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# **U**nderstanding Reflective Teaching

Thomas Farrell

*Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.*

*Oscar Wilde, Lady Windermere's Fan, Act 111*

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## INTRODUCTION

One day, a young girl was watching her mother cooking a roast of beef. Just as the mother was going to put the roast in the pot, she cut a slice off the end and then she put it in the pot. The ever observant daughter asked her mother why she had done that and the mother said her grandmother had always done it. Later that same afternoon, the mother was curious so she called her mother and asked her the same question. Her mother, the child's grandmother, said that in her day, the pots were too small for the usual size roast so she had to cut it to fit the pot (Farrell 1998).

Routine in teaching without any reflection can lead to this type of 'cutting the slice off the roast' and can lead to burnout on the job. Teachers of English, both preservice and experienced, have to be careful of the 'busy teacher syndrome' whereby they come into the classroom and follow the book because they are too busy to reflect on what they are doing. Pre-service teachers follow the book because they have little experience teaching; however experienced teachers have their years of teaching experience and many are already firmly set in their own ways of teaching. Nevertheless, as Fanselow (1988) has pointed out, these experienced teachers are often unaware of their teaching routines and beliefs; consequently, they may not actually do what they think they do in the classroom.

This article briefly outlines some approaches in reflective teaching movement in general, and as it applies to the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in particular. The article starts with a discussion of reflective teaching, including the different

definitions of reflective teaching and critical reflective teaching. Next, the article discusses different levels of reflection, criticisms of reflective teaching and then outlines some benefits of reflection in teaching. Implications of the reflective teacher movement for practicing teachers of English are also highlighted.

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## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

During the 1980s, the concept of reflection and reflective teaching grew popular with the call for professionalism of teaching and teacher education. This idea of reflection in teaching basically referred to teachers learning to subject their own beliefs of teaching and learning to a critical analysis and with this reflective stance, thus take more responsibility for their actions (Korthagen 1993).

The concept of reflective practice also arose out of the need to counteract burnout in the teaching profession. 'Burned out' practitioners find teaching repetitive and routine (Munby & Russell 1989). Consequently, they neglect important opportunities to think about what they are doing. As Munby & Russell (1989: 61) say, "If he [sic] learns, as often happens, to be selectively inattentive to phenomena that do not fit the categories of his knowing-in-action, then he may suffer from boredom or 'burnout' and affect his clients with the consequences of his narrowness and rigidity".

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## DEFINITIONS OF REFLECTION AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

In a review of the literature on reflective teaching, it is possible to find terms that vary in meaning and there is much variance in the definition of any single term. In TESOL, reflective teaching is defined by Pennington (1992: 47) as "deliberating on experience, and that of mirroring experience" and she also extended this idea to reflective learning. Pennington (1992) further proposes a reflective/developmental orientation "as a means for (i) improving classroom processes and outcomes, and (ii) developing confident, self-motivated teachers and learners" (p. 51). The focus here is on analysis, feedback, and adaptation as an ongoing and recursive cycle in the classroom.

In a more recent article, Pennington (1995) says that teacher change and development require an awareness of a need to change. She defined teacher development as "a metastable system of context-interactive

change involving a continual cycle of innovative behaviour and adjustment to circumstances" (p 706).

Richards (1990) sees reflection as a key component of teacher development. He says that self-inquiry and critical thinking can "help teachers move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition, or routine, to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking" (p 5). Richards says that reflection or:

*critical reflection refers to an activity or process in which experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a border purpose. It is a response to a past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action.*

