

The Language Teacher

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An invitation to reflect on practice

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Reflective practice is now a common term in many teacher education and development programs worldwide. Although definitions of reflective practice may vary in different programs, it generally means teachers systematically collect information about their classroom happenings, and then analyze and evaluate this information and compare it to their underlying assumptions and beliefs so that they can make changes and improvements to their teaching. This paper outlines what reflective practice is, why it is important, and how teachers can reflect.

内省の実践（意識的に深く考え注意深く観察する）というのは世界中の多くの教員養成課程で使われている一般的な用語である。内省の実践の定義は、それぞれの教科課程で異なっているかもしれないが、一般的には、授業の向上と工夫のために、教師がクラス内の情報を体系的に集め、この情報を分析・評価し、自分達の教育の前提や信条と比較する、ということの意味している。本論では内省の実践とは何か、なぜそれが重要なのか、どのように教師は授業に反映できるのかについて要点を述べる。

What is reflective practice?

Perhaps people new to teaching may consider a formal invitation for teachers to reflect to be obvious and commonsensical because, after all, most teachers think about their teaching in one way or another. Yes, such “common sense reflection” is familiar to most teachers of English to speakers of other languages as we mull over our classes before and after teaching. So, *reflect* in its everyday conversational use means thinking about what we do and what we did, but this “thinking” is not systematic, nor is it continuously related to what happened in our lesson. For example, if we have a student who suddenly does not respond to our lesson and is in fact negative, we will wonder why—especially if this student has in the past responded well. Our instinct as a teacher is to try find out “what is wrong” and to try to solve it because it may make us uncomfortable. When we have resolved this—hopefully successfully (whatever “success” means in this case)—we may feel better and



hope something like this does not happen again. Either way, we just want to leave it there rather than really explore what just happened. This is not reflective practice though, as we do not try to link it to our experience and the process of our “reflecting” lacks any structure. This is *common sense reflection* and is probably the most popular type of reflection that all language teachers consider important. Reflective practice means taking such common sense reflections further, with more disciplined thinking in which we ask ourselves more probing questions about our practice. Such probing questions can include “What do I do?” “Why do I do this?” “What is the result?” and “Will I change anything in my practice as a result of finding answers to the previous questions?” Such reflective practice actively challenges our taken-for-granted ways of teaching and can be uncomfortable and challenging for anyone who tries it, as we do not know what we may find.

So reflective teaching means more than fleeting thoughts before, during, or after a lesson. Reflective practice means examining what you do in the classroom and why you do it. Reflective practice also means thinking about the beliefs and values related to teaching English as a second or foreign language, and seeing if classroom practices are consistent with these beliefs and values. In order to engage in this type of reflective teaching, teachers must systematically collect information about their classroom

happenings and then analyze and evaluate this information and compare it to their underlying assumptions and beliefs so that they can make changes and improvements in their teaching (Farrell, 2007). Reflective practice can also be conducted outside the classroom by looking at the context of teaching, such as when teachers want to see either the impact of their teaching on the community and society or how the community and society impacts their teaching (e.g., Who makes the curriculum? What and whose values does the curriculum embody?).

Why is reflective practice important?

Teachers may ask why they should reflect on their practice beyond the quick after class muse with perceptions such as, "That was a good/bad class!" or "The students were not very responsive today!" While these reflections may act as a necessary starting point for most teachers, they do not produce any real evidence that their musings or perceptions have been correct or not. For example, some teachers end class feeling really happy because they think it went well. Conversely, they may feel unhappy at the end of a class because they have perceived it to have gone badly and, worse, they had spent a lot of time preparing for that particular class. Some teachers base their initial perceptions on their teaching on the way the students respond (e.g., by yawning) or not responding during class. This kind of "evidence" may not lead to correct interpretations of the teachers' perceptions because that yawn may have nothing to do with their class and their teaching and everything to do with that student's lack of sleep or the like. Likewise, if the students do not respond to the lesson, teachers should try to find out why they were not responsive without getting too defensive. So, teachers need to know *why* some classes go "well" and others do not go so "well" and how they define what this "well" means. This is called *evidence-based reflective practice*. As such, teachers need to get solid data about what is really happening in their classroom, rather than what they think is happening. So, reflective practice is important because it helps teachers make more informed decisions about their teaching, because these decisions are based on concrete evidence systematically collected over a period of time.

How can we reflect?

Teachers can engage in evidence-based reflective practice by themselves and this is a good starting

point for all teachers. However, while we are self-reflecting we may encounter issues or situations that may be unpleasant and so we may avoid these and become biased in our reflections, considering only topics that do not upset us. In other words, we can become biased in what we self-reflect on, so we may need to be challenged because we may become too comfortable with our teaching, or because we have not asked ourselves some hard questions about what we do. As such, reflective practice is better informed by some kind of dialogue with the self, but mostly with others so that we can have a deeper understanding of ourselves as teachers.

Reflective practice through dialogue begins with the self where a teacher engages in internal dialogue about his or her own practice. A teacher can begin this internal dialogue by telling their own teaching story, such as in an autobiography, which can be analyzed later for that teacher's stated or implied beliefs, assumptions, and values about teaching and learning English as a second language. By telling their story, teachers can make better sense of seemingly random experiences because they hold the inside knowledge, especially personal intuitive knowledge, expertise and experience that is based on their accumulated years as language educators. These self-reflection stories can provide a rich source of teacher-generated information that allows teachers to reflect on how they got where they are today, how they conduct practice, and the underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs that have ruled their past and current practices.

The dialogue with self can be expanded to include others such as a critical friendship or a group of teachers that form a teacher reflection group. For example, if a teacher wants to dialogue with another peer he or she can choose to enter a critical friendship, team-teaching, and/or peer coaching whereby both teachers collaborate in a two-way mode to encourage dialogue and reflection in order to improve the quality of language teaching and learning in some way. Teachers can also join a teacher reflection group with teachers from either their own institution or from other institutions. The teacher reflection group meets regularly to discuss and reflect on practice. These group discussions can break the sense of isolation many teachers say they feel when they talk about their teaching. The group can also complement individual members' strengths and compensate for each member's limitations.

Conclusion

Reflective practice as it is outlined in this short article is much more than taking a few minutes to mull over our teaching. Most teachers do this anyway. Reflective practice as it is outlined here is evidence-based because teachers systematically gather data about their teaching and use this information to make informed decisions about their practice. In addition, reflective practice also means teachers enter a dialogue with themselves and other teachers so that they can reach a new level of awareness and understanding of their practice. This dialogue can occur with the self, a critical friend, and/or in a teacher reflection group. The dialogue is supportive and sympathetically challenging so that individual teachers can reach a level of awareness of what they do and why they do it. Indeed, I would like to invite all readers to join me to reflect during the JALT2014 conference where I am excited to speak.

Reference

Farrell, T. S. C. (2007). *Reflective practice: From research to practice*. London, UK: Continuum Press.

Thomas S. C. Farrell is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Brock University, Canada. His professional interests include reflective practice, and language teacher education and development. Professor Farrell has published widely in academic journals and has presented at major conferences worldwide on the topic of reflective practice. A selection of his recent books include *Reflecting on Teaching the Four Skills* (Michigan University Press, 2012), *Reflective Writing for Language Teachers* (Equinox, 2013), *Reflective Practice* (TESOL Publications, 2013), and *Reflective Practice in ESL Teacher Development Groups: From Practices to Principles* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). His webpage is <reflectiveinquiry.ca>.

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KRISTIN SHITARA (KS): You are described as a singer, storyteller, author, playwright, educator, and performing artist. Is there one of these identities that is most important to you?