consequently, while exploratory-affective and affective stages are sometimes being withheld, its importance in ESL conversations was not undermined by the teachers.

The Personal Talk: Stable Stage. The last stage, stable stage, reaches a level where personal things are shared, and one can predict the emotional reactions of the other person (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). In the case of the ESL teachers, they acknowledge that they also experience this stage with some of their students who are willing elevate the level of their rapport. Time is also one of the factors that push them to share things like their deep personal problems, future plans in life, among others, as some of their students stay in their class for several months to even years.

Teacher Ben: I have this student. I've been teaching him for, roughly, 4 months, I think. But I can honestly say he knows about my relationship, my religion, my hobbies, my personal problems. I even get to talk to him about my future plans.

The stable stage is also the stage wherein familiarity signals the teachers of the possible reactions their students might make. For instance, Teacher Maria shared that she knows already when her student is in a bad mood. She shared that her 60-year-old-student whom she has been handling for almost three years has brought such comfort to the point that she knows the mood that Mr. Lee is expressing. She knows if he is happy or sad by just listening to the tone of his voice. Thus, Teacher Maria sometimes chooses not to share negative news with Mr. Lee, because she knows what his reaction will be. She said, "there are some bad days, that I know that when they answer, they are in bad condition." It turns out that the "*pakikiramdam*" or the heightened sensitivity of the teachers plays a crucial role to the maintenance of teacher-student relationship. Since the stable stage signifies closeness that is way beyond a surface level kind of relationship, ESL teachers do their best to maintain it. Furthermore, if the teacher and the student reached this level, the teachers are not too conscious about which conversation is acceptable or not as they basically know the preference of their students. Thus, in this stage, it can be said that teachers and students have built friendship – a friendship that allows vulnerabilities to be shown in class. After all, disclosing something about their problems and weaknesses humanizes them (Kaufmann, 2011).

Stable stage is not often achieved, but it turns out possible depending on how willing the teacher and the student to maintain their rapport in class. Stable stage in ESL context means having friendship with their student.

> Teacher Juan: I have seen them grow. Some of them, they told me they already have a boyfriend, so I congratulate them.

> Teacher Jem: My student also shared about his life on Kakao Talk. One of my students, he shared that he wanted to resign from his company. *Ganun eh kapag naging-*close *na kayo* (that's how it is when you have become closer to each other).

Teacher Juan and Teacher Jem have revealed that some of their foreign students have grown so at ease with them that they openly share personal life updates. Some online ESL teachers, despite the rules of the company, maintain good relationship with their students even outside their class. Some have managed to sustain these relationships to the extent that certain students have remained for over five years. These teachers have witnessed the personal and linguistic growth of these students over time. This finding suggests that once an online ESL teacher establishes a stable rapport with their students, concerns about company policies become less significant.

Depenetration. Just like in any other relationship, online ESL teachers and students also reach the stage wherein they choose not to continue their relationship. In the context of ESL, it is important to note that students always have the liberty to choose and/or change their teacher. In this case, if their class did not go well, students can choose to withdraw from their class. Depenetration appears to be the choice of the student most of the time unless the teacher has complaints against the student. Based on the narratives of online ESL teachers, ending their classes with their students is sometimes not a big deal. One main factor is that their class is online and that their students are geographically far from them. No matter the closeness, their attachment is always expected to end anyway because teacher-student relationship, especially in this context, is seasonal.

> Teacher Maria: 'Yung iba lumilipat o nililipat sa ibang teacher. So, 'yun na 'yun. Pwedeng hindi na kami mag-usap ulit. Okay lang. Next student nalang. (Some transfer or are transferred to another teacher. So, that's it. We might not talk again. That's okay. I'll just move on to the next student.)

Although this stage no longer implies further disclosure, it is included in the study to emphasize that even when the teacher and the student have reached the stable stage, only a few remain to be friends after their classes, and that self-disclosure is not a lifetime investment in this context, unlike in other human relationships.

