# Expositions

## Reflective Practice for TESOL Teachers: "What, Why, When and How"

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In this invited paper for *Expositions* in the *JALT Journal* I will address all aspects of reflective practice for TESOL teachers so that readers can consider implementing it in their daily practice in Japan. The paper outlines and discusses what reflective practice is, why it is important, when, and how language teachers can do it. More specifically I outline and discuss two different frameworks I developed for teachers wishing to reflect on their practice that I developed over the past 30 years. The first is an early framework I developed has five interrelated components and is useful for groups of teachers coming together to reflect on their practice. The second more recent framework also has five interrelated stages and suitable for individual teachers as well as groups when wishing to reflect on their practice. I believe that both frameworks may be useful for teachers to consider when wishing to engage in reflective practice in Japan.

**Keywords**: language teachers; reflective practice; TESOL

### What Is Reflective Practice?

I remember the excitement and fear I felt the first day I walked into a classroom in Dublin, Ireland as a trainee "teacher" (actually, I was teaching for a year for 2 hours a day as part of my teacher qualification diploma). I remember the room and can still to this day nearly 40 years ago, see all those faces looking at me as I said "good morning" to them all. Then I also

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remember that it suddenly hit me that I did not know what to do at that moment after entering the room; I remember wondering for example, 'do I stand up or sit down?' Do I ask them to open their books, and/or write on the board (yes, we had chalkboards in those days), and many more issues related to how I would conduct the class. I realize that this may seem trivial to most seasoned teachers, but to a neophyte like myself, those opening moments on my first day were some of the most frightening experiences of my teaching career. To be sure these dilemmas were critical incidents, some of many I was to experience that were not only going to shape me as a teacher but also as a reflective practitioner because as I learned after, experiences by themselves are of no use unless we engage in "reflection" so that we can learn from them. But what do I mean by the term "reflection" and is it the same as "reflective practice"?

I would say that "reflection" and "reflective practice" are a bit different, because reflection in its everyday connotation can be considered fleeting or reflection in passing based on our hunches, or intuition like the reflection I mentioned in the paragraph above about my first day as a teacher in Ireland all those years ago. It is a good start and perhaps one in which many teachers experience, however, we cannot be sure of what has really occurred beyond our hunches or intuition because the events have come and gone. So although engaging in some kind of reflection may be a good beginning when considering what we do as teachers, it is not enough to help us really see what is happening in our classes and lessons. That is why I use the term "reflective practice" because it means much more that thinking about what has happened in our lesson as we are going home on the subway or bus after a class. Engaging in reflective practice is a more systematic analysis of gathering evidence about what has actually happened in your lessons and also examining who you are as a person, what you do in the classroom, why you do it, and what the result is. It includes not only examining our teaching plans before class, our teaching actions during the class, and what we think we achieved in each class after the lesson, but also who we are as a human being, because I believe the person you are cannot be separated from the teacher you are and the act of teaching (Farrell, 2022). In other words, you bring *all of you* (your past and present) into each class you teach—for more on this see below under *philosophy* in the second framework for reflective practice I present. I provide more details on this evidence–based approach to reflective practice in the sections below.

## Why Is Reflective Practice Important?

Teachers may ask why they should engage in "reflective practice" I mentioned above when they say that they always do so after teaching and mention to other teachers in the staff room that they had "a good/bad class!" or that their "students were not very responsive today!" In other words, most teachers think they already reflect already. While I agree most teachers do "reflect" in such a manner as we are not robots and we are happy after an activity or a class if we perceive these to have gone well, we can also be overly depressed or angry if we perceive them to have gone badly and then we engage in "beating ourselves up" too much. The operative word here is "perception" or what we think went well or not so well in our lessons. Some teachers base such perceptions on the way the students respond (e.g., yawning) or do not respond during class (e.g., sitting in silence). They may consider this as "a critical event" for them; however, that yawn may have nothing to do with the class or teaching and everything to do with that student's lack of sleep or an illness. So, teachers need to know why classes go "well" and some other classes do not go so "well" and how they define what this "well" means. How do you *know* it went well or not so well? So how do you collect this evidence?

