

It's Not Who You Are! It's How You Teach! Critical Competencies Associated with Effective Teaching

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Abstract

Recently a dichotomy has developed in the field of TESOL between native English speaker teachers (NESTs) and non-native English speaker teachers (NNESTs) with some in each camp promoting one over the other, but this only separates rather than unifies our profession. In this article I suggest that it is not in anybody's interests to continue with this dichotomy if we are to be recognized as a profession within the wider academic community and that we should be debating critical competencies related to effective teaching instead, regardless of if one is a NEST or NNEST. In this paper, I point out that it is not who you are in terms of your ethnicity, culture or race as a TESOL teacher, but what you know in terms of your effectiveness as a teacher regardless of your background.

Keywords

NESTs, NNESTs, Reflective practice, effective teaching

Introduction

Recently a lot of attention in the field of teaching English as a second language (TESOL) has been focused on the differences between a native speaker teacher of English (NEST) and a non-native speaker teacher of English (NNEST). Some administrators and teachers consider that NESTs are better teachers (without any evidence) while others consider NNESTs are better teachers (again without any evidence). As a result, a dichotomy has developed in the field of TESOL between NESTs and NNESTs with some in each camp promoting one over the other, but this only separates rather than unifies our profession.

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In this article, I suggest that it is not in anybody's interests to continue with this dichotomy if we are to be recognized as a profession within the wider academic community and that we should be debating critical competencies related to effective teaching instead regardless of if one is a NEST or NNEST. As such, I suggest that it is not *who* you are in terms of your ethnicity, culture or race as a TESOL teacher, but what you know in terms of your effectiveness as a teacher regardless of your background.

Language Teachers

Apparently there are two main types of language teachers in TESOL: native speaker teachers of English (or NESTs) and non-native speaker teachers of English (or NNESTS). NESTs are those individuals who were raised speaking English as their first language (L1) and grew up in English speaking communities. They supposedly speak the language fluently, apparently have a 'feel' for its nuances and are comfortable in using its idiomatic expressions, which of course differ in different English speaking contexts (e.g. US, UK, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand). In most contexts NESTs are assumed by both students and administrators to be best able to provide (but I must also point out not necessarily able to 'teach') the target model for language learning and teaching. As Reis has recently noted: 'Native English speakers are the preferred teachers because they are perceived to speak "unaccented" English...and thus they make better ESL or EFL teachers than Non-Native English speakers' (2011: 140). In other words the only 'qualification' these administrators and students recognize is their ability to speak English (and possibly entertain the class).

In contrast, apparently NNESTS are said to be bilingual or multilingual language teachers, who speak English as their second language and teach English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) in either their own home countries where they share the same mother-tongue (L1) of their students, or in English speaking countries (e.g. US, Canada, UK) where they have a diverse student makeup with many different first languages in their classes. However, there are negative perceptions held by various stakeholders (e.g. administrators, students) as to the 'quality' of NNESTS over NESTs, mainly because of their status as so-called non-native speakers of English. Unfortunately, this discrimination is to be found in many job advertisements with job specifications written boldly as 'only native speaker teachers should apply' (see Mahboob and Gordon, 2013 for more on this). Indeed, Reis (2011) has noted that this inappropriate labeling of language teachers by administrators as "natives" and "non-natives" not only adversely affects not only the careers of many qualified NNESTS, but also the TESOL profession as a whole, as many times 'teachers' seem to get hired solely on the basis of their native speaker status.

While I recognize that some 'qualified' TESOL teachers who apply for particular jobs feel or are discriminated against because of their perceived L1 and/or skin color (Mahboob and Gordon, 2013) I suggest that this is an issue for TESOL/IATEFL as a governing body (such as is the case within the medical field or any other profession) to deal with and for affiliate organizations within particular countries to challenge. No doubt much of the discrimination and racism within TESOL (Edge, 2011) also arises from clients (students and their parents) who think they need a so-called native speaker to be their teacher, even though some of these native speakers may not be *qualified* by a

recognized certifying granting body. In fact, when considering terminology these people should be called ‘conversation partners’ and rather than advertising for ‘Native-speaker teachers’ schools should advertise for ‘conversation partners’ for their students.

Thus, I suggest that it is time to stop this harmful NEST/NNEST dichotomy and indeed using the nonsensical terms of NEST and NNEST and to begin talking about effective teachers regardless of their first language or place of origin. I suggest that the terms Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) in themselves are polarizing and self-defeating and contribute to the perception that there is a division in status and teaching effectiveness between teaching professionals in the ELT field. So it is now time that we as a profession began to talk about critical competencies of *effective teachers* and *effective teaching* regardless of that teacher’s background. In other words, it is not who you are in terms of your background, but what you know that makes you a ‘qualified’ TESOL teacher.

