

Contemplative Practice: From *Letting Go* To *Letting Come*

By Thomas S.C. Farrell

In my first column for TEC, I wrote about the importance of reflecting on self-knowledge for language teachers, and I mentioned that I would outline various ways teachers can get to know themselves professionally and personally so that they can understand the “self as teacher.” This is an important aspect of reflective practice that seems to be missing in the latest moves in TESOL to encourage teachers to engage in research, cognition, or action research projects. While all of these moves are very important parts of teacher reflection, they focus on the behavioral aspects of teaching in the classroom and seem to be divorced from the main person responsible for these actions: the teacher.

Recent focus on teacher cognition studies, language teacher research engagement, and action research can all be summarized as research ON teachers, BY academics, FOR academics. This focus should be changed to research WITH teachers, BY teachers, FOR teachers.

In addition, calls for teachers to engage in research, action research, or cognition awareness all seem to be for the benefit of academics and not the teachers who are undergoing the study. In fact, the recent focus on teacher cognition studies, language teacher research engagement, and action research can all be summarized as research ON teachers, BY academics, FOR academics.

This focus should be changed to research *WITH* teachers, *BY* teachers, *FOR* teachers. In other words, we should be more focused on looking at what language teachers think about what they do, which is the core of reflective practice. In this column, I will outline the various ways teachers can get to know themselves (for more details, see Farrell, 2015).

Contemplative Practice

In order to gain more self-knowledge, I combined the concepts of contemplation, where teachers can reflect on the self (more as a prerequisite to more systematic reflections on practice), and reflection, where teachers engage in more systematic reflections on practice (which will be the focus of future columns). In order to “see” and gain self-knowledge, Anthony De Mello (1992; cited in Farrell, 2015) urged people to just observe and not interfere with whatever may appear:

Watch everything inside of you and outside, and when there is something happening to you, to see it as if it were happening to someone else, with no comment, no judgment, no attitude, no interference, no attempt to change, only to understand. (p. 25)

This is a powerful meditation to try because it means not trying. I realize this may sound contradictory, but by not trying to interfere with what is happening around and in us, we reduce the power of the influence. Try this meditation and see what you discover as you contemplate your inner world. Conduct this meditation as you teach, and you will become more aware of what is happening in your mind as you teach. Just “listen” to your mind as you teach. When you begin to listen to yourself as you teach, you may feel a sense of calmness of the mind because we are beginning to reach higher levels of awareness of our inner world, which will ultimately help

us better understand our outer teaching world.

However, in order to enter such a contemplative state, you must “let go” of your desire to control what you see and just let it happen. Trust yourself as you are most likely doing a good job as a teacher, but have never



taken the time before to look at yourself as you teach. In other words, we must let whatever will happen in our contemplations happen without any interference by anything. We just observe ourselves and allow whatever thoughts appear to enter our state of consciousness. The ultimate aim of letting go in such a contemplative state is to become more *mindful* of who we are as humans when we teach. Contemplation can help us reach this state of *mindfulness*, where we can experience an enhanced awareness of our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and perceptions. I will talk in more detail about *mindfulness* in my next column.

Conclusion

In TESOL, we must be careful of encouraging teacher research, action research, and teacher cognition research solely as a one-dimensional, intellectual exercise, while overlooking the inner life of teachers, where such reflections are able to not only lead to awareness of teaching practices, but also to increased levels of self-awareness. We must remember that teachers are whole

persons and teaching is multidimensional (including the moral, ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic). In order to tap into the whole person as a teacher and the multidimensional aspects of teaching, I have suggested in this article that teachers can engage in contemplative practice, a precursor to more systematic and evidence-based reflective

practice, because it can help teachers become more aware of themselves as human beings first. This is because contemplative practice places individuals at the center of the contemplative process, without trying to take any control or intervening with the contemplations so that we can become more aware of our surroundings in a more mindful way. Thus, engaging in contemplative practice means being able to consciously observe the self in the present moment simply by paying quiet attention to the “here and now,” without any intervention (“letting go”) so that we can become more aware of who we are as human beings (“letting come”). We can thus move from “letting go” to “letting come.” Try it!

Reference

Farrell, T.S.C. (2015). *Promoting teacher reflection in second language education: A framework for TESOL professionals*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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