Farrell 1995: 95

Outside TESOL, the terms on reflection become less clear in that reflection or reflective teaching can be defined as detailed as is politically feasible. The definitions move from just looking at the behavioral aspects of teaching to the beliefs and knowledge these acts of teaching are based on, to the deeper social meaning the act of teaching has on the community. However, not all scholars agree on these definitions. For example, Schulman (1987: 19) says, "Reflection is what a teacher does when he/she looks back at the teaching and learning that has occurred and reconstructs, reenacts and/or recaptures the events, emotions, and the accomplishments. It is that set of processes through which a professional learns from experience". However, Munby & Russell (1989) suggest that Schulman is working within a technical rationality as a model of knowledge production and use in that Schulman's account focuses on the cognitive processes of teaching that depend on retrospection, but leave out Schon's (1987) concept of attending to the non-logical and dialectic thinking that accompanies action and transforms it. This reflection-in-action is not captured in Schulman's model. Similarly, Zeichner & Liston (1987) focus on reflection-on-action but reflection-in-action is missing. So, reflection-on-action would come to mean some kind of metacognitive action, while reflection-in-action is the ability to frame problems based on past experiences, a type of conversation that takes place between the practitioner and an uncertain situation.

We can see that there is a big difference between reflective action and routine action, and according to Zeichner & Liston (1987: 24) reflective action “entails the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge. Routine action is guided primarily by tradition, external authority and circumstance”.

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## CRITICAL REFLECTION

If the review of the literature of reflective teaching revealed different definitions of the concept, the same is true for definitions of critical reflection. Outside TESOL, Hatton & Smith (1995: 35) point out that the term critical reflection “like reflection, appears to be used loosely, some taking it to mean more than constructive self-criticism of one’s actions with a view to improvement”.

Hatton & Smith (1995: 35), however, point out that the concept of critical reflection “implies the acceptance of a particular ideology”. This view of critical reflection in teaching also calls for considerations of moral and ethical problems (VanManen 1977), and it also involves “making judgments about whether professional activity is equitable, just, and respectful of persons or not” (Hatton & Smith 1995: 35). Therefore, the wider socio-historical and politico-cultural contexts can also be included in critical reflection (Zeichner & Liston 1987; Schon 1983, 1987).

In TESOL too, the term critical reflection has been used loosely. Richards (1990) does not distinguish between reflection and critical reflection. He also does not take the broader aspect of society into consideration when defining reflective practice. Pennington (1995: 706) defines critical reflection as “the process of information gained through innovation in relation to the teacher’s existing schema for teaching”. Again, the broader aspect of society does not play a significant role in her definition of critical reflection.

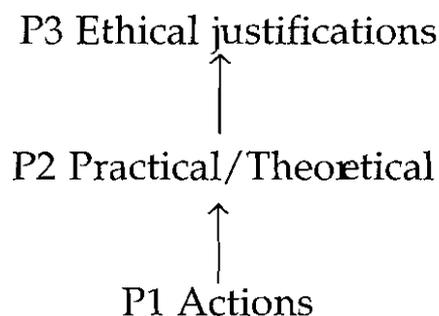
However, Bartlett (1990) sees a need to include the broader society in any definition of critical reflection. He says that in order for teachers to become critically reflective, they have to “transcend the technicalities of teaching and think beyond the need to improve our instructional techniques” (p 204). He sees critical reflection as “locating teaching in its broader social and cultural context” (p 204). Regardless of which definitions of reflection and critical reflection, one adheres to this author agrees with Oberg & Blades (1990: 179) when they say:

*Reflection is less a process than a way of being, a way of orienting toward professional practice and toward life. Being reflective is becoming responsive to self, responsible to self as well as others...it's potential lies not in the theory it allows us to develop (about practice or reflection) but the evolution of ourselves as teacher. It's focus is life; we continually return to our place of origin, but it is not the place we left.*

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## LEVELS OF REFLECTION

Apart from practitioners finding a definition of reflective practice that best suits their needs, it is important to note that there are different levels of reflection. For example, Day (1993), sees reflective practice split into three hierarchial levels, as outlined in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Hierarchial Levels of Reflection (Adapted from Day 1993)

Figure 1 shows that planning is at the level of action P1, the reasons for these actions are at P2, and justification for the work itself is at the level of P3. Day (1993) says that most teachers find themselves planning and acting (constructing practice) at level P1 and less on observation and reflection (deconstructing practice) at levels P2 and P3. Change is mainly at the P1 action level.

