

Reflective Practice

I began working in the area of reflective practice, at first informally in the late 1970s and then more formally in the mid-1980s. Since I began, I have always looked at reflective practice as a compass to guide me as I seek direction in my classroom practices. The metaphor of reflection as a compass enables teachers to stop, look, and discover where they are at that moment and then decide where they want to go in the future professionally.

That said, over the years it has seemed that the terms *reflection* and *reflective practice* have become so popular in the field of English language education that using them in such programs is nearly mandatory. Yes, many language educators still agree that some form of reflection is a desirable practice among teachers; however, there is still almost no consensus as to what reflective practice is and which reflective practices actually promote teacher development (Farrell, 2007). Therefore, I will begin by defining reflective practice and then considering why it is important to do before I introduce various principles connected to the concept.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What does reflection mean to you?
- What is your metaphor for reflection?
- What is your definition of reflective practice?

What Is Reflective Practice?

Most teachers think about their work either before they teach, while they are teaching, or after they have finished teaching a class. While many think this is reflective practice, it really only consists of fleeting thoughts that are based on hunches, intuition, or even some actions that happened in the class. So much is happening in the classroom during a lesson, though, that teachers cannot really know or see all that transpires. Reflective practice means more than fleeting thoughts before, during, or after a lesson; it means examining what you do in the classroom and why you do it. Reflective practice also means thinking about the beliefs and values related to English language teaching, and seeing if classroom practices are consistent with these beliefs and values. In order to engage in reflective practice, teachers must systematically collect information about their classroom happenings and then analyze and evaluate this information and compare it to their underlying assumptions and beliefs so they can make changes and improvements in their teaching (Farrell, 2007). Reflective practice can also be conducted outside the classroom by looking at the context of teaching, such as when teachers want to see the impact of their teaching on the community or society, or how the community or society impacts their teaching. Questions to consider may include *Who makes the curriculum?* and *What and whose values does the curriculum embody?*

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Why is the preceding definition, which suggests that teachers collect data about their work, different from the usual way reflective practice is seen?
- How can collecting data help teachers make informed decisions about their practice?
- How can teachers collect data about their practice?
- Why is reflecting on practice important for a teacher?

Why Is Reflective Practice Important?

Teachers may ask why they should reflect on their practice beyond the quick after-class muse, which may lead to perceptions such as “That was a good class!” or “That was a bad class!” or “The students were not very responsive today!” Although these musings may act as a necessary starting point for most teachers, they do not produce any real evidence whether the perceptions they lead to are correct or not. For example, some teachers end class happy because they think it went well. Conversely, they may feel unhappy at the end of a class because they have perceived it to have gone badly and, worse, they spent a good deal of time preparing for that particular class. Some teachers base their initial perceptions of their teaching on the way students respond (e.g., yawning) or do not respond during class. This kind of evidence may not lead to correct interpretations of the teachers’ perceptions because yawning may have nothing to do with the class and the teaching and everything to do with a student’s tiredness. Likewise, if students do not respond to teaching and lessons, teachers should investigate why they were not responsive without becoming too defensive. Teachers need to know why some classes seem to go well and others not so well, and how they define what *well* means. This investigation is called *evidence-based* reflective practice. As such, teachers need to compile solid data about what is really happening in their classrooms rather than what they think is happening. Reflective practice is important because it helps teachers make more informed decisions about their teaching—decisions that are based on concrete evidence systematically collected over a period of time.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- When teachers think about their teaching, they usually come up with statements such as “My lesson went well” or “My students seemed not to be interested today” or “I did not like that lesson,” and then they make decisions about how they will conduct future classes. Would this be considered reflective practice? If yes, why? If not, why not?

Principles of Reflective Practice

In the remainder of this short book, I outline four principles of reflective practice:

Principle 1: Reflective Practice Is Evidence Based

Principle 2: Reflective Practice Involves Dialogue

Principle 3: Reflective Practice Explores Beliefs and Practices

Principle 4: Reflective Practice Is a Way of Life

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What is your understanding of each of these four principles?