

Reflective Practice: What and Why

I began working in the area of reflective practice, at first informally in the late 1970s while teaching English as a second language (ESL) in Seoul, South Korea, and then more formally in the mid-1980s and early 1990s when I did my PhD dissertation on reflective practice, hitherto an unexplored topic in the field of TESOL. Since I began this exploration now nearly 40 years ago, I have always looked to this interesting yet complex concept as a compass to guide me as I sought direction in my classroom practices, both in my early years as an ESL teacher and later as a teacher educator and professor of applied linguistics. Indeed, the desire to understand what is behind my practice fueled much of my writing in the years that followed my early teaching of ESL. I believe fully that the metaphor of reflection as a compass enables TESOL teachers to stop, look, and discover where they are at that moment and then decide where they want to go in the future professionally. I believe, as Dewey (1933) also observes, that reflection offers teachers the ability to slow down the interval between thought and action so that they can really understand what they are trying to accomplish. Teachers in fast-paced classrooms today sometimes jump to conclusions about what is happening during their lessons based on emotion and intuition rather than on evidence, so engaging in reflective practice allows them to suspend immediate judgment and perhaps look for alternatives.

That said, over the years, the terms “reflection” and “reflective practice” seem to have become so popular (even approaching orthodoxy) in all professions, including the field of TESOL, that people may be losing sight of what they are exactly and why engaging in such reflections is important. Yes, doing so has become a sign of competence in many professions, such as medicine, law, business, and the field of education; however, although many educators agree that some form of reflection is a desirable practice for teachers, almost no consensus exists as to what reflective practice is and which reflective practices actually promote teacher development (Farrell, 2007; 2018a). Therefore, I will begin by defining reflective practice and then considering why it is important before I introduce various principles connected to the concept.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- 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 based on hunches, intuition, or even something that happened in the class. So much goes on 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 that teachers examine what they do in the classroom and why they do it. Reflective practice also asks teachers to think about their beliefs and values related to English language teaching and to determine whether classroom practices are consistent with them. 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; 2018a). Reflective practice can also be conducted outside the classroom by looking at the context of teaching, such as its impact on the

community or society, or how the community or society impacts the teaching. Questions to consider may include *Who makes the curriculum?* and *What and whose values does the curriculum embody?* I end this section with a definition of reflective practice that I developed relatively recently:

a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and, 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)

I fully admit that my definition is not conclusive, as I continue to gain understanding of this fascinating concept. However, this definition is based on a holistic approach to reflection that I explain in more detail in the chapter that follows.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What is your understanding of the preceding definition of reflective practice?
- 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 teachers?

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 of whether the perceptions they lead to are correct. 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 perceive 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. A teacher may incorrectly interpret this kind of evidence because yawning may have nothing to do with the class and the teaching and everything to do with a student's fatigue. Likewise, if students do not respond to teaching and lessons, teachers should investigate why without becoming too defensive. They need to know why some classes seem to go well and others not so well, and how they define "well." This investigation is called evidence-based reflective practice. It requires teachers to compile solid data about what is really happening in their classroom rather than what they think is happening. Walsh and Mann (2017) echo this call for evidence-based reflective practice by encouraging teachers to collect data as a concrete means of focusing reflections so that they can analyze more insightfully and gain a fuller sense of their own teaching. Reflective practice helps teachers make more informed decisions about their teaching—decisions based on concrete evidence systematically collected over a period of time.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- 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 six principles of reflective practice. These principles show how reflective practice is not just a collection of methods to "fix" perceived problems related to teaching. Rather, they point to the depth associated with reflection that starts with the teacher-as-person and extends into and beyond the classroom to encompass a teacher's career and life.

Principle 1: Reflective Practice Is Holistic

Principle 2: Reflective Practice Is Evidence Based

Principle 3: Reflective Practice Involves Dialogue

Principle 4: Reflective Practice Bridges Principles and Practices

Principle 5: Reflective Practice Requires a Disposition to Inquiry

Principle 6: Reflective Practice Is a Way of Life

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

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