

# 'We Teach Who We Are': Contemplation, Reflective Practice and Spirituality in TESOL

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## Abstract

For most of its history, the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) has focussed much of its attention on teaching methods and curricula to the exclusion of the person who must deliver them. In this article we propose that TESOL recognize the inner lives of teachers through understanding their spirituality from the perspective of the teacher's personal and professional being and becoming. We encourage teachers to reflect on the spiritual dimensions of practice and propose how these might interface with standard disciplinary knowledge to produce more integrated language teachers.

## Keywords

Contemplation, reflective practice, spirituality, TESOL, teacher identity, teacher education

## Introduction

For most of its history, the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) has focussed much of its attention on teaching methods and curricula to the

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exclusion of the person who must deliver them. Despite the first letter of the acronym TESOL, over the years we seem to have forgotten the ‘T’ for “teacher”, a person with feelings, emotions, and senses who delivers English language lessons to students. Or as Palmer (2003:1) has put it, ‘we teach who we are’. Yet, as we noted above, historical and current models of second language teacher education have ignored the teacher-as-person (e.g. teacher cognition studies are focussed on beliefs about language teaching rather than personal beliefs) and their affective, artistic, and aesthetic development as teachers: their inner lives. As Palmer (2003: 1) states: “Knowing . . . myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. . . When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are”. In fact, for most of its young history, the field of TESOL has favoured methods over teachers to the extent that methods . . . were developed as close to being teacher-proof as possible and the role of the TESOL teacher was to follow the method and exclude the ‘self’ as much as possible. As a counter balance, in this article, we . . . suggest that TESOL as a profession can do more to prepare teachers with strategies for both professional and personal development so that they can become more integrated language teachers who possess self-awareness and understanding to be able to interpret, shape and reshape their practice.

Specifically, we propose that TESOL recognizes the inner lives of teachers through understanding their spirituality from the perspective of the teacher’s personal and professional being and becoming. A good working explanation of ‘spirituality’ is that it ‘refers to a way of being that includes the capacity of humans to see beyond ourselves, to become more than we are, to see mystery and wonder in the world around them, and to experience private and collective moments of awe, wonder, and transcendence’ (Schoonmaker, 2009: 2714). Spirituality in this sense is generously inclusive and might (by any given individual) be linked with beliefs, values, identities, ethical principles, mental health, or overall well-being. It can be connected with organized religion – *but need not be*, and encompasses the spiritual lives of atheists and agnostics as well (Waggoner, 2016). It is not about fixed creeds or doctrines but instead highlights personal beliefs and values that grow and develop with experience.

We hope our language teacher-readers will take our argument to heart and encourage them to reflect on the spiritual dimensions of practice and propose how these might interface with standard disciplinary knowledge to produce more integrated professional selves. Our basic argument is that contemplating the spiritual dimensions of practice reveals important implications for TESOL teacher education and development (Wong & Mahboob, 2018).

## Contemplation

The notion of contemplation and its awareness-raising effects have long been a part of the great religions and philosophies of the world that include Buddhism’s mindfulness of the ‘here-and-now’, existentialism and the inevitable mortality of human beings, and prayer as integral parts of Christianity, Islam, and other faiths. These philosophies and religions engage in contemplation not to solve particular issues, but to become more aware of the inner self. Although such contemplation might place individuals at the centre of the contemplative process, this does not result in self-judgment, but . . . in becoming more aware of their surroundings in a more mindful way.

Indeed, contemplation can help us reach this state of *mindfulness* where we can experience an enhanced awareness of our thoughts, feelings, emotions and perceptions. It is important for us to become aware of our perceptual experiences as a detached observer so that we . . . can also begin to examine them in light of our conscious experiences as teachers (Farrell, 2015a). As Palmer (1998: 11) notes: ‘The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self’.

We believe that such contemplation can be a dimension of reflective practice (see below) because it can help TESOL educators become more aware of themselves as human beings. In order to gain such knowledge of who we are and how we interact with the world, we need to . . . engage in contemplation because we usually hold such knowledge tacitly in our subconscious. As Polanyi (1967: 4) noted, ‘We know more than we can tell’. Thus, . . . we can say that contemplation could be a pre-logical phase of knowing. For example, Polanyi (1962: 54) observed that when a person (in any field) carries out a skillful performance, this performance includes ‘actions, recognitions, and judgments which we know how to carry out spontaneously; we do not have to think about them prior to or during’ the performance.

Thus, contemplation . . . places individuals at the centre of the process, but . . . without trying to take any control or intervention of the contemplations so that they become more aware of their surroundings in a more mindful way (Farrell, 2015a). The person carrying out the performance may be unaware of ever having learned anything or of how he or she became skilled in the first place. He or she just performs. In fact, it is like recognizing a face in a crowd without being able to list the features of that face in words, or as Polanyi (1967: 5) says: ‘We recognize the moods of the human face, without being able to tell, except quite vaguely, by what signs we know it’. This is called ‘contemplative reflective practice’ (Farrell, 2015a) and is a necessary pre-logical phase of ‘reflection’ so that we can become more mindful of who we are as human beings.

