# Self-Reflections Through the Looking Glass: Perspectives of Instructors and Trainers

Ian Wash
Rikkyo University
Ken Ohashi
Rikkyo University

**Reference Data:**

Wash, I., & Ohashi, K. (2014). Self-reflections through the looking glass: Perspectives of instructors and trainers. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

The aim of this study was to examine the benefits and outcomes of writing self-reflection papers from the perspectives of both trainers and instructors. Drawing on data from qualitative interviews, we compare and contrast the views of instructors and programme managers as they reflect on their experiences of writing and supervising self-reflections. Interview responses are analysed within the core themes of teacher development, programme development, and professionalism. Findings suggest that self-reflection enables instructors to adapt to new teaching challenges, contribute more to programmes, and play a pivotal role in the professionalism of the field.

当プロジェクトでは大学英語教育プログラムにおいてself-reflection paperを書くことの利点および得られる成果についてプログラムマネージャーと英語講師双方の視点から考察した。インタビューを通して各々のグループから得られたself-reflection paperを指導または書き上げた経験に関する話を質的に比較した結果self-reflection paper は教員の質的向上（teacher development）、プログラムの発展（programme development）、専門家意識（professionalism）の三点について役立っていることを双方ともに認識していることが示唆された。

In spite of the hard work and dedication of English language instructors and the many developments in the field, many enter and exit the industry without considering it as a long-term career option. According to Richards and Lockhart (1996) "Language teaching is not universally regarded as a profession" (p. 40) because it is not usually associated with specialized skills, dedicated training, and high job satisfaction. This throws down a challenge to all those involved in the industry to create working conditions that engender professionalism and stimulate instructors' goals and attitudes, in other words enhance professional development.

But what is professional development? One useful way to define it is in comparison to its close relative: training. Wallace (1991) claimed the difference to be that "training or education is something that can be presented or managed by *others*; whereas development is something that can be done only by and for *oneself*" (p. 3). Reflective teaching, defined as an activity in which "teachers and student teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 1), has gained popularity for this purpose. Bailey (1997) mentioned that self-reflection has practical benefits because it creates a context that promotes professional dialogue, provides a more manageable professional

development alternative to action research, and could also be the starting place for many research projects. More recently, Kabilan (2007) added that self-reflection "can engage teachers' self-examination and enhance their understanding of teaching and learning in ways that are fresh, stimulating and challenging" (p. 684). Greater explanatory power of how the process of self-reflection can be helpful for instructors can be found in Wallace's (1991, p. 56) Reflective Model. In this model, *Received Knowledge*, or principles and theories of language teaching, and *Experiential Knowledge*, or practical classroom experience, feed into a cycle of practice and reflection, which results in professional development outcomes for the in-service instructor. Wallace's model and the other theories referred to above have one thing in common apart from connections already made: They are written by trainers and established experts in the field and they do not necessarily represent the views of novices or current instructors.

In this study we examined the benefits and outcomes of implementing written *Self-Reflection Papers* (SRPs) as a task to encourage professional development in instructors at The Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University. The SRP writing task is conducted by all instructors during their first semester at EDC as the first step in a series of projects that follow in the subsequent semesters. Instructors were asked to consider how their prior teaching beliefs have been reinforced or reconsidered since teaching at EDC (see Appendix). The voices of not only the programme managers (PMs), but also the instructors were collected to illustrate any similarities or differences in opinion towards the SRP activity.

## Research Methodology

Our review of the literature led to identification of a gap in previous research where experts' theories are plentiful but instructors' views of self-reflection are largely absent. This opened up an opportunity to conduct research on both. To guide our study, we formulated two research questions:

1. What are the anticipated or desired professional development outcomes of writing SRPs?
2. What are the actual professional development outcomes of writing SRPs?

### Sampling

Three PMs (David, Simon, and Brad) from the department were interviewed for research question 1. And for question two, three instructors (Naomi, Mia, and Jack) who had written SRPs within the same academic year were selected for interview by convenience sampling. It is noted that working with such small sample sizes weakens the external validity of the study. Therefore, any results cannot be used to explain the effects of similar projects in the English language departments of other universities.

### Data Collection

Two semi-structured group interviews were conducted with the participants. Both interviews were guided by a list of questions and prompts based around the research questions as a loose structure to allow for flexibility. The interviews were recorded using IP recorder equipment and then transcribed within 2 days of the date of the interview.