For Griffiths & Tann (1991), levels of reflection depends on the reflective practitioner's desire to uncover his/her own personal theories and make them explicit, but they say this is very difficult to accomplish. Griffiths & Tann (1991: 100), claim reflective teaching requires that public theories be translated into personal ones and vice versa unless teachers are going to allow themselves to be turned into "low level operators, content with carrying out their tasks more and more efficiently, while remaining blind to large issues of the underlying purposes and results of schooling".

Much of the review of the literature presented so far assumes a positive relationship between reflective teaching and teacher effectiveness. However, education has a long but disappointing history of attempts to relate personality variables, styles, or qualities in teachers to student learning outcomes. Consequently, reflection and reflective practice has not escaped from its share of criticism. For example, Copeland *et al.* (1993: 348) pose a central question concerning reflective practice, "How would you recognize a reflective practitioner if you saw one?". So the reflections movement also came in for its fair share of criticism.

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## CRITICISMS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

A number of scholars have urged caution as to the applicability of reflective practice in education. Schon (1987) has said that for reflective teaching to happen, opportunities must be created for teachers to use conscious reflection as a means of understanding the relationship between their own thoughts and actions. However, as Day (1993: 90) admits, "We do not know how reflection leads to change. We do not know much about how teacher's make decisions based upon reflection or how to judge the quality of the decisions in action".

Jackson (1968) wondered pessimistically about the potential for success of efforts at developing reflective teachers. He says, "Even if they did possess the inclinations and skills for reflection...they might receive greater applause from intellectuals, but it is doubtful that they would perform with greater efficiency in the classroom".

Another critic of reflective practice in teaching is Hoover (1994: 83) who cautioned that, "The promising acclamation about reflection has yielded little research qualitatively or quantitatively". He does not however, rule out reflection in teaching but says reflection is a learned activity; "a carefully planned set of experiences that foster a sensitivity to ways of looking at and talking about previously unarticulated beliefs concerning teaching" (p 84). He also says that this self-analysis requires time and opportunity.

Goodson (1994) points out that the concept of teacher as researcher has some problems — (i) it frees the researchers in the university from clear responsibility from complementing and sustaining the teacher as researcher; (ii) the teacher as a researcher focuses mainly on practice; the New Right [in the USA] is seeking to turn the teacher's practice into

that of a technician which turns teaching into a routinized and trivialized delivery of predesigned packages.

Most of the important unresolved issues on reflective practice were also raised by Hatton & Smith (1994: 34-36). They ask four key questions pertaining to reflective teaching:

- Is reflection limited to thought process about action, or more bound up in the action itself?
- Is reflection immediate and short term, or more extended and systematic? What time frame is most suitable for reflective practice?
- Is reflection problem-centered, finding solutions to real classroom problems, or not? Should solving problems be an inherent characteristic of reflection?
- How 'critical' does one get when reflecting? Should the one reflecting take into account the wider political, cultural, and historic beliefs and values in finding solutions to problems?

Hatton & Smith (1995: 36) also see a number of "barriers which hinder the achievement of reflective approaches":

- Reflection is not generally associated with working as a teacher; it is seen as a more academic exercise.
- Teachers need time and opportunity for development.
- Exposing oneself in a group of strangers can lead to vulnerability.
- The ideology of reflection is quite different than that of traditional approaches to teacher education.

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Regardless of the validity of the above criticisms of reflective teaching, most teacher educators and teachers themselves are in favour of a reflective approach to teaching. Recently in Singapore, the Director-General of Education, Mr Wee Heng Tin, in an open letter to all school principals and teachers in Singapore said that teachers "must continually upgrade their skills through peer-mentoring, reflective

practice and other means... If the greatest gift we can offer each of our students is the quest for continuous learning and continuous improvement, we need ourselves to be exemplary practitioners." He also said that school facilities are not as important as "a thinking environment brought to life with 'thinking teachers' and 'thinking principles'."