Teachers can collect evidence about what they do through recordings of what actually happens in classroom lessons rather than what we *think* happens. As Walsh (2015) notes, we can only get a real understanding of the complexities of interaction when we have a precise representation of what is really occurring by recording the communications and a record of this recording in the form of a written classroom transcript. This is mostly because we all have selective memories and these are not *real evidence* of what has occurred. We can collect this type of evidence by placing an audio recorder or video recorder in our classroom. Once the classroom communication data has been collected, the teacher then needs to transcribe the recording; this can be the most painful part of the whole process because it can take a long time to transcribe a one–hour class. It may not be necessary to transcribe the entire recording; teachers can decide what aspect of the classroom communications they are interested in knowing more about. In his excellent book, Fanselow (1987) suggested that transcriptions be made at certain intervals or at special events that the teacher wants to investigate. For example, teachers may only be interested in reflecting on the impact of their verbal instructions in their classes, so all they need to do is listen to and transcribe those parts of the tape that show the teacher giving instructions and then the turns immediately after this (for about five minutes) to see what impact these have on instruction.

Teachers can also collect evidence by writing about their practice because writing has its own built–in reflective mechanism; the process entails that writers must stop to think and organize their thoughts before writing (either with a pen or computer) and then decide on what to write. After this they can 'see' (literally) their thoughts and reflect on these for self–understanding. This I call reflective writing and I use it all the time to help me with my own reflections (such as writing this article). For teachers, such reflective writing can include written accounts of teachers' thoughts, classroom observations, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences about their practice both inside and outside the classroom (Farrell, 2013a). By writing regularly teachers are able to identify and address issues critical to their practice within their teaching contexts, and as a result provide more learning opportunities for their students. Teachers can use this evidence based on concrete evidence systematically collected over a period of time to make more informed decisions about teaching rather than relying on hunches or the like. As such, teachers will need to get solid data about what is really happening in their classroom rather than what they think is happening. This brings us to the next important question related to engaging in reflective practice, how do I do it?

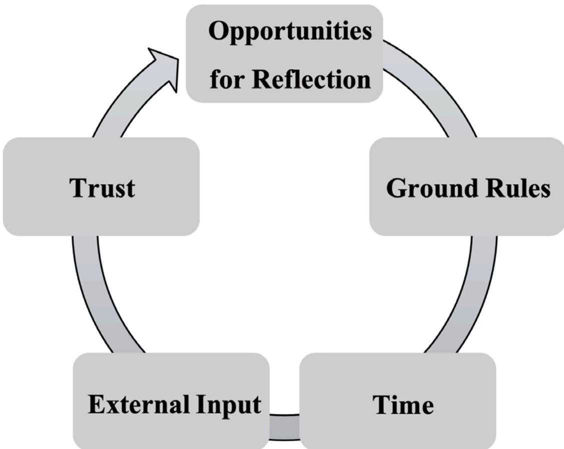
## When And How Do I Reflect?

To answer the "when" question about reflective practice, there is no correct answer as teachers can reflect at any time during the day. That said, a lot depends on how you reflect. As mentioned above, just thinking about your teaching will probably naturally occur at most times as you teach, as well as before you enter the classroom and when you leave the classroom. This may not be deliberate reflection, and it may be in reaction to something that the teacher perceived to have occurred. As mentioned above, we need all the evidence we can get to make informed decisions about what happened, why it happened and what we want to do next.