### Analysis

We then screened the transcripts for common themes. Both authors worked on the analysis together in order to provide assurances of the internal reliability of the data. Primary coding led to the initial creation of 15 identified themes. A thematic analysis was conducted on the scripts using the themes to capture other

material in the transcript that was relevant to the established themes. This was then refined to produce a table of core themes and associated subthemes (see Table 1). Results and findings are discussed in the next section using the themes as headings.

### Research Ethics

We used pseudonyms to provide anonymity to the PMs and instructors who participated in the interviews, and these measures were agreed on before the interviews took place.

Table 1. Core Themes and Subthemes

| Teacher development | Programme development | Professionalism |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher benefits | Shared experiences | |
| Teacher control | Teacher motivation | |
| Lesson planning | Management tool | |

## Findings and Discussion

In this section the key findings from the interviews with the PMs and instructors will be analysed. Each theme and subtheme will be examined to explore, compare, and contrast the views of both the instructors and PMs. A final summary explains how self-reflection and instructor adaptability combine to interact between teacher and programme development whilst simultaneously driving professionalism.

### Teacher Development

How far does self-reflection contribute towards developing instructors with the ability to successfully teach a unified curriculum? One way in which Mia and Naomi noticed themselves develop was through the initiation of teaching targets.

> Like . . . kind of setting reflections and setting the next goals that I can work on for the next step. So maybe I consider myself as a fresh teacher, like I'm still a new teacher so I want to keep improving. (Mia, instructor)

> I felt like maybe I should set a goal for myself. (Naomi, instructor)

Goal setting generally indicates a willingness to engage in teacher development. At the same time it is the desired teacher development effect that the PMs hoped would register with instructors. As Simon pointed out, the paper writing process prompts instructors to question their entire purpose for working within the EDC programme.

> I think that SRPs is one of the early steps in having teachers really think deeply of *why* they're doing what they're doing in this programme. (Simon, PM)

Because SRPs are written by instructors in their 1st year of service on a 3-year programme, the emphasis is on initiating teacher development and providing guidance for future development. They also help focus on the *why* questions which, as Gün (2011, p. 127) pointed out, aid critical reflection and as a result generate a deeper understanding of one's own teaching.

The following three subthemes provide insights into more specific areas of teacher development that arose in the course of the interviews.

#### Teacher Benefits

Instructors said the process of writing an SRP provided numerous teacher benefits. Mia saw the paper as an opportunity to

unravel and map out ideas about teaching that they had begun to formulate. This supports the understanding that instructors can utilise writing as part of a process of discovery and that this process "helps trigger insights about teaching" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 7).

> I think writing is one way of organizing my thoughts. (Mia, instructor)

Such insights may not be directly obvious to the instructor who only has limited time to reflect individually while teaching a busy schedule of classes. In order for the opportunity to become a reality the right conditions have to be provided and in this case the PMs understood the need. Provision of time and opportunity to read SRPs written by other EDC instructors was a particular advantage of the process. This was commented on by both the PMs and instructors.

> So I think that we're all really lucky to be able to do this programme because not only does it give teachers a time to actually just sit down and put that on paper, but also to read each other's. (David, PM)

> I think reading other people's self-reflections is really useful. For one thing they would give you ideas about things maybe you wouldn't come up with. (Jack, instructor)

### *Teacher Control*

Teacher control concerns scenarios in which instructors considered their teaching principles and intuitions about best practice. The PMs were clear about the need to challenge teaching methods in the SRP writing process that would highlight the need for teacher development and inward examination of their instructional principles.

> But if you actually think about what you're doing, if you think about why you're doing it, then that gives you a measure of control in terms of what you're doing in the classroom, right? So you can actually start to say, for example "This [activity] . . . why am I doing the [activity]? How are students reacting to the [activity]? In what ways is it effective or not effective? How can I start to shape that?" (Brad, PM)

This response connects actual classroom experience to theoretical rationale, supporting the idea that teachers who make internal links between classroom practice and theoretical research are better positioned to engage in "enlightened" teaching (Brown, 2007, p. 63). This approach towards more enlightened methods manifested itself in one instructor's classroom experience. In this case, Naomi reflected on how she came to understand that a positive classroom atmosphere and willingness to communicate could be achieved through task-based group activities rather than the teacher's personality.

