

# Reflective Practice for Language Teachers

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## Framing the Issue

There is a longstanding recognition in the field of language education that teachers must continually reshape their knowledge of teaching and learning (Farrell, 2007). This knowledge is developed initially in teacher education programs, and then becomes part of teachers' education throughout their careers when they engage in reflective practice (Farrell, 2015). Indeed, many years ago Dewey (1933) noted that teachers who do not bother to reflect on their work become slaves to routine because their actions are guided mostly by impulse, tradition, and/or authority rather than by informed decision making. This reliance on routine and daily repetitive actions eventually leads to burnout. However, if teachers engage in reflective practice they can avoid such burnout because they take the time to stop and think about what is happening in their practice to make sense of it so that they can learn from their experiences rather than mindlessly repeat them year after year. Dewey's ideas were further developed by his PhD student Donald Schön (1983) when he suggested that teachers should not only reflect on their action after stepping back from it, but also reflect during and while doing the action, which he called reflection-in-action. For example, Schön (1983) wondered what would happen when a teacher's established routines did not work because an unforeseen event occurs and the teacher must experiment in some manner while in the midst of the action in order to cope. In such a manner Schön's reflection-in-action built on Dewey's reflection-on-action and the result of both can be used to direct a teacher's future decisions (or reflection-for-action).

Reflective practice occurs, then, when teachers consciously take on the role of reflective practitioner and subject their own beliefs about teaching and learning to critical analysis, take full responsibility for their actions in the classroom, and continue to improve their teaching practice (Farrell, 2007, 2015). For the purposes of this entry, reflective practice is defined as "a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and,

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while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom” (Farrell, 2015, p. 123).

## **Making the Case**

Some teachers may wonder why they should bother to reflect because they prepare well and try their best in class when they are teaching and spend untold hours (usually unpaid) grading papers after class. In addition they say that they are always trying to follow the million mandates sent from the administration, curriculum developers, school boards, and/or ministry of education officials, which leave little time or energy for reflecting on their teaching. However, when teachers engage in reflective practice, they have the opportunity to examine their relations with students, their values, their abilities, and their successes and failures in a realistic context.

Teachers who engage in 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. It is true as mentioned above that teachers are busy, so we must also be realistic with reflective practice in terms of who can do it and when, and so reflective practice in reality takes place along a continuum of opportunity, where teachers will vary in the opportunity to reflect given their context and their own personal psychological makeup. In other words, some contexts may make it impossible for teachers to organize together to reflect on their practices and, as such, individual teachers may only be able to reflect on their own individual practices and conceptions of their teaching. As a result, it may be unreasonable to expect all teachers to engage in reflection at every moment or stage of their teaching. However, certain activities can help teachers with their reflections at various stages of their careers and these are outlined in the section that follows.

## **Pedagogical Implications**

Language teachers can choose a number of activities that facilitate reflective practice over the course of their professional careers. Various ways that language teachers can choose when reflecting are outlined below, and some of these can be used alone or in combination with peers, depending on each teacher’s level of comfort sharing their ideas, issues, and concerns. Thus language teachers can choose to reflect with and through teaching journals, critical friends, teacher development groups, classroom observations, and/or action research.

### **Teaching Journals**

Teaching journals provide teachers with a written record of various aspects of their practice, such as classroom events, and enable them to step back for a

moment to reflect on their work. When teachers write regularly in a teaching journal, they can accumulate information that on later review, interpretation, and reflection can assist them in gaining a deeper understanding of their work. Farrell (2007, 2013a) suggests that writing regularly in a teaching journal can help teachers clarify their own thinking, explore their own beliefs and practices, become more aware of their teaching styles, and be better able to monitor their own practices. The added advantage of writing a teaching journal is that it can be shared with other teachers. When teachers share their reflective journals, they not only foster collegial interaction but they can also gain different perspectives about their work while also contributing to professional knowledge in the field as a whole.

### Critical Friends

Critical friends are teachers who collaborate in a two-way mode that encourages discussion and reflection in order to improve the quality of language teaching and learning. Critical friendship is where another person reflects with a teacher and gives advice as a trusted “friend” rather than a consultant in order to develop awareness of classroom events as well as the reflective abilities of the teacher who is conducting his or her own reflections. Such critical friends can give voice to a teacher’s thinking like looking into a mirror, while at the same time being heard in a sympathetic but constructively critical way. Teachers who are reflecting can also be challenged by critical friends so that the teachers can have a deeper understanding of their teaching.

This type of reflection promotes collegiality and shared observations but teachers should constantly remember that the focus is on the friend and not the critical in a trusting relationship.

### Teacher Development Groups

Farrell (2014) suggests that language teachers come together in teacher development groups to reflect so that they can complement each other’s strengths and compensate for each other’s limitations. A group of teachers working together can achieve outcomes that may not be possible for an individual teacher working alone, because the group can generate more ideas about classroom issues than can any one individual. Farrell cites three types of teacher development group: peer groups within a school, teacher groups that operate outside the school and within a school district, and virtual groups that can be formed anywhere on the Internet. For example, in programs for adult English language learners, practitioners might meet within a program, across programs, or throughout the province/state/region either in person or online. Study circles—where practitioners meet to read and discuss research and consider its implications for classroom and program practice—offer the opportunity for practitioners to focus and reflect more deeply, with a community of peers, on the content and methodologies they are learning in workshops and implementing in their classes. When teachers come together in groups, they can help each other articulate their thoughts about their work and all grow professionally together (Farrell, 2014).