There are many different models and approaches about how teachers can reflect, too numerous to cover in this article (but see Farrell, 2019 for a comprehensive review of many of them). So, in this *Expositions* article I will outline two different approaches that I have developed over the years. An early model of reflective practice I developed emphasized a practical approach with the idea that practicing TESOL teachers would be better able to "locate themselves within their profession and start to take more responsibility for shaping their practice" (Farrell, 2004, p. 6) rather than relying on publisher produced materials and books that were rampant in the TESOL profession at that time. I saw a need for teachers to be able to break away from relying on these badly produced textbooks along with teacher guides to *tell* them what they should be doing rather than taking responsibility for their own direction while teaching *their* students.

My initial framework was crafted to encourage teachers to look at their own practice with other teachers and decide their own future direction in terms of providing opportunities for their students to learn. This framework (Farrell, 2004) of reflective teaching is composed of five components: (a) a range of opportunities and activities; (b) ground rules; (c) provision for four different times or categories of reflection; (d) external input, and (e) trust. Figure 1 outlines this model.

**Figure 1**
*Farrell Reflective Practice Framework (2004)*




This framework (Farrell, 2004) illustrated above, is explained as follows:

1. *Opportunities*. A range of activities should be provided for teachers to reflect on their work. In this model the activities that were emphasized were group discussions, journal writing and classroom observations. These activities can be carried out alone, in pairs, or as a group. A group of teachers may decide to do one of the activities or a combination of any or all of them.

2. *Ground rules*. In order to avoid groups or individual teachers just drifting off into something other than reflection, this framework suggests a need for a negotiated set of built–in–rules or guidelines that each group or pair should follow in order to keep the drifting to a minimum. The model can be adjusted to individual group needs. Indeed, suggestions three through five are actually ground rules that can be built in to the activities. For example, who will chair the meetings and other such related question? For observations, certain understandings need to be negotiated ahead of time. For example, what are the responsibilities of the observer? Is intervention possible or desirable in the class? Will the class be videotaped, audiotaped, or neither? If you use a video, how will this be analyzed and why? What is to be observed and how? For journal writing, groups/pairs should negotiate the number of frequency of entries and the type of entries. The following list of general questions may help get a writer started: Describe what you do with no judgment? Why do you do it? Should you continue to do it or change it? What do others do? To suggest a set of built–in rules for critical friends while observing is not easy because there must be an element of trust and openness present in order to avoid putting emphasis on the critical while overlooking the friend. The friend can provide another set of eyes that both support and challenge us to get at deeper reflections of our teaching. To encourage this openness, the initial conversations between critical friends (or all conversations) should be taped and analyzed. This analysis can include the use of questions in their relationship, in terms of type, power structures established, focus of observation, and usefulness. In this way critical friends can negotiate what they want to achieve. Of course, all of the above activities and built–in guidelines cannot be accomplished quickly; like all valuable things, they take time. This introduces the next component of the model: time.
3. *Time*. For practicing teachers to be able to reflect on their work, time is a very important consideration. Groups can consider four different views/types of time: *Individual*, *Activity*, *Development, Period of Reflection*

- <u>Individual</u>: A certain level of commitment by individual participants in terms of time availability should be negotiated by the group at the start of the process.
- <u>Activity</u>: Associated with the time each participant has to give the project is the time that should be spent on each activity.
- <u>Development</u>: Another aspect of time that is important for teacher self–

development groups is the time it takes to develop. Analytical reflection takes time and only progresses at a rate which individual teachers are ready to reflect critically.

- Period of reflection. The time frame for the project as a whole is important to consider. How long should a group, a pair, or an individual reflect? Having a fixed period in which to reflect allows the participants to know what period during the semester they can devote wholly to reflection.

