

Book Review

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FARRELL TSC

Reflective Practice in ELT

(Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2019), 179 pp. ISBN 978-1-78179-654-2. \$29.95 (Pbk.)

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Reflective Practice in ELT is the first book in a series that aims to encourage English language teachers to reflect on and improve their practice. The overall aim is to optimize their students' learning outcomes. As an introductory text bridging theory and practice, it succeeds in giving readers a comprehensive understanding of reflective practice by systematically unravelling *what it is*, *why do it*, and *how to do it*. Each chapter is embedded with 'reflective questions' which, in a timely and meaningful manner, help readers to process and connect what they learn with their prior knowledge and current practice. With its practice-oriented focus and clear writing style, language educators including pre- and in-service teachers, teacher educators, and programme administrators will find the book accessible and beneficial.

As the book '*assumes no previous background in language teacher education or reflection*' (p. 4), its early chapters are dedicated to building readers' foundational understanding of reflective practice by critically examining its definitions (Chapter 1), typologies (Chapter 2), and principles (Chapter 3). I found reading these foundational chapters illuminating because they helped me adopt the big picture perspective of reflective practice. For example, more than just presenting the different definitions of reflective practice, readers are helped to see the connections amongst these definitions by tracing their historical development, examining their similarities and differences, and understanding the impact that researchers have on one another. Similarly, besides providing a comprehensive overview of different reflective practice typologies such as those developed by John Dewey and Donald Schön, Farrell also reflects on how his own research has been influenced by them. This, in turn, made me think about how my reflective belief and practice could also evolve to shape my own learning.

Just before delving into the nuts and bolts of reflective practice, Chapter 3 discusses its principles of practice – that *it is holistic, evidence-based, involves dialogue, bridges principles and practices, requires a disposition to inquiry, and a way of life*. Farrell provides a detailed explanation and rationale for each of the principles, complemented by examples of these principles translated into actions. However, I was disappointed that there was little discussion of the challenges or obstacles related to their actual

implementation, and much less, evidence-based recommendations to overcome them. As a result, some readers, like me, could inadvertently conclude that reflective practice is something ‘good to have’ but ostensibly too demanding and impractical. Fortunately, Farrell seems to have anticipated this, and hopes that readers will see all six principles put into practice as the book then shifts its focus from theory to practice.

In the practice-oriented chapters, Farrell describes a few reflective tools commonly used by teachers (Chapter 4), outlines a case study of one teacher’s reflective journey (Chapter 5), and discusses the process of cultivating reflective practice individually and within an institution (Chapter 6). Readers can potentially harvest many useful hands-on tips from these chapters. For instance, besides learning about the uses, benefits and challenges of employing reflective tools such as dialogue, writing and classroom observations, readers will also see the principle of ‘*evidence-base*’ clearly at work. As these tools vary in purpose and complexity of use, teachers would be able to identify the ones that would best match their needs and research purposes. Furthermore, from the case study presented, readers can glean many useful ideas to guide their own reflective journeys. In particular, teacher-researchers interested in designing a multi-dimensional reflection study would likely find the case study useful as it details the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data using several of the reflective tools described earlier.

Having given due attention to the ‘*product*’ of reflective practice (i.e. definitions, typologies, principles, practices, and tools), the book refocusses on the ‘*process*’ of ensuring the systematic implementation of reflection by individual teachers first, followed by the school. It asserts that meaningful reflection is only possible for teachers with a ‘*reflective disposition*’, characterized by having the attitudes of *open-mindedness*, *wholeheartedness* and *responsibility*. When these individual reflective dispositions become collectively evident amongst the teachers in a school, it is then opportune for the school to realign some of its internal systems and structures, such as the teacher evaluation system and professional development programme, to its reflective approach to teaching and learning. Although Farrell details a range of tangible school-wide strategies such as *mentoring*, *team teaching*, and *critical friends*, he is silent on *how* individual teachers can acquire a reflective disposition.

As a practitioner, I found the ‘hands-on’ Chapters 4-6 useful and instructive for reflection. More significantly, just as Farrell has hoped that ‘*readers will note the presence of all six principles throughout. . .*’ (p. 78), I fully acknowledge their presence in these chapters, and firmly believe that reflective practice is not something ‘good to have’ but is worthy of our investment.

Finally, as current criticisms of reflective practice pose serious problems to educators, Farrell attempts to address some of them in the form of ‘*Ten Questions for Reflection*’ (Chapter 7). The issues discussed mainly concern the acceptance of reflective practice in education, the fidelity and challenges of implementation, and the benefits and costs of engaging in reflective practice. Generally, I find Farrell’s reflections balanced and persuasive as he examines the issues from multiple perspectives, and supports his views with empirical evidence when appropriate. However, to die-hard sceptics, his replies could seem evasive or overly optimistic. For example, reflecting on what the future of reflective practice is, Farrell opines that it is up to all teachers to answer the many unanswered questions about reflective practice, ‘*so that they will be able to decide for*

themselves. . . what outcomes they expect' (p. 165). Admittedly, his inconclusive answer left me hanging in the air – which I think I rightly should, given the evolving nature of reflective practice.

Reflective practice in language education is multi-faceted and ever-changing. Hence, any attempt, such as this book, to provide an update in a timely and comprehensive manner is no mean feat. As a creditable introduction to reflective practice for language educators, *Reflective Practice in ELT*, together with the forthcoming titles in this series, is set to '*enlighten and inform us all so that we can continue to provide the best learning opportunities for all our readers*' (p. 169).

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