> I thought that for other teachers there must be different ways to create a positive, friendly atmosphere so that students can and are willing to make mistakes. That was my belief, but after joining EDC, there was a change because students . . . even if I cover a different teachers' class, they seem not to care about their teachers and they're more focused on students' relationships. (Naomi, instructor)

### *Lesson Planning*

Language instructors with a busy schedule of classes sometimes feel they do not have time for careful lesson planning. However, through self-reflection after lessons, it often becomes clear how crucial the act of planning can be (Dobson, 2006, p. 318). The following response suggests that self-reflection prompts instruc-

tors to contemplate how they apply the teaching principles and beliefs they hold.

> Self-reflections maybe, give us more . . . taught me more options. So when I meet different types of students, maybe I can use *this* strategy, have you ever tried *this* one? So maybe it's a good opportunity to broaden your teaching approaches . . . strategies. (Mia, instructor)

But perhaps more specifically, self-reflection encourages thinking on how to adapt lessons to meet the needs of students and the diversity of classroom realities that are faced on a daily basis. This is echoed in the views of David.

> And I think [writing SRPs] helps [instructors] to put the principles into action because there's a gap between what's written in a page and what happens in a classroom. (David, PM)

## Programme Development

Just as self-reflection aids teacher development, it could also contribute towards the development of language teaching programmes as a whole. David provided a reason why this might be the case.

> I think bearing that in mind, it's essential to have formalized self-reflections or semester projects and research projects because they enable, not just the teachers but also the programme to get a *direction*. (David, PM)

The growth and evolution benefits that SRP writing can deliver are examined more thoroughly in the following three subthemes.

### Shared Experiences

Sharing experiences was a theme that instructors and PMs, in particular, envisaged as an important contributing factor towards developing a successful language programme. From a management perspective it is clear that there are wider implications for SRPs in that they influence instructors' ability to communicate with fellow teachers and the programme itself.

> So I think that having things like self-reflections is so people can share and so those [Professional Development Sessions] where they talk about what they're doing kind of allows people to know they're on the same page but from a kind of bottom-up way . . . it has been the chance to actually have some pretty interesting open, frank discussions with people about what we're doing and why we're doing it. (David, PM)

In this case, David offered an understanding of how self-reflection improves sharing on several levels. Firstly, that instructors can communicate better with each other and secondly, that it provides a forum for deeper and more meaningful communication between PMs and instructors. This idea was developed by an instructor who commented on how sharing led to more teacher-led training.

> Like the presentations we watched [in a previous training session]. I remember Roger's idea with the little slips of paper. It wasn't something I'd thought of but it was really interesting, and obviously that was something that had been built on from his self-reflection on what he's seen the students doing. So it can lead to other things as well and maybe improve the overall methodology of the course. (Jack, instructor)

Jack's remark identified a free-flow of reflection wherein issues that arise in instructors' SRPs feed into training sessions that produce an outcome of programme development. By situating self-reflections in this way, instructors feel they are at the heart of programme development.

### *Teacher Motivation*

Reflection prompted instructors to compare themselves as instructors now to how they were prior to teaching on the programme, and this in turn initiated thoughts about the teachers they wanted to become and the expectations the programme had of them. A similar instructor thought process was observed by Kubanyiova's (2009) application of the notion of future possible selves, which built on Dörnyei and Ushida's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System to analyze teacher motivation. This model differentiated the *Ideal language teacher-self* (led by aspirations), the *Ought-to language teacher-self* (led by professional responsibilities and obligations), and the *Feared language teacher-self* (led by failure to live up to ideals or obligations) (Kubanyiova, pp. 315-316). Applying this model to the experience of the instructors interviewed in this study enabled us to examine how much they are willing to adapt to and engage with the EDC unified curriculum. The following response is quite telling in this respect.

> You keep teaching the same material with the same instruction, but we know that it doesn't work sometimes too. Even if it works with group A but it doesn't work with group B . . . I felt like I was getting a bit lazy towards the end. Maybe I could have modified to improve more each time, but you know, looking back, I just got used to getting it done. (Naomi, instructor)

Naomi indicated that she was in agreement with the programme by mentioning that modifying lessons to suit the needs or the learner is best practice. This signifies that the ideal teacher-self and the ought-to teacher-self are well aligned. In this case we can probably assume that Naomi's previous training or language teaching experience has developed an aspiration to be a more responsive teacher. Naomi also hinted at the feared language teacher-self by being concerned about sacrificing the adaptation of materials as a means to survive the teaching schedule and minimize stress. In this situation, written self-reflection plays an important role and acts as a tool to measure the dissonance between the actual teacher-self and the possible teacher-self.