Effective Teaching

What is ‘effective teaching’ is the obvious starting point; however, because the concept of ‘effective teaching’ is multidimensional, it is difficult to define. In addition, there have been different approaches to researching the concept of what makes a teacher effective from looking at it in terms of the relationship of teachers’ behavior and student learning or how teachers help facilitate student learning to comparing novice and expert teacher behaviors. In terms of learning outcomes or how teachers help facilitate student learning, some researchers have suggested that effective teachers should stimulate active and creative learning as well as inspire a curiosity for future learning (Muijs and Reynolds, 2001; Muijs, 2006). In addition, many studies have proposed that effective teachers possess particular characteristics and knowledge such as superior subject matter knowledge, good classroom management skills, good instructional skills and many more diverse behaviors too long to list in this article (Muijs and Reynolds, 2001). Other approaches to research on teacher effectiveness involved comparisons of novice and expert behavior with various different criteria used to identify ‘expert teachers’ such as the number of years of teaching experience, recommendation from peers, students and administrators, and/or student achievement scores (Berliner, 2004; Turner-Bisset, 2001).

Within second language teaching, Richards has pointed out that ‘the nature of what we mean by effectiveness in teaching is not always easy to define because conceptions of good teaching differ from culture to culture’ (2010: 102). Indeed, if you ask ten language teachers or teacher educators to define effective teaching, you are likely to get ten different answers, so the concept of an effective teacher is really an elusive one. As Richards (2014) has noted: ‘The way a person teaches, and his or her view of what good teaching is, will, therefore, reflect his or her cultural background and personal history, the context in which he or she is working and the kind of students in his or her class’ (2014: 5). To date, there are no precise benchmarks of what constitutes effective second language teaching in all settings, nor are there agreed effective strategies that teachers should implement in their classes (not to mention what exactly effective teachers would look like in a classroom).

How does this translate into learning to teach? Richards has noted that learning to teach English means 'mastering a core set of basic skills, or competencies, that teachers make regular use of in the classroom' (2014: 8). Then, as teachers become more experienced, they become more flexible and can improvise more as they continue to build up and automate their repertoire of teaching routines and strategies. In second language teacher education programs, as Johnson has proposed, this knowledge-base should inform at least three broad areas: '(1) the content of L2 teacher education programs: *What L2 teachers need to know*; (2) the pedagogies that are taught in L2 teacher education programs: *How L2 teachers should teach*; and (3) the institutional forms of delivery through which both the content and pedagogies are learned: *How L2 teachers learn to teach*' (2009: 11). Language teachers initially learn the theoretical foundations of TESOL, or the content knowledge, in their initial training programs (Richards, 2014). As Richards (2014) has noted, this knowledge can be divided into disciplinary knowledge (e.g. SLA, Methods, Sociolinguistics, Phonology, etc.) and pedagogical content knowledge (e.g. Curriculum Planning, Assessment, Teaching Young Learners, etc.). However, and as Richards has noted, 'the central issue of what constitutes appropriate disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge remains an unresolved issue' (2014: 23).

It has also been suggested that effective teachers are expert teachers. What is an expert? Many will likely answer that it is a person in any field who performs his or her job in a seemingly effortless manner so much so that it looks automatic and comes from all the years of experience performing this particular job. However, Johnson (2005) and others caution that 'the apparent ease of experts often belies immense effort' because they 'work long hours... and they tend to set standards for themselves and others that are always at least slightly beyond reach' (2005: 15–16). Johnson (2005) suggests that expertise has something to do with a detailed knowledge (discussed above) but not 'just a handful of facts' (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993: 30) about a particular topic. Johnson has pointed out that in order to be an effective expert it 'is the quality of knowledge that is important' in terms of possessing the "judgment of promisingness" [where] the expert knows which avenues are likely to be promising and which may turn out to be dead ends' (2005: 13). In addition, Shulman has maintained that expert teachers must not only possess many different kinds of knowledge (content, curriculum, pedagogical content, knowledge of learners and learning), all of which the teachers in this study exhibited but also have the capacity to 'transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students' (1987: 15). However, similar to the inconclusiveness of what constitutes the knowledge-base of TESOL, Tsui has also pointed out that: 'There are as yet no established common criteria for expert teachers' (2009: 190). However, in a recent study on ESL teacher expertise, Farrell (2013) identified five main characteristics (in order of their frequency) that effective teachers possess or should aspire to possess: Knowledge of Learners and Learning, Engage in Critical Reflection, Access Past Experiences, Informed Lesson Planning, and Active Student Involvement. As can be observed with these findings, many of these characteristics have been covered so far in the literature review of what effective teaching is.