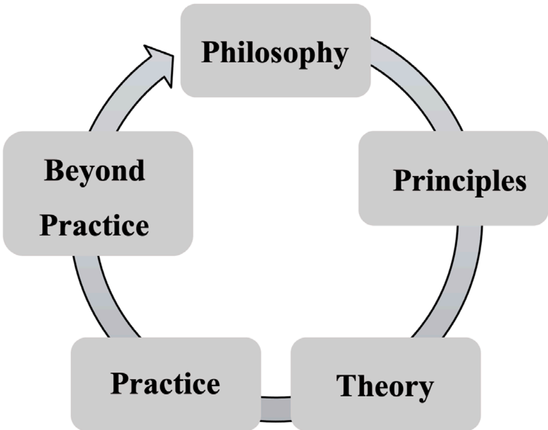
4. *External input*. The previous three suggestions utilize the idea of probing and articulating personal theories, which is at the center of teacher professional self–development. This involves process of constructing and reconstructing real teaching experiences, and reflecting on personal beliefs about teaching. However, at this level, reflection only emphasizes personal experiences but what do these mean in the greater professional community? Thus, external input of some kind is necessary to see what other teachers and groups have done. This external input can come from professional journals, other teachers' observations, and book publications of case studies.
5. *Trust*. The above four components of the model all pose some threat and associated anxiety for practicing teachers. Inevitably, there will be a certain level of anxiety present. Therefore, trust will be a big issue when teachers reflect together so a non–threatening environment should be fostered in the group by the individuals themselves.

The most important aspect of this early framework (Farrell, 2004) is to encourage reflection and to give teachers the opportunity to reflect, and I believe this framework is still relevant today: I have used this framework successfully and very recently with experienced TESOL teachers in a teacher reflection group in Canada (e.g., see Farrell, 2014), and it is still worthwhile for teachers wishing to reflect on their practice and especially with a group of teachers. In fact, the main topics the teachers talked about in order of frequency was their students (46% of the time) and how they had successes with them as well as challenges, the school context (44% of the time) in which they were teaching and mostly negative experiences with the administration and to a much lesser extent, their own teaching methods (10% of the time). I urge you to read this book and compare their experiences to your own in Japan.

In more recent times I began to work on a different framework that focused more on individual teachers reflecting holistically on their practice rather than a group of teachers reflecting together as the early model above focused on. I call this the Framework for Reflecting on Practice (Farrell, 2015). As outlined in Figure 2 below, the framework has five different stages/levels of reflection: *Philosophy; Principles; Theory; Practice; and Beyond Practice*.

**Figure 2**

*Farrell Framework for Reflecting on Practice (2015)*




1. *Philosophy*. This first stage of reflection within the framework examines the "teacher–as–person" and suggests that professional practice, both inside and outside the classroom, is invariably guided by a teacher's basic philosophy and that this philosophy has been developed since birth. Thus, in order to be able to reflect on our basic philosophy, we need to obtain self–knowledge and we can access this by exploring, examining and reflecting on our background – from where we have evolved – such as our heritage, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background, family and personal values that have combined to influence who we are as language teachers. As such, teachers talk or write about their own lives and how they think their past experiences may have shaped the construction and development of their basic philosophy of practice. Reflecting on one's philosophy of practice cannot only help teachers flesh out what has shaped them as human beings and teachers but can also help them move onto the next level of reflection, reflecting on their principles.

