

Expert TESOL Teachers: Reaching for “Who I Am Is How I Teach!”

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INTRODUCTION

I was honored to be invited to speak at the 2019 Korea TESOL International conference in Seoul, Korea, and my topic was a reflection on what an expert TESOL teacher entails. I will not go over in detail what I talked about at the conference as Kimberley Roberts (2019) wrote a nice review in her article in *The English Connection*: “A Newbie’s Experience: Review of the 2019 KOTESOL International Conference.” Kimberley said in summary that my talk gave her

a lot to consider when I think about my own definitions of what exactly a “good” or “expert” teacher might be, as it became evident that pinpointing exactly what a “good” teacher is isn’t an easy task. He [Farrell] concluded that while the exact meaning of “expert” might be elusive, reflective practice is critical to developing expertise. (p. 25)

It is this latter point, that reflective practice is critical to developing teaching expertise, that I base my paper on: a reflection of my own journey as a teacher from a recent book that I contributed to that was edited by Alan Maley (2019): *Developing Expertise Through Experience*. This wonderful (and free) book collects together teachers’ narratives and reveals the value of reflecting on experiences for teacher development and training.

Focusing on the role of experience in teacher training and lifelong development, it is an exploration and extension of Prabhu’s (1987) concept of “the teacher’s sense of plausibility.” Prabhu suggests that whatever forms of training and professional development teachers are exposed to, they will make sense of them in their own way, drawing on their own values, beliefs and experiences and on their evolving sense of what will be appropriate for them in their specific context. Twenty practitioners worldwide were invited to reflect on their own career trajectories in the light of Prabhu’s idea. Their responses offer fascinating insights into the way places, publications, ideas, and key people have influenced the professional and personal development of the contributors. Thus, I summarize in this volume the various themes that emerged from my own reflections (Farrell, 2019a) as well as provide a discussion of some meditation techniques (Farrell, 2019b) that teachers can consider as they reflect on their understanding of what a “good” teacher is or what an “expert” teacher is. I would encourage readers to read both books and reflect on what other wonderful language teacher educators from around the world have reflected about their journey in our profession.

MY REFLECTIONS ON MY JOURNEY

Probably the most significant theme emerging from my own reflecting on my teaching journey over the past 38 years as an ESL teacher starting in Korea and then as a language teacher educator, also while in Korea and then in Singapore and Canada, is this simple statement: “Who I am is how I teach!” The general purpose of engaging in reflection for all teachers is to get some kind of awareness of who we are as teachers, what we do, and why we do it. Becoming more aware of who we are as teachers means exploring our own inner worlds through contemplation so that we can become more mindful of what we do. Mindfulness is the opposite of mindlessness – and unfortunately, our world gives us too many examples of the latter rather than the former. Recently I have developed a framework for reflecting on practice in second language teacher education (SLTE) that can help language teachers and teacher educators to become more mindful of who they are and how they teach (Farrell, 2015, 2018).

As Freeman (2016, p. 208) maintains in his recent book, reflection offers a way into the “less accessible aspects of teachers’ work,” and my framework offers such an accessible way into all aspects of a language teacher’s work. This framework differs from many other approaches, as it offers a holistic approach to reflection that focuses not only on the intellectual, cognitive, and meta-cognitive aspects of practice that many other approaches are limited to, but also on the spiritual, moral, emotional, and non-cognitive aspects of reflection that acknowledge the inner life of teachers. Teacher educators can encourage pre-service (and in-service) teachers to use the framework as a lens through which to view their professional (and even personal) worlds, and what has shaped their professional lives as they become more aware of their philosophy, principles, theories, and practices, and how these impact issues inside and beyond practice. Pre-service (and in-service) teachers need to be encouraged to think about themselves and their teaching in ways that include activating their feelings and emotions, or the affective side of reflection, so that they can develop their inner resources to meet future challenges in the profession. I believe that implementing a holistic approach to teacher reflection produces more integrated second language teachers with self-awareness and understanding, and with the ability to interpret, shape, and reshape their practice.

As a result of these reflections, I now make a brief statement of my beliefs/values about language and about learning languages: Learning a language has little to do with learning grammar, vocabulary, or phonology, but everything to do with learning about other human beings’ ways of life. The pace of how we learn a language will match the pace of how much we want to know about others.