Motivations behind online ESL teachers' self-disclosure

Online ESL teachers are motivated to forge connections with their students because of its favorable impact on their classes. In this study, the participants openly shared the motivations driving their willingness to engage in self-disclosure. The following are the two primary reasons emerged as key factors motivating them to practice self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure as a Teaching Strategy. The participants mentioned that while disclosure is part of any conversations, sharing more about themselves can be a strategy for them to teach their students better.

English is the primary language used in their class. Since this is not the first language of their student, they need to model how it is used in conversations. Hence, they share real-life stories in order to prime their students' participation.

> Teacher Ben: Let's say I would ask them, "So, what did you do this weekend?" It might seem like a simple question, but for some students, they might not understand it and then, no

matter how much you simplify the question, they still won't understand. I'll give an example, like, I'll say "oh 'coz during Saturday, I went to the mall. What about you? What did you do on Saturday?" And with that, hearing the example would help them understand the question and be able to finally answer it.

Teacher Sara: I think it's very important (self-disclosure). Kasi (because), with those experiences that they have and with those information that we disclose that are similar to them, *mas nae-engage sila magsalita* (they get to be more engaged), and by that, it would be easier for them to talk.

Teacher Juan: Because (for) Korean students, they tend to be more engaged in speaking when I am sharing those kinds of information to my students... those are my ways on how I will encourage my students to at least speak in English language.

Self-disclosure plays an indispensable role in capturing the interest of the students. Online ESL teachers talk about things that can be relatable to the students. Because of this, students can feel that the topic or lesson for that day is interesting, so they start to engage in the discussion. This may not be an obvious rule to teach students, but online ESL teachers subconsciously strategize just to make a pleasing kind of learning environment, eradicating barriers through disclosure. This result supported the study that says teachers should understand the different characteristics of various educational settings and use tailored strategies for more effective learning experiences (Song et al., 2015). Moreover, the finding also agreed that teacher's self-disclosure can improve students' attitude towards English language learning (Farani & Fatemi, 2014).

Self-disclosure to Elevate the Quality of Class Conversations. Connected to the first point, disclosure is also the teachers' technique to maintain a good conversation with their students. According to them, it would be difficult for the teacher to maintain their class conversations without revealing some information about them that would be salient to the elevation of the quality of their class.

Teacher Maria: It's (self-disclosure) something that everything starts with. If you don't have self-disclosure at the very first, it's going to be difficult for you, for the month-long class or as long you're going to be together.

Teacher Juan: You will both benefit (in self-disclosure). You will have a better class with them. If they trust you, they will share more as well.

Based on the narratives of the teachers, it was revealed that elevating the quality of class is deeply grounded in the quality of the relationship of the teacher and the student, and trust is salient to class maintenance and is it an antecedent to self-disclosure as well. (Shih et al., 2015).

The Influence of Online ESL Teachers' Self-Disclosure on their Relationship with their Students

Generally, online ESL teachers shared positive narratives about self-disclosure and how it influences their relationship with their students. It appears that the reward or benefit of sharing their lives to their students outweighs the costs.

From the traditional student-teacher relationship to having a real friendship. All the participants agreed that the wider the breadth of the topics they discuss in class—topics that include their personal lives—the deeper the depth of their relationship with their students. Teacher Sara expressed her overall positive experience in self-disclosure by saying, "*they treat you more than just a teacher.*" Through self-disclosure, they get to have a closer relationship with their students. In addition, the teachers repeatedly mentioned that word "comfort" to emphasize that the affinity that they are building with their students is genuine and mutual. As they reach deeper stages and reveal wide varieties of information about them, their connection can go beyond the traditional notion of student-teacher relationship.

Albeit this is not for all their students, self-disclosure can bring about real friendship – a kind of relationship that allows them to be who they are beyond the roles they play as teachers and students. Their online lessons do not restrict the development of these friendships. In fact, many continue to stay in touch through various messaging apps and even meet in person. For instance, there are students who look for their teachers when visiting the Philippines to reconnect.

