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Book review

From trainee to teacher. Reflective practice for novice teachers, T.S.C. Farrell. Equinox, Sheffield, UK & Bristol, CT, USA (2016). 144pp.

Even though our knowledge on language teacher education is expanding, there are still areas that need further exploration. One such example is the territory of a novice teacher whose subtleties are gradually and consistently being “discovered” by Thomas Farrell (2003; 2006; 2008; 2009; 2012). His latest contribution, reviewed here, belongs to this category as well, in which Farrell, in ten chapters, discusses the first year of working as a language teacher – the borderline period between teacher’s pre-service education and in-service work. Presented in accessible language and dealing with “practical” issues, which is always appreciated by practising teachers, the book is definitely written for teachers and teacher educators.

Chapter 1 provides the introduction to the book, in which the author points to its rationale (dropout of teachers after the first working year) as well as describing the intent and overview of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 provides essential information about the study and although most of the methodological aspects are addressed, I would have welcomed more details as responses to questions such as “Were there any obstacles with the organization of such a group?” “Did the participants agree willingly?” and “Was that what they had been looking for?” While I understand when Farrell writes that ethical matters prevent him from disclosing too many details, I still know that persuading teachers into voluntarily attending regular reflective meetings about themselves is a serious challenge. This is also the chapter in which a most important question is asked: “Whose needs are being met during teachers’ pre-service education?”

In Chapter 3, the aims of the book are specified and the details of the shock experienced by novice teachers are explicitly laid out. At the same time, the second important question arises: “Who is to blame for the novice teachers’ tensions?”

Chapter 4 is an account of the teachers’ first week at school with more “shocking” and definitely negative information to come concerning lack of staff meetings, change or absence of textbooks, no preparation for writing exam questions, larger groups than expected. The problems continue in Chapter 5, as well, this time referring to classroom management, teaching methods and approaches or dealing with discipline. Again, only negativity of experience is stressed which may have been the author’s true intention. On the other hand, no stories of success may make a reader ask, “Is it really that bad?”

Chapter 6 engages the reader with evaluating lessons. Farrell’s participants present a very good, speaking-controlling technique called “talking sticks” (inspired by the book, I myself used it successfully). In this chapter, the picture of school is clearer and, despite previously mentioning the school as a language school in an ESL country, the reader finally knows precisely what kind of school Farrell has in mind. The school that is being discussed and criticised is an ESL language school, rather badly organized, and by no means a public school with which most readers from EFL countries would associate a first-year teacher. This chapter made me think how different concepts of a first-year teacher are possible. Unsurprised at such issues as teachers’ short-term employment contracts, lack of staff meetings, supervisors’ searching after economic gains rather than the quality of tuition, etc. I am not defending the school’s lack of organization but I rather tend to think that the private language school, as epitomised in the book, is a business, and its teachers are expected to be less or more prepared formally or be better or worse language teachers. To my mind, such situations in which a teacher has problems because she has prepared another lesson or does not know what to do due to the lack of a book may point to, unfortunately, the low quality of teachers’ creativity, undoubtedly related to their insufficient preparation for the job.

Chapter 7 discusses the issue of teacher roles. An interesting point is drawing attention to the distinction between the roles that are imposed on the teacher and those that are created by her. I am certain that there are many teachers in the world who are not aware that some roles can be self-constructed. Farrell stresses the role conflict, another important role aspect, and does not omit the issue of teacher’s positionality, which can be an eye-opener for the newly-employed. In Chapter 8, Farrell is right when he stresses the significance of teacher’s “personal stamp”, or her uniqueness as someone who makes a difference. He comes back to his first question about whose needs are being met, although now it is extended to experienced teachers, as well (p. 105).

Chapter 9 underscores the teacher’s past suggesting how much individual teacher’s biographies determine their future actions. The second part of the chapter is devoted to Farrell’s reflective framework encompassing: *Philosophy, Principles,*

Theory, Practice and Beyond Practice, which might constitute a sharing experience remedy for first-year teachers. Undoubtedly, the suggestion of a reflective dialogue with others or talking through the problems of the first-year trauma is a useful one. Perhaps, getting into details, that is, identifying what concrete aspects within each of the framework stages/levels should be taught, could be the next direction to head towards. The last chapter 10 reiterates the need for more reflective practice during the first year of teaching.

I do agree with the author that many teachers give up teaching after the first year (although definitely more so in private language schools which, unlike state schools, are often treated as temporary jobs by teachers themselves) and the hardships of being a novice teacher should be acknowledged and addressed during their pre-service education. However, it is also true that the problems of each new teacher are unique, context-bound and difficult to generalize, even if many case studies are available. Probably the best option would be the creation of teacher support groups which, like the three-person group created by Farrell, could discuss their problems during the first year. Then, however, they would not be pre-service but in-service teachers (in most countries you cannot work unless you are formally recognised), and their meetings would depend on their willingness to meet regularly, which is not easy, even with a supportive facilitator.

In a way, Farrell's book sheds light upon the way the ESL teacher profession is treated and how professional standards are assured. His example of "go and teach book" is a memorable case in point.

I like Farrell's questions posed for the reader in his many "reflective breaks" in the book. Although one or two may sound too wide (e.g., "How should teachers be prepared for a real classroom?") or a bit naïve ("What would you have done if the coordinator had rejected your mid-term exam even though it reflected what you ... covered in your classes?"), on the whole they are good and should generate discussion and further reflection.

The book certainly stirs up a number of issues and is quite an eye-opener. Without doubt, it amounts to a first-year practitioner's toolkit, providing the first step in marking the route with, perhaps, the identification of more concrete teaching content to be followed. All in all, the book is an excellent case study of a teachers' support group whose aim is being fulfilled as they reflect on their professional problems.

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