### Classroom Observations

Because classrooms are such busy places, with many different activities happening at the same time, much of what is really happening in the classroom for the most part actually remains largely unknown to the teacher. So classroom observations can help language teachers develop more of an awareness of what is really happening and what decisions they make and then why they make them. Classroom observation can be carried out alone, and/or in pairs, and/or in small groups. Self-monitoring can be carried out through journal writing, self-reports, tally sheets, and/or recording (audio and video) lessons with or without coding schemes. By later reviewing what was written, or what is heard and seen on the tapes, aspects of teaching that may not have been obvious during the class may become clearer to the teacher (Farrell, 2007).

### Action Research

Action research comes under the umbrella of reflective practice and it involves investigation of some problem a teacher may be experiencing with a particular class, student, curriculum, teaching method and so on, and it usually generates some practical knowledge for the teacher that is immediate and directly applicable to practice. Teachers can engage in action research alone or they can collaborate on one particular project/issue, but it all depends again on how the results will be used by individual teachers. The main idea is change to improve practice and solve a perceived problem. The main point of action research is that teachers collect concrete evidence about the problem and its possible solution(s) within a cycle of clearly thought out procedures. Farrell (2007) suggests the following cycle that teachers can use for action research projects: identify an issue; review the literature on the issue and ask questions to narrow the focus; choose data to be collected and a method of data collection; collect, analyze, and interpret the data selected; and develop, implement, and monitor an action plan.

When using the reflective activities above, language teachers can also choose to reflect on a number of different issues related to their practice that can expand their understanding of their practice. Each activity promotes reflection in different ways, and some teachers may find particular activities more appealing than others, so it may be a good idea to try each approach once before deciding on a focus. For example, teachers can reflect on their role identity, their use of metaphors, and/or their beliefs.

### Teacher Role Identity

Over their careers teachers construct and reconstruct (usually tacitly) a conceptual sense of *who* they are (their self-image) and this is manifested through *what* they do (their professional role identity). Teacher role identity includes teacher beliefs, values, and emotions about many aspects of teaching and being a teacher. Teachers' conceptualizations of their self-image and the various roles they play

are usually held at the tacit level of awareness. As such, “reflection” is seen as a key component associated with understanding the concept of “self” because it brings these tacit conceptualizations to a level of awareness. Reflecting on teacher role identity allows teachers a useful lens into “who” they are as teachers and how they construct and reconstruct their views of their roles as language teachers and themselves in relation to their peers and their context (Farrell, 2011). By reflecting on their teacher identity roles, and how they have been shaped over time and by whom, language teachers can then consider how these roles need to be nurtured during their career.

### Teacher Metaphors

Metaphors are indications of the way teachers think about teaching and also guide the way they act in the classroom; thus, when teachers begin to unpack the meaning of the metaphors they hold, they can begin to understand what they really believe about teaching and can start to change themselves as teachers. However, most teachers may not be aware of the impact of these images on their current teaching practices, because they are held tacitly. So at some time during their careers teachers should explore the images, the metaphors, they have built up. When language teachers identify the metaphors they use, they can also be challenged as to their current relevance and then they can begin to develop alternative and more appropriate metaphors that best represent their practice. Language teachers may thus be able to restructure previously entrenched beliefs as they become more aware of the metaphors they use, and as such, it may also be possible to trigger a repackaging of the old beliefs they held. So, by a process of critical reflection on metaphors (old and new), language teachers can understand and combine the unknown into what they already know as changes in metaphor usage signal changes in their conceptions of teaching and learning a second language.

### Teacher Beliefs

Language teachers can also explore the beliefs they hold about teaching and learning because these are usually held tacitly and build up over a teacher’s career. Language teachers must thus be given opportunities to articulate their beliefs and what they mean to them and ask if they still remain valid in light of present-day research in teaching and learning before being encouraged to make any changes. After articulating and reflecting on their beliefs about teaching and learning, language teachers can be encouraged to reflect on their actual classroom practices to see if there is alignment between their stated beliefs and their classroom practices. However, we must be aware that what teachers say they do and what they actually do in the classroom may not always be the same and so it is important for all teachers to test these stated beliefs against observations of classroom actions to see if there is any discrepancy between what teachers say and do.

## Conclusion

Reflective practice helps teachers avoid burnout and routine approaches to their teaching and life in general because reflection is a way of being or a state of mind. There are many different ways teachers can reflect on their work and all of these methods have advantages and disadvantages. It is up to each individual (or group) teacher to decide which method would be most beneficial depending on the purposes of their reflections. Most of all, reflective practice enables teachers to make more informed decisions about their teaching and, as a result, their students receive the best possible opportunities for reaching success in their learning. Finally, reflection and reflective practice is more than a method, it is a way of life—we evolve as teachers throughout our careers as we construct and reconstruct our practice (Farrell, 2013b).

**SEE ALSO:** Action Research and Teacher Inquiry; Critical Friends: How to Develop Effective Critical Friends PD Groups; Journals; Observations; Reflective Teaching; Teacher and Institutional Beliefs, Vision, Belonging, and Identity

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