A reflective approach to everyday teaching is not easy for the busy teacher to put into practice as the critics to this approach point out — some teachers may not be interested or may not be willing to discuss their ideas about teaching in public in a crowded staff room. But many teachers are already reflecting on their everyday classes by simply having such thoughts as "That was a good/bad class today"; "My students related well/badly to that activity. I must modify it for the next class." So, teachers are already defining their own needs in private. It would be better for all teachers concerned if they were able to share these thoughts with others for their own professional development. Ways of sharing could include the following:

- Get a group of teachers together to talk about teaching. This can start within the school setting itself when two or more teachers expand the usual staff room chat about their classes to include a more formal analysis of their teaching and the dilemmas they face. They could share information on how they handle discipline, correct papers, teach a particular course and many other topics. In this way they could experiment and see what works for each other and why. It is also a way of letting off steam. It is important that teachers feel they are not alone and that they have the support of their fellow professionals. Teaching is not easy in today's world, so any form of comfort in the form of a group of teachers talking together in a non-threatening environment can help ease the burden of the job.
- Collect data from actual classroom teaching situations and sharing this data with the group for discussion by analyzing, evaluating and interpreting it in light of their unique context. This is a more formal analysis of teaching and requires knowledge of ways to collect classroom data. This classroom data, if included in the group discussions proposed above, would focus the topic of conversation in a more professional manner. One could have a colleague come and observe the class, or a teacher can do self-observation (see below). The colleague can act as a 'critical friend' in that he/she would be a mirror in describing what had actually happened in

the class and also probe for the reasons for such approaches to teaching. In this way, the classroom teacher can articulate his/her personal beliefs about teaching to another person, but more importantly, to herself/himself.

- Self-observe with audio and/or video cameras and be observed by group members for group discussions. This may be the first step for a teacher to reflect on his/her teaching as making public a private event (the classroom) can unnerve even the most experienced teachers. Teachers may feel that they must become comfortable with listening to their own voices on tape and watching themselves teach on video before sharing this with others. Actually, the first time a teacher hears himself/herself in tape or watches himself/herself on video can be quite an experience in that the teacher usually focuses on behavioural aspects of his/her teaching rather than the student learning.
- Keep a journal for self-reflection and comments by group members. This can be a personal journal or for sharing with a group (as discussed above). In this way, teachers can write to each other (via email) and respond without actually meeting if time does not permit. Teachers can write about all aspects of their work.
- Take on action research projects such as the teacher's pattern of questioning behaviour. This would involve work on one project by a group or an individual that has been causing a dilemma for the individual or group. The overall design of the research should include the following:
  - \* Identify the problem;
  - \* Identify possible causes for the problem;
  - \* Generate possible solutions;
  - \* Implement these solutions and evaluate the effectiveness of these solutions in the light of what went before; and
  - \* Make a decision about future action.

Remember action research involves taking some form of action. Go to conferences, workshops, in-service courses and subscribing to professional journals. This can be beneficial for many reasons including

learning new approaches, but not least, taking a break from the old routine to reflect aspects of teaching — the whole point of reflection.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that reflective teaching can benefit teachers; I see four main ways:

- Reflective teaching helps free the teacher from impulse, and routine behaviour.
- Reflective teaching allows teachers to act in a deliberate, intentional manner and avoid the ‘I don’t know what I will do today’ syndrome.
- Reflective teaching distinguishes teachers as educated human beings since it is one of the signs of intelligent action.
- As teachers gain experience in a community of professional educators, they feel the need to grow beyond the initial stages of survival in the classroom to reconstructing their own particular theory from their practice. Dewey (1933: 87) said that growth comes from a “reconstruction of experience” (p. 87), so by reflecting on our own experiences, we can reconstruct our own educational perspective. In other words, we are always unravelling our approach to teaching and learning. I agree with Lange (1990) who sees an intimate relationship between teacher reflection and teacher development. He says:

*The reflective process allows developing teachers latitude to experiment within a framework of growing knowledge and experience. It gives them the opportunity to examine their relations with students, their values, their abilities, and their successes and failures in a realistic context. It begins the developing teacher’s path toward becoming an “expert teacher”.*

*Lange 1990: 249-250*

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