However, it is not my intention in this article to discuss the details of the knowledge-base (this is a different and possibly endless debate) outlined above nor what an expert

teacher is (another long debate); rather I want to emphasize that candidates who study what is required by their credential granting organizations should be recognized as effective by what they have learned and can do in the classroom rather than who they are as individual people regardless of what their first, second or third languages are. As Ethell and McMeniman suggest, there are some overall characteristics said to be essential for teachers to be competent, successful and effective; they must 'have a larger knowledge-base from which to draw' and usually they 'organize knowledge more efficiently in complex interconnected schemas and utilize it more effectively' (2000: 88). As Medgyes has suggested, effective teachers are outstanding teachers and 'all outstanding teachers are ideal in their own ways, and as such, are different from each other' (2001: 440). More importantly, it suggests *all* teachers regardless of whether they are monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual are different from each other and as such we should eliminate the harmful terms NESTs and NNESTs.

ALL teachers have different strengths and weakness and must keep up with their professional development throughout their careers in order to remain effective in the classroom. For example, some teachers may need to brush up on their knowledge or grammar while others may want to brush up on their oral proficiency skills, but they engage in such professional development because they want to remain effective teachers throughout their careers. What we can say for sure is that teachers as professionals cannot rely on any definitive or accepted body of knowledge base throughout their careers because of the various challenges they will inevitably meet. Rather 21st century language teachers must be able to respond to every issue, dilemma and problem they face, thus moving beyond their initial craft skills and knowledge and be able to evaluate possible roads of action that take into account the needs of their students, their institution and their community. As Richards has pointed out, teacher development for the most part, is 'dependent upon the teacher's individual initiatives and efforts, and in their willingness to participate in activities that involve reflection, monitoring and evaluation of one's own professional growth' (2014: 2). Thus, in order to become and remain effective, professional language teachers should engage in reflective practice. In other words, a critical competency for 21st century effective language teachers along with knowledge and all that entails, experience and expertise, is their ability to continuously deliberate on their practice.

Reflective Practice: A Critical Competency

In the general education literature some scholars (e.g. Day, 1999; Zeichner, 1983) maintain that reflection is an important part of effective teaching and effective teachers systematically examine their beliefs and practices and critically reflect on both so that they can gain an understanding of what they do and why they do it. As Jay and Johnson (2002: 76) suggest: 'Reflection is a process, both individual and collaborative, involving experience and uncertainty. It is comprised of identifying questions and key elements of a matter that has emerged as significant, then taking one's thoughts into dialogue with oneself and with others.'

Within the field of second language education, reflective practice has emerged as an approach where teachers actively collect data about their teaching beliefs and practices and then reflect on the data in order to direct future teaching decisions (Bailey, 2010;

Farrell, 2010, 2012; Perfecto, 2008). This evidence-based approach to reflection encourages teachers to avoid making instructional decisions based on impulse or routine; rather, teachers are now encouraged to use the data they have obtained so that they can make more informed decisions about their practice (Chien, 2013; Farrell, 2014; Perfecto, 2008). Richards and Lockhart's (1994: 1) definition summarizes this evidence-based reflective approach as they encourage teachers to 'collect data about their teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching.'

Many different models, frameworks, and strategies have been used to promote reflection. Most, if not all, of the models have their uses for teachers but because there are so many different models and frameworks in existence, no one model provides any overall application of reflecting on practice that includes all teachers, from pre-service and novice to the most experienced teachers. As such, I have recently developed an overall framework for 21st century language teachers to reflect on their philosophy, beliefs, values, theories, principles, classroom practices and beyond the classroom so that they can become and remain effective teachers (Farrell, 2015).

Reflective Practice Framework

The framework has five different stages/levels of reflection: *Philosophy*; *Principles*; *Theory*; *Practice*; and *Beyond Practice*. Each of the five stages/levels within the framework are not isolated stages or levels of reflection as they all are linked and each stage or level builds on the other. All stages must be considered as a whole to give effective teachers a holistic reflective practice experience.

Philosophy

Philosophy, the first stage/level of the framework, can be considered to be a window to the roots of a teacher's practice because having a philosophy of practice means each observable behavior has a reason that guides it even if the teacher does not articulate this reason. 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.

Principles

Principles, the second stage/level of the *framework for reflecting on practice*, include reflections on teachers' assumptions, beliefs, and conceptions of teaching and learning. Assumptions generally refer to what we think is true but we do not have proof of as they have not been demonstrated yet; however, we accept them as true for the time being.