### *Management Tool*

When instructors' join the EDC programme, using interviews and recruitment tasks, PMs gain a sense of where instructors have come from and what their existing teaching philosophies are. However, at the end of the first semester there is a need to detect changes in the instructors. Wallace (1991, p. 51) argues that supervisory management procedures and instructor training fail to operate effectively unless programmes find out how teachers have adapted to the demands of a new programme. David supported this view and attached some other practical reasons to the rationale.

> So we have really limited time to actually interact with the instructors. Most of the time [instructors] are in the classroom as well. And also this allows us to look at the changes that are going through instructors. (David, PM)

Here, David expressed the limitations of management and provided an example of how SRPs can help overcome issues that cause minimal opportunities for engaging with and monitoring the progress of instructors.

### Professionalism

Levels of professionalism concerned both instructors and PMs, albeit for different reasons and to varying extents. In general, although the instructors were aware that writing self-reflections worked towards enhancing in-service professionalism, they were more associated as tools used primarily in pre-service training and coursework for professional qualification certificates.

> When I was doing teacher training, I wrote (an SRP) but after I officially started working I had never . . . . but I think it promotes our professionalism in different ways. (Mia, instructor)

This attitude towards reflection is not surprising considering that many English language teachers work for schools or organizations in which professional development is low on the priority list. In terms of professionalism, David was keenly aware that by integrating SRP writing as part of the in-service professional development of instructors, they were doing something that was uncommon in the context of English language departments of Japanese universities.

> Most institutions in Japan don't have such a kind of system . . . it's really meaningful information on how that person conceptualizes teaching and hopefully that allows us to differentiate EDC instructors as the cream of the crop as really reflective professional instructors. And I think if we didn't have self-reflection semester projects, then it would be much more difficult for us to do that. (David, PM)

This view highlights the need for ongoing professional development that places an emphasis on continuous training and learning, both of which have implications for the English language teaching industry. It is also congruent with other findings that teachers "invested their personal time for research and further development in order to keep up with professional demands and responsibilities" (Ifanti & Fotopoulopou, 2011, p. 45).

> One comment [from an article on ELT] complained about language teachers saying that they're not really respected or they're not seen as true academics or they're the bottom of the heap. And I think that's a really valid complaint but so the field has to rise up which means the teachers have to do their best to sort of create standards and maintain standards and share what they're doing. So hopefully teachers will sort of feel part of that process and part of being more aware of the whole field. (David, PM)

David's final comment indicates that there is a premium placed on programmes that provide professional development through reflective teaching practices and action research in an attempt to enhance the professionalism of the industry as a whole.

### Summary of the Findings

The three major themes are connected not only by the overarching use of self-reflection, but also by the need to constantly adapt to new challenges. Teacher development, programme development, and professionalization of the industry sit as a tripartite system (Figure1) in which teacher reflectivity and adaptability are central to the three core themes. Self-reflection is a means to adapt to an ever changing environment be it in the methods teachers employ in the classroom, the tools programmes select to implement to improve professional development in teachers, or the standards that instructors strive for in the industry to raise its professional credentials vis-a-vis other

academic disciplines. Teacher development interacts with programme development through the practice of SRP writing that enables instructors to consider more deeply teaching principles that are relevant to the classroom experiences they have had. Teacher development pivots to contribute to the professionalism of the field by setting greater professional development goals as instructors strive to attain the status of their ideal-teacher selves and reflect on the gap between novice and expert. On the other side of the triangle, constant evaluation of language teaching programmes contributed to by reflective instructors informs the needs and opportunities for ongoing training, which links programme development to the professionalism of the whole industry.