2. *Principles*. The second stage/level of the framework, principles, includes reflections on teachers' assumptions, beliefs, and conceptions of teaching and learning. All three are really part of a single system, and thus difficult to separate because they overlap a lot, and, although I treat them separately in the framework, I see them as three points along the same continuum of meaning related to our principles. Teachers' practices and their instructional decisions are often formulated and implemented (for the most part subconsciously) on the basis of their underlying assumptions, beliefs and conceptions because these are the driving force (along with philosophy reflected on at level/stage one) behind many of their classroom actions.
3. *Theory*. Theory explores and examines the different choices a teacher makes about particular skills taught (or they think should be taught) or, in other words, how to put their theories into practice. Influenced by their reflections on their philosophy and principles, teachers can now actively begin to construct their theory of practice. Theory in this stage/level means that teachers consider the type of lessons they want to deliver on a yearly, monthly or daily basis. All language teachers have theories, both "official" theories we learn in teacher education courses and "unofficial" theories we gain with teaching experience. However, not all teachers may be fully aware of these theories, and especially their "unofficial" theories that are sometimes called "theories–in–use." Reflections at this stage/level in the framework include considering all aspects of a teacher's planning and the different activities and methods teachers choose (or may want to choose) as they attempt to put theory into practice.
4. *Practice*. Reflecting on practice begins with an examination of our observable actions while we are teaching as well as our students' reactions (or non–reactions) during our lessons. Of course, such reflections are directly related to and influenced by our reflections of our theory at the previous level and our principles and philosophy. At this stage/level in the framework, teachers can reflect while they are teaching a lesson (reflection–in–action), after they teach a lesson (reflection–on–action) or before they teach a lesson (reflection–for–action). When teachers engage in reflection–in–action they attempt to consciously stand back while they are teaching as they monitor and adjust to various circumstances that are happening within the lesson. When teachers engage in reflection–on–action they are examining what happened in a lesson after the event has taken place and this is a more delayed type

of reflection than the former. When teachers engage in reflection–for–action they are attempting to reflect before anything has taken place and anticipate what may happen and try to account for this before they conduct the lesson.

5. *Beyond Practice*. The final stage/level of the framework entails teachers reflecting beyond practice. This is sometimes called critical reflection and entails exploring and examining the moral, political and social issues that impact a teacher's practice both inside and outside the classroom. Critical reflection moves the teacher beyond practice and links practice more closely to the broader socio–political as well as affective/moral issues that impact practice. Such a critical focus on reflections also includes teachers examining the moral aspect of practice and the moral values and judgments that impact practice.

The framework can be navigated in three different ways: theory–into–(beyond) practice, (beyond practice–into–theory or a single stage application. Thus, it is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive framework. Teachers can take a deductive approach to reflecting on practice by moving from theory–into–practice or from stage/level 1, philosophy through the different stages to stage/level 5, beyond practice. Some may say that pre–service teachers who do not have much classroom experiences, would be best suited to take such an approach because they can first work on their overall philosophical approach to teaching English to speakers of other languages and work their way through the different stages of principles (stage/level 2), theory (stage/level 3) when they reach the practicum stage, they will be well placed then to reflect on their practice (stage/level 4) and eventually move beyond practice (stage/level 5). This theory–driven approach to practice where philosophy and theory have an initial influence on practice is probably a natural sequence of development for novice teachers because they do not have much teaching experience. When their early practices are observed, it is most likely that theory can be detected in their practice; however, over time, and with reflection, it is possible that their everyday practice will begin to inform and even change their philosophy and theory and they may come up with new principles of practice.

Experienced teachers too can also choose to begin their reflections at stage/level 1, philosophy especially if they consider their philosophy as a significant basis of their practice with principles second, theory third and so on through the framework. For experienced teachers some of whose practice can be theory–driven if they have been reading and experimenting with applications of particular theories throughout their teaching careers, most likely describe their work in terms of their overall philosophical approach to teaching English to speakers of other languages and this description probably embeds a lot of their values, beliefs, principles and well as theories behind their practice. When such teachers are observed teaching their lessons, we are likely to see that their approaches, methods and activities often reflect the influence of these theories.

Attached to the "when" and "how" of reflective practice is the time teachers have to reflect. Many teachers are very busy and as such may consider the above approaches too time consuming for them to engage in. I agree to a certain extent that it can be time consuming, but it would be time well spent. I would also suggest that teachers begin at whatever stage they feel comfortable with above (e.g., your philosophy or your principles) when you have the time and work your way around the framework as you see fit. In this way teachers can use the framework as a lens through which they can view their professional (and personal) worlds—what has shaped their professional lives—as they become more aware of their philosophy, principles, theories, practices and how these impact issues inside and beyond practice. I believe that such a holistic approach to reflection produces more integrated second language teachers who have self–awareness and understanding to be able to interpret, shape and reshape their practice throughout their careers. The information that is produced from reflecting during each stage can be compiled into a teaching portfolio and used for collaborative teacher evaluation purposes. In such a manner the teacher is not separated from the act of teaching when reflecting or being evaluated.