Assumptions are thus sometimes difficult to articulate for a teacher. Beliefs, in contrast, are somewhat easier to state and there is a general acceptance of a proposition; in other words, it is accepted to be true by the individual who holds it. Conceptions are more of an overall organizing framework for both assumptions and beliefs and they can mediate our response to situations involving both. 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.

Theory

Following on from reflecting on our principles, we are now ready to reflect on our *theory*, the third level/stage of the framework. 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 their 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, especially their 'unofficial' theories that are sometimes called 'theories-in-use.' Reflections at this stage/level in the framework includes considering all aspects of a teacher's planning (e.g. forward, central and backward planning—see below) and the different activities and methods teachers choose (or may want to choose) as they attempt to put theory into practice. As they reflect on their approaches and methods at this level, teachers will also reflect on the specific teaching techniques they choose to use (or may want to choose) in their lessons and if these are (or should be) consistent with the approaches and methods they have chosen or will choose. In order to reflect on these, they will need to describe specific classroom techniques, activities and routines that they are using or intend to use when carrying out their lessons.

Practice

Up to now, the framework has emphasized reflecting on philosophy, principles and theory, or the 'hidden' aspect of teaching. If we think of all of the whole teaching process as an iceberg, we cannot see the part of the iceberg that is beneath the surface of the water (the 'hidden' aspect) that is much larger than the visible part on the top. All we can see is the top of the iceberg, or 10% of the whole iceberg, and in teaching this constitutes our *practice*, the fourth stage/level of reflection in the framework. Thus we are now ready to reflect on the more visible behaviors of what we do as teachers, our *practice*, and what actually happens in the classroom. 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. This includes reflecting on how the students are responding or not responding, how long each activity may be taking and/or how individual students are interacting with the content of 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. Ideally, the results from the first two types of reflection (reflection-*in*-action and reflection-*on*-action) can be used as a basis for future planning (reflection-*for*-action) and as such is slightly different from the type of planning that was discussed in the previous stage/level of the framework.

Beyond Practice

The final stage/level of the framework entails teachers reflecting *beyond practice*. This fifth stage/level of the framework takes on a sociocultural dimension to teaching and learning of which Johnson (2009: 2) points out is 'not simply a matter of enculturation or even appropriation of existing sociocultural resources and practices, but the reconstruction and transformation of those resources and practices in ways that are responsive to both individual and local needs.' This is 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. Reflecting *beyond practice* emerges 'out of a dialogic transformative process of reconsidering and reorganizing lived experiences through the theoretical constructs and discourses that are publicly recognized and valued within their professional discourse community' (Johnson, 2009: 98). Critical reflection thus enables teachers to better understand the way our *foundational theories* (philosophy, principles, theory) and our *practice* may be socially relevant or restrictive. Once we become more aware of the hidden foundational theories and policies that we may have unwittingly absorbed into our practice, we are then freed to make our own choices and on our own terms. Consequently, we can begin to contribute to social change for the betterment of our students, our colleagues, our community and society at large.

When teachers have finished reflecting at one particular stage/level of the framework, they can then move on to the next stage/level and so on until they have completed reflecting within and throughout the framework. Thus as they work their way through the

various stages, they can accumulate lots of information about themselves as human beings and as teachers that includes their philosophy, principles, theory and practices as well as their reflections *beyond practice*. The *framework for reflecting on practice* (Farrell, 2015) depicted in this paper can be seen as a promising professional development tool for teachers to become and remain effective. Of course, I realize that reflection is not the only condition for effective teaching, but it is a very important condition and a critical competency for 21st language teachers.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that we in TESOL should move on from the discussions of distinctions between native speaker and non-native speaker teachers and start discussing what an effective, qualified teacher is regardless of their background, regardless of their background, as in professions such as medicine or law - when was in professions such as medicine or law — when was the last time we asked for a native speaker of English medical doctor? A medical doctor is qualified or not and it is not *Who* the doctor is, but it is *How* he or she practices medicine that is most important for the patient. This should also be promoted for TESOL teachers. I have also pointed out that although the literature in general education and TESOL is inclusive as to what characteristics an effective teacher should possess, one critical competency (that keeps appearing in the literature) is that he or she continuously engages in reflective practice. I then outlined a comprehensive framework that TESOL teachers can consider when reflecting on their practice. This framework consists of five interconnected stages or levels of reflection: *Philosophy*; *Principles*; *Theory*; *Practice*; and *Beyond Practice*, in which teachers can decide to move from theory-into-practice or (beyond) practice-into-theory as they continuously learn from experience.

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