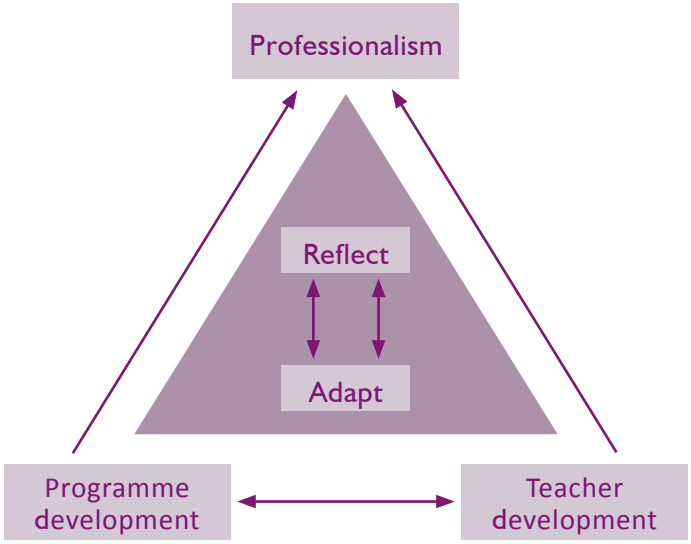


Figure 1. Tripartite system of reflectivity.

## Conclusion

Most professional development and reflective teaching literature is written from a trainer's perspective. In this paper we have attempted to balance this with some views of instructors, and as we have seen, reflection can benefit instructors, programmes, and the industry as a whole. Referring back to our research questions, the PM's responses provided some answers for question 1 in the context of each of the three core themes. However, PMs had a longer-term view about the benefits of the SRP (e.g., professionalism) than instructors. In providing answers for research question 2, instructors focused more on teacher development and programme development as outcomes of the experience, but didn't have so many ideas about how it contributed towards their professionalism and the professionalism of the industry as a whole. It is therefore important that instructors are made more aware that the professionalism of the field benefits from reflective teachers that can adapt to new challenges and reflect on the kind of teacher they want to become. Programmes that embrace reflective teaching are more likely to provide teacher-centred professional development and training that equips instructors for the ever-professionalising field. At the same time, these programmes can contribute towards improving standards of professionalism in the industry.

## Bio Data

**Ian Wash** is currently an English Instructor at The Center for English Discussion Class, Rikkyo University.
<ianwash@rikkyo.ac.jp>

**Ken Ohashi** is currently an English Instructor at The Center for English Discussion Class, Rikkyo University.
<k-ohashi@rikkyo.ac.jp>

## References


Bailey, K. M. (1997). Reflective teaching: Situating our stories. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, **7**, 1-19. Retrieved from http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ajelt/vol7/art1.htm

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An Interactive approach to language pedagogy*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.

Dobson, G. (2006). Teacher development: How to do it. In M. Nikolov, & J. Horváth (Eds.), *UPRT 2006: Empirical studies in English applied linguistics* (pp. 307-327). Pécs, France: Lingua Franca Csoport.

Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2009). *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Gün, B. (2011). Quality self-reflection through reflection training. *ELT Journal, 65*, 126-135.

Ifanti, A. A., & Fotopoulopou, V. S. (2011). Teachers' perceptions of professionalism and professional development: A case study in Greece. *World Journal of Education, 1*(1), 40-51.

Kabilan, M. K. (2007). English language teachers reflecting on reflections: A Malaysian experience. *TESOL Quarterly*, *41*, 681-705.

Kubanyiova, M. (2009). Possible selves in language teacher development. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 314-332). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wallace, M. J. (1991). *Training foreign language teachers: A reflective approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


## Appendix

### *Self-Reflection Paper Task Guidelines*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Introduction** | Describe your beliefs about communicative language teaching BEFORE you entered EDC. Feel free to discuss previous teaching (or learning) experiences, as well as training courses or academic study and readings. End this section with a description of the beliefs you valued the most and why. |
| **Discussion** | Describe the changes in your teaching beliefs in answering all or some of the points below:<br>• Which of your prior teaching beliefs have been reinforced after teaching EDC classes?<br>• Which of your prior teaching beliefs have you reconsidered after teaching EDC classes?<br>• Which new instructional principles, if any, have become relevant after teaching EDC classes?<br>Be sure to provide specific examples from your classes in this section. |
| **Conclusion** | Describe your beliefs about communicative language teaching AFTER you entered EDC in answering all or some of the points below:<br>• After teaching in EDC, has your personal understanding of CLT changed?<br>• What do you think are the most important factors and/or principles when teaching effective EDC classes? |