## Implementing Reflective Practice in Japan

So far in this paper I have outlined and discussed two major frameworks that language teachers can implement individually or in groups to facilitate their reflections. The first framework I outlined was a broad implementation of reflective practice that most likely serves groups of teachers reflecting together rather than individual teachers reflecting alone. I would recommend a group of three or four teachers come together weekly (or whenever possible) for one semester and consider using that early model when considering the (a) range of opportunities and activities they intend to follow, (b) the specific ground rules the group wants to follow when engaging in reflection for one semester, (c) provision for four different times or categories of reflection (*individual*, *activity*, *development,* and *period of reflection*), (d) what kind of external input they will use (see next sentence), and (e) how they will develop trust in each other throughout the process. In this regard, I urge interested groups of teachers to read a paper I wrote for a short version of how this all works and what the teachers focused on in Farrell (2014a), and/or a longer version that details everything in book form in Farrell (2014b).

When implementing the second framework for reflecting on practice you can read how it was used recently in the case studies outlined in the work of Farrell & Kennedy (2019), Farrell & Avejic (2020), Farrell & Macaplinac (2021), Farrell (2022), and most recently Farrell & Moses (2023). Indeed, in a recent published review of 92 studies on reflective practice in second language education, Sarab and Mardian (2022) highlighted the usefulness and importance of the second framework for reflecting on practice in all global contexts that include Japan when they noted that "one central benefit of Farrell's framework is its specific and holistic nature" (p. 13). They continue: "Besides, another striking feature of the model is that it functions in a reflective–reflexive manner, meaning that the model not only views 'reflection as an analytical process' but emphasises 'the mirroring of practice, and thereby undertaking a self–analysis'" (p. 13). The authors especially recommend the use of the framework in all contexts (such as Japan) because it includes critical reflection that I call beyond practice, or the fifth stage of the framework outlined above. Sarab and Mardian continue:

> It is through critical reflection or beyond practice – the last stage in Farrell's framework – that the benefits of reflection can be applied to social contexts. With such a critical focus on reflection, research can provide insights into how L2 teachers around the globe explore the moral, political, and sociocultural issues that impact their performance inside and outside the classroom. (p. 14)

In this paper I outlined and discussed my approaches to reflective practice that I believe will be useful for teachers wishing to engage in reflection on their work in Japan. I should also point out that I fully recognize that the concept of reflection is certainly not new to Japan with its rich history of Buddhist practices that has existed for centuries (Watanabe, 2016). In her important work on the concept of reflective practice in a Japanese context, it is interesting to note that Watanabe (2016) has pointed out that there is no agreed Japanese translation for the term "reflective practice" which suggests it is still new(ish) in education circles. Watanabe (2017) used the term *kotodama* or "word spirit [for] "putting one's inner thoughts into words" (p. 98) as a reflective communication convention among the Japanese people.

Watanabe included this interesting concept in her study of seven in–service high school teachers of English reflections that show that reflection is highly contextualized. In her study, Watanabe conceptualizes teacher reflection and development as 'expansion' rather than 'change' and she places teachers, who she notes are equipped with different strengths and weaknesses, at the centre or the core of the activity of their own reflection and development. Watanabe notes that rather than shedding their old practices, teachers in Japan she says are encouraged to expand their repertoires of use. Watanabe (2016) continues:

> The 'expansion' model, which places teachers in the centre, also allows teachers more autonomy in taking responsibility for both student learning and their own growth. In the study, reflective practice helped my participants to recognise that they were driving forces in leading the students to learning. Their notion of themselves as teachers also expanded to include a new awareness that they had agency. They acknowledged that the locus of control for their own growth was themselves and expanded their sense of being agents of their own development. (p. 289)