Teacher Ben: They won't think that if their grammar is right, if their pronunciation is right, they will just listen and sometimes share.

Teacher Juan: Kapag na-meet mo sila (when you meet them), you will see, they are like us.

As it was mentioned in the previous sections, despite company policies that discourage the online ESL teachers to have personal communications with their

foreign students, it still appears like the teachers value the relationship they have built with their students more.

Having a comfortable class environment results to other positive experience. The teachers added that there is increased in student engagement when they get to talk to their students more. Thus, if self-disclosure brings comfort in class, then self-disclosure as a teaching strategy can be effective in the context of online ESL teaching.

Teacher Maria: They will eventually do the same thing that I do. If I say about "you know what blah blah blah..." they will say "me too, blah blah blah". Eventually, there would come a time that you're not asking anymore, but they are sharing, and they would just keep on sharing and update you with their lives. They will also want always book you and study English more with you.

Good teacher-student relationship and rapport based on affinity (Faranda and Clarke, 2004) have been linked with the students' comfortability in cooperating in the class activities and with the students' academic participation (Swenson, 2010; Yezbick, 2016; Frisby & Myers, 2008).

This research demonstrated that self-disclosure has a beneficial influence on the connection between online ESL teachers and their foreign students, as well as on the overall level of student engagement in the class.

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The aim of this study circled around the process of self-disclosure of online ESL teachers. To understand this concept more deeply in the ESL context, the motivations for self-disclosure were also determined. Furthermore, the perceived influence of the teachers' said self-disclosure on their relationship with their students was also investigated. Apparently, the process of self-disclosure of online ESL teachers signifies the four stages of self-disclosure—orientation, exploratory-affective to affective, and stable. However, in this context, the process is not in an ideal linear progression as unfolding each stage and each information will always be contingent on adhering to company guidelines and catering to student preferences. This suggests that, in an ESL class, the teacher doesn't hold complete control. For instance, the orientation stage may appear to be surface-level and inconsequential for normal interlocutors, seemingly sharing information that is already publicly known. Yet, it appears like this stage has another hidden layer in the ESL context—a layer that conceals some of the real information about the teacher in order to adhere to the company rules, avoid misunderstandings, and even enhance the understanding of the students. This matter deserves attention as good intentions can lead to inauthentic self-disclosures. The mindset of the teacher to always think of what benefits the class

propels them to present themselves in a manner that pleases both students and the employing company. Hence, their self-presentation in connection with their self-disclosure can be explored.

Online ESL teachers can choose to disclose some information about them in order to relate to their students. Thus, it can be argued that the degree of intimacy does not necessarily equate to the breadth and depth of the information shared by the teacher. This finding challenges the conventional belief that only those in close relationships should share their deeply personal stories. This discovery primes another area to explore, considering that the reward of gaining positive feedback from their students outweighs the cost of sharing their private lives.

Despite the specific constraints and repercussions of self-disclosure, ESL teachers appears to be motivated to open their lives to their students, because they can clearly see its benefits. Students tend to engage more in class when the teachers talk about personal narratives. Also, the quality of their English conversations can be more complex. Thus, self-disclosure can be an instinctive tool for ESL teachers in maintaining very engaging dialogues. As this study focused on ESL teachers who conduct classes online, comparing the self-disclosure of teachers online and face-to-face in the ESL context can be another area to investigate. Overall, student-teacher relationship has the potential to flourish and may result to building stronger affinity as long as the teacher and the student are both willing to open up and be penetrated. Having a conversation-based type of a language class can really benefit from self-disclosures as real-life narratives can spark class enthusiasm. Finally, a crucial aspect to acknowledge in this study is the concept of depenetration, which is an integral part of the process. While participants may view depenetration as merely ending their class with students, delving into the coping mechanisms for depenetration could serve as a valuable focus for future research endeavors.

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