

# 10 Qs TEN QUESTIONS



for  
Thomas  
Farrell

In this issue's 10 Questions we are delighted to welcome Professor Thomas Farrell, whose name has become synonymous with reflective practice (RP) in the TESOL field. Author of numerous articles and books, including *Research on Reflective Practice in TESOL* (Routledge, 2018), *Reflecting on Critical Incidents in Language Education* (with Laura Baeher, Bloomsbury, 2017) and *From Trainee to Teacher: Reflective Practice for Novice Teachers* (Equinox, 2016), and an ESL teacher himself for many years, Farrell is well known for championing the perspective of practising teachers, and encouraging both teachers and teacher educators to explore and challenge their beliefs and approaches. In this interview, he discusses what RP is, how systemic beliefs in institutions and teacher training programs can stifle development, and ways forward for teacher education. There's lots of food for thought here – we hope you enjoy it!

### **1. You started your career as a TESOL teacher – can you tell us what drew you to this field?**

Well, not really as I was a qualified high school teacher in Ireland but left after training to travel the world. When I was travelling I discovered teaching English in Korea but there was no TESOL at that time. In fact, I was a founding member of Korea TESOL in 1979 because I was in the same room as 4 people who were organising it and they asked me. I loved teaching English at that time because the students were so interesting and I was fascinated with how to teach English. I had no idea really so I went back to my teacher training and developed my own approaches given the books were really bad and I realised quickly that this was a new field that was emerging. So I like to think as a young Irish lad, I grew up with the field!

### **2. How did you move from teacher to researcher? Do you have any advice for teachers who are interested in an academic career path?**

This is a big jump from the previous question as I spent 10 solid years teaching and as you can see, I was learning on the job before I completed my MA to get a more solid grounding in this emerging field. That was my first foray into academics and it gave me an idea on what research was all about as I completed a full thesis (which nearly broke my heart!) and all that entails. I still was not ready for the academic path so I did both – teacher and teacher of teachers in some MA programs at night to get my own feel. Then I completed a PhD, which was the real entry. I loved the research aspect because I am a teacher-scholar still as one leads to the other and vice versa. I did not do any of these degrees to get the letter, however, as I was only interested in the process. I think a classroom is a centre of inquiry and not only a place for students to learn, but also a place for teachers to learn. Thus teachers are all researchers regardless and it depends how much and how far you want to formalise it.

### **3. Your name is tied to the idea of reflective practice for language teachers – can you define it, and why you feel it is such a significant area?**

I defined reflective practice in a recent book as ‘a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom’ (Farrell, 2015). This means that teachers systematically collect information about their practice and use that information to make informed decisions. The main idea is that teachers take back the classroom and become generators of their own knowledge (much like I had to do in the early years as we had no internet or library, etc.) rather than consumers of the knowledge of so-called experts. Surely this is significant as teachers can learn from their reflections and discontinue practices not in the best interests of their students.

#### **4. You mentioned above the importance of ‘engaging in dialogue with others’ as part of the reflective process. Does this mean that activities like journaling, on their own, will not be sufficient?**

Yes, I did say that dialogue is very important and one reason I said this is that my most recent research (Farrell, 2018) – a review and appraisal of 168 articles in peer-academic journals on the practices that encourage TESOL teachers to reflect – clearly showed that the majority of the studies used some form of discussion as a tool for reflection. But teachers can also use journal writing for self-reflection or collaborative reflection as well. The main idea I would suggest is that reflection can be tailored to individual or group specifications but it is always good to use different tools as different lenses to explore issues in our teaching. I prefer writing myself but that is the nature of my job – I journal a lot as my reflections on my practice and much of this ends up in journals or books. The great American educator John Dewey pointed out a long time ago that reflection is best carried out with others, so it is a social activity as well, and dialogue can best promote this activity. Also, a group can engage in journaling together to augment such ‘discussions’. Teachers can try out different tools and decide for themselves what tools best further their own reflections.

#### **5. In some pre-service courses, perhaps due to time constraints or the prioritisation of other areas, the opportunity for reflection on teaching practice often seems under-exploited by both teachers and their teacher educators. Do you have any advice for successfully planting the seed of reflective practice?**

One of the problems with institutionally required reflection in these programs is that nobody defines what they mean by reflection. So many pre-service teachers just want to know what the instructor wants and give that as reflection to get grades. This is often compounded by the fact that many teacher educators do not engage in reflection themselves, yet they make their students reflect. When they say reflect, what does this mean? Often it means giving teachers prescribed checklists of what to look for rather than allowing them, or teaching them, to look at and for what they see. In other words, teacher educators must avoid reducing reflection practice to recipe-following checklists that reflect their biases and consider their pre-service teachers’ personal histories, their beliefs and theories, as well as their expectations – and that all these may differ from those of the teacher educator. In addition, teacher educators should set the example and engage in reflection themselves so that their students can learn from them and their experiences.