Another interesting approach to the implementation of reflective practice in Japan was a recent study by Chris Harwood and Dennis Koyama (2022) where they implemented reflection within an onboarding process for hiring new faculty at universities as a way of facilitating success in and acclimatization to their new work environments. Specifically, they outlined how they successfully implemented a reflective practice process that included a routine of reflecting *in*, *on* and *for* action. Harwood and Koyama's (2022) four stage framework (pre–class, in–class, post–class and meta reflection) were used to evaluate the efficacy of existing curricular materials to inform adjunct–faculty in an undergraduate English composition program's onboarding and professional development. They cite several benefits of implementing such a system such as more rapid troubleshooting before the lesson occurs in the pre–class stage, a high level of teaching engagement in the in–class stage, and more in–depth discussions among teachers in the post–class stage. In addition, in the meta–stage students' perceptions about materials were included in reflections and of course such inclusions lead to more student reflections on their own learning which should always be included in any reflective practice process. Harwood and Koyama (2022) also include an important aspect of such meta–reflections by their writing up of their study (as did Watanabe, 2016, 2017) leading to its publication where they can share their experiences with others.

I urge readers to investigate both these studies when wishing to engage in reflective practice in Japan as well as the following publications on this interesting yet complex topic of reflective practice in language.

Barnard, R., & Ryan, J. (Eds). (2017) *Reflective practice: Voices from the field*. Routledge.

Barnard and Ryan's (2017) collection contains reflective practice studies of TESOL teachers (preservice and inservice) on topics such as (collaborative) lesson planning, classroom observation, lesson transcripts, post–lesson discussions, journal writing, reflection on action, reflection in action, critical friends, and focus groups. The aim of the book is to explain a range of options for implementing the reflective practice cycle in educational settings in various international contexts. Written by international academics, these studies show how reflection can be interpreted in different cultural contexts.

Mann, S., & Walsh, S. (2017). *Reflective practice in English language teaching*. Routledge.

Mann and Walsh's (2017) book outlines an empirical, data–led approach to reflective practice and uses excellent examples of real data along with reflexive vignettes from a range of contexts in order to help teachers to reflect on their practices. Mann and Walsh also note the importance of dialogue as crucial for reflection as is allows for clarification, questioning and enhanced understanding.

Tajeddin, Z., & Watanabe, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Teacher reflection: Policies, practices, and impacts*. Multilingual Matters.

This edited book has been compiled in honor of Thomas S. C. Farrell, one of the most distinguished scholars in theorizing and researching language teacher reflection. It examines teacher reflection in three main areas: policies, practices, and the impact of teacher reflection on teachers' practices and professional development. The data–driven chapters shed light on concerns and challenges experienced by teachers in diverse international contexts and institutions and discuss the practical implications of their findings across a variety of policy settings. The book addresses aspects of reflective practice including macro and micro policies and constraints, as well as opportunities in the engagement of reflective practice. In addition, it explores teachers' identity, cognition, emotion and motivation, areas which are relevant but often not discussed in the literature on reflective practice (from the publisher's webpage: https://www.multilingual–matters.com/page/detail/Teacher–Reflection/?k=9781788921022)

## Conclusion

Reflective practice as it is outlined in this article is much more than taking a few minutes to think about our teaching. Most teachers do this regularly after a class, or on the way home from school. Reflective practice as it is outlined here is evidence–based because involves teachers' systematically gathering data about their teaching and using this information to make informed decisions about their practice. Reflective practice is more than a method, it is really a way of life. Teachers can engage in reflective practice at any stage of their careers and at any time of the teaching day as they continue to construct their own personal theories of teaching and improve their instructional practice. Teachers who engage in life long reflective practice can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop informed decision–making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching and possibly their personal life as well. I wish all the readers of the *JALT Journal* a happy reflective journey.

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