MEDITATING ON TEACHING

Here are four meditative techniques: insight meditation, mantra, visualization, and movement meditation for the mindful teacher (Farrell, 2015, 2019b). Insight meditation (or *vipassanā*, which means to “see” things as they really are) allows us to focus on what happens in each moment as it happens. We can accomplish

this by just focusing on our breathing: When we breathe in and out, we just concentrate on this act and nothing else. Then as we focus on our breathing, we can gain insight into the “self” as we watch various thoughts and emotions come and go because we do not react to any of them. Eventually, these thoughts and emotions get weaker and finally disappear. In this way, we are practicing insight meditation.

Mantra means “word,” and the meditative activity is to use a word repeatedly (out loud or internally) while either sitting or in motion as we continue with our normal daily activities. Singing out loud could also be a form of mantra meditation, as the act of singing can lead to an inner calmness and also be a way of relaxing the mind (and even the body) before teaching a class. Sing your favorite song out loud ten minutes before entering your next class. After you sing the song, note any physical or mental changes before and after singing. You could even get your students to sing out loud as well and see if their disposition towards learning has changed.

Visualization is a meditative technique by which you visualize a place (new or old) or a task and remain in a general state of openness while using this place as a type of sanctuary where you feel safe because this sanctuary is unique to you. As you see yourself inside this sanctuary, you become calm and just sit there and totally relax. Because this sanctuary is unique to you, it reflects who you are as a person, as you “see” yourself relax and then begin to notice your personal visualizations. We gain knowledge of the self as a result of meditating on our visualizations because these too are unique to the person who is meditating. You can try this before class and see if your attitudes (to your teaching, your students, and learning) change. You could also get your students to try it through English as it can all contribute to learning.

Movement meditation includes any body movement as meditation. The most popular types of movement meditation include yoga and its many different forms, as well as tai-chi, but even a simple routine such as walking or jogging can be considered movement meditation. My own preference for movement meditation is my practice of the discipline of taekwondo, a Korean martial art. I studied this wonderful art when I was in Korea for 18 years and, for me, the calming nature of the pre-practice stretching routine along with the practice of kicking and other body movement and postures allows for enhanced awareness of self through attention to mind, body, and spirit while in action. Apart from the physical benefits of feeling “high” after intense movement (the effect of increased endorphins in the brain), I also have noticed that any negative pre-practice thoughts and energy have been fully transformed into positive thoughts and energy as I go through the movements. Teachers can do simple stretching exercises or whatever body movements that relax body and mind before they enter a class, or they can take a walk/jog during their lunch hour and experience meditation through movement. Try some movement activities before you enter your next class, and note any physical and mental changes before and after your movements. You can also have your students move during class to get them focused. This is especially useful for teachers of young learners.

CONCLUSION

I noted in the beginning of this paper that Kimberley Roberts (2019) wrote a summary of my presentation on teacher expertise and how elusive this is to define (just as what “good” teaching is) but that reflective practice is critical to reaching expertise. I followed this up with the idea that reaching any level of expertise is in fact also reaching a state of “who I am is how I teach,” where we know how we are by meditating on what makes us unique personally and professionally, and by reflecting on what we do. I contribute this paper to the *KOTESOL Proceedings* with the hope that other ESL teachers in Korea, the place where I really started my own teaching career, will engage in reflective practice so that they too can become the best teacher they can be. I end with Kimberley’s hope for her own future reflections as maybe others can do what she intends to do:

Having dabbled in reflective practice a couple of years back, this presentation certainly gave me a little push to pick it back up again. I even bought a new notebook to keep in my classroom for tracking my reflections, and I’m excited to get back into the practice. (p. 25)

Enjoy your teaching journeys.

THE AUTHOR

Thomas S.C. Farrell is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Brock University, Canada. His professional interests include reflective practice, and language teacher education and development. He has published widely in these areas. A selection of his books include *Reflective Practice* (TESOL, USA, 2013), *Reflective Practice in ESL Teacher Development Groups: From Practices to Principles* (Palgrave MacMillan, UK, 2014), *Promoting Teacher Reflection in Language Education: A Framework for TESOL Professionals* (Routledge, 2015), *From Trainee to Teacher: Reflective Practice for Novice Teachers* (Equinox, 2016), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* (TESOL, USA, 2017), *Research on Reflective Practice in TESOL* (Routledge, 2018), *Reflective Language Teaching: Practical Applications for TESOL Teachers* (Bloomsbury, 2018), and *Reflection as Action in ELT* (TESOL, 2019). His webpage is www.reflectiveinquiry.ca

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