## **6. Some experienced teachers and teacher educators may not see reflective practice as something that applies to them. What argument would you make here?**

I think I introduced some of my ideas about this question above but I would say that reflective practice is even more important for so-called experienced teachers because experience means nothing unless it is reflected upon – this is the essence of engaging in reflective practice. If they don't reflect then they may be considered 'experienced non-experts'. Reflection is the hallmark of the expert teacher as my own research has discovered and because experienced teachers who have followed routine (relatively unaware of this) can plateau easily and lose heart as a teacher but all the time not knowing why this is occurring. Again my own work with experienced and wonderful teachers has shown that teachers can burnout or as one said to me, 'I have gone a little stale.' Engaging in reflective practice can re-energise their whole world, if they consider their classroom to be a centre of inquiry where they can continue their own lifelong learning.

## **7. Teacher trainers or managers are often in the awkward position of observing teachers and then needing to provide feedback that is both developmental and evaluative. Do you have any advice for dealing with this?**

Well, I am not a big fan of these as you call them 'awkward' observations of teachers – I call them a 'walk through' or worse 'drive-by shootings' – because it only gives an outsider a snapshot of what they think is happening in the class/lesson. This type of assessment rarely produces lasting effects and even leads to resentment because they are so judgmental: teachers resent supervisors evaluating their teaching usually armed with a checklist of predetermined aspects of what they consider good teaching. On the other hand, I know that some supervisors feel a burden with evaluating teaching because of the need to provide feedback as you correctly point out in your question. However, I believe that if both teachers and supervisors adopt a collaborative approach to teacher evaluation through reflective practice the burden is shared by both. As I alluded to above, reflective practice generally means that language teachers subject their philosophy, beliefs, theories and practices to a critical analysis so that they can take more responsibility for their actions. Recently I developed a *Framework for Reflecting on Practice* that has 5 stages: *philosophy, principles, theory, practice* and *beyond practice*. I believe that if teacher assessment includes teachers reflecting on all five stages particularly practice (video of the teacher teaching with the teacher analysis of what he/she was trying to teach and how it went), they can put the contents in a teacher portfolio so that both supervisor and teacher can discuss these for the purposes of teacher evaluation and professional development. This type of teacher assessment through reflective practice empowers teachers with autonomy and opportunity to

look what *they* think is important in teaching. It also motivates teachers to self-assess their performances while providing more opportunity for professional development. In addition it not only enhances supervisor/administration and teacher collaborations and discussions, it also creates a school culture of reflection.

**8. Teachers will often teach the way they themselves were taught at school, in spite of being aware of other techniques or approaches that they may prefer on an intellectual level. How do you explain this and how can it be addressed?**

Yes, we all have experiences as students at all grade levels and university. This 'apprenticeship of observation' is a very powerful filter all teachers tend to use while they are in training – but they don't realise they are unless they articulate these prior experiences. If they don't articulate

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these tacitly held beliefs, developed while observing their teachers and building up images of what they think is 'good' and 'bad' teaching, they will filter whatever new ideas, activities, theories they are presented with through these, confirming what they already hold to be true, and denying any that go against their prior beliefs. Teacher education and development programs must first engage their participants and see where they are at and where they have developed their beliefs before they attempt to give them new ideas. Thus teachers must become reflective practitioners so they can articulate their philosophy, their principles, their theories and practice as well as reflect beyond practice as to their morals and values with the context they are teaching in. When we know what we do now and why, then we can consider if these beliefs and practices are still relevant for us in light of any new information we are presented with.

**9. Sometimes teachers are resistant to unfamiliar teaching approaches and insist they won't work in their context/classroom. When they do try them, and it doesn't work due to poor design/understanding, this then acts as confirmation bias. How can we encourage a mindset of experimentation whilst also recognising the complex sociocultural backdrop we all work within?**

I think I addressed this question above but I will add that I don't believe in 'dog-and-pony' shows where so-called experts come in to teach teachers 'new' ways of teaching reading, writing or whatever because the teachers will not implement most of this or forget it the next day. One reason for this is that you cannot change something if you

don't know what that something is in the first place. Hence reflective practice is very important.

**10. Do you think current teacher training needs to evolve, and in what way(s)?**

Yes I do, because there is still a gap between the theory-informed programs learner teachers must take as part of their training, and the reality of what actually happens in real classrooms in the school they find themselves teaching, where they must conform to existing practices if they want to survive. What is really required is a balanced integration of theory and practice in teacher education courses because teachers are more than just reactive practitioners to the immediacy of the classroom (practice) without sufficient rationale of what lies behind such reactions and methods (theory). However, before we as a profession can move to programs that have such a balanced integration of theory and practice, teacher educators must be aware that a gap between theory and practice exists in their teacher education programs. In order to 'notice' that such a gap exists teacher educators must become reflective practitioners themselves because such noticing means they recognise that the content of their teacher education programs are not really convergent with their own beliefs and that they need to do something about it. See, I am back again to the importance of reflective practice for teachers and teacher educators.

**REFERENCES**

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**Thomas Farrell** is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Brock University, Canada.

[tfarrell@brocku.ca](mailto:tfarrell@brocku.ca)

[www.reflectiveinquiry.ca](http://www.reflectiveinquiry.ca)