Contemplation can help TESOL teachers reach a state of mindfulness or attentiveness in which they can experience an enhanced awareness of thoughts, feelings, emotions and perceptions, a practice that is rarely addressed or acknowledged in TESOL. Indeed, TESOL teachers might develop their contemplative abilities by practising different meditative techniques such as *insight meditation*, *visualization*, and *movement meditation*.

*Insight meditation* allows us to focus on what happens in each moment as it happens. We can accomplish this just by focussing on our breathing: when we breathe in and out we 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. We can thus become clearer about who is the *real self* that teaches. Farrell (2015) suggests that at the beginning of a class or at a transition time during a lesson, a teacher can turn the lights off and ask students to take a few deep, slow, clearing breaths and be silent for a few minutes while they only focus only on their breathing and simply do nothing. Then ask them to transition slowly from the depth of contemplation to the classroom and continue the lesson. Farrell (2015) has noticed that students report sensations of peacefulness, a clearer mind, and a feeling of centredness.

*Visualization* is a meditative technique in which the practitioner visualizes a place (new or old) or a task and remains in a general state of openness, while . . . using this place as a type of sanctuary where one feels safe because this mental sanctuary is

uniquely individual. As he or she sees inside this sanctuary, he or she becomes . . . calm and totally relaxed. Because this sanctuary is uniquely individual, it reflects personal identity. As a result, we gain knowledge of the self. A teacher might try this before class and see if their attitudes toward teaching, students, and learning change. Farrell (2015a) has reported that such visualization can help teachers become more mindful of their own attitudes towards their classroom practices and also became more mindful of their students' emotions and experiences.

*Movement meditation* includes any body movement as meditation. The most popular types of movement meditation include yoga and tai-chi, but even a simple routine such as walking or jogging can also be considered movement meditation. Teachers can do simple stretching exercises or whatever body movements that relaxes body and mind before they enter a class, or they can take a walk or jog during their lunch hour and experience meditation through movement. Farrell (2015a) reported that his own preference in movement meditation is his practice of the discipline of *Taekwondo*, a Korean martial art. Farrell (2015a: 38–39) explains:

For me, the calming nature of the pre-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 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.

## Reflective Practice

As mentioned above, contemplation can lead to more self-awareness; however, when in contemplation there is less of a distinction between the contemplator/thinker and the subject of contemplation or thought. When engaging in conscious reflection, on the other hand, there is such a distinction because there is a subject thinking consciously about something (an object) (Farrell (2019)). Thus engaging in reflective practice for TESOL teachers generally means conscious thinking about what we are doing and why we are doing it or reflecting about our beliefs and classroom practices (Farrell, 2015a; Farrell, 2019).

Within the field of TESOL reflective practice has been warmly embraced as a concept in which language teachers examine their beliefs and practices about teaching and learning throughout their careers (Mann and Walsh, 2017). However, how it is to be operationalized or implemented has remained somewhat elusive (Freeman, 2016). One of the reasons for this is that many different models and approaches outside TESOL about what constitutes the theory of reflective practice have been incorporated from the field of general education without much scrutiny and indeed without much clear understandings about the underlying assumptions of these theories and approaches (Farrell, 2019).

For example, one of the many problems associated with the implementation of these approaches is that a gap has developed between the teacher who is doing the reflecting and the act of reflection itself, where the ‘teacher-as-person’ is essentially excluded from the reflection process. Reflective practice is now viewed as a method for TESOL teachers to implement (again TESOL teachers as a field move back to methods, see above) in

order to ‘repair’, ‘fix’ and thus improve their teaching. However, as Freeman (2016: 217) has recently pointed out, TESOL needs to move away from such an emphasis on ‘reflection-as-repair’ because it confines reflection to problem-solving the technical (in)competencies of teaching while again ignoring the inner lives of teachers, or the teacher-as-person who is doing the reflection. We believe that pre-service (and in-service) TESOL teachers need to be encouraged to reflect about who they are and their practice so that they can be more integrated TESOL teachers.

Such a holistic approach to implementing reflective practice that includes the teacher-as-person is the *framework for reflecting on practice* (Farrell, 2015). This approach not only focusses on the intellectual, cognitive and metacognitive aspects of practice that many other approaches consider, but also includes the spiritual, moral and emotional non-cognitive aspects of reflective practice that are also important for TESOL teachers (Farrell, 2019). This framework has five different stages or levels of reflection: philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and beyond practice.

Philosophy, the first stage of the framework, examines the ‘teacher-as-person’ and suggests that professional practice, both inside and outside the classroom, is invariably guided by a teacher’s basic philosophy which has been developed since birth. Thus, in order to reflect on our basic philosophy we need to obtain self-knowledge and we can access this by exploring, examining and reflecting on our background – from where we have evolved – such as our heritage, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, family and personal values that have combined to influence who we are as language teachers. As such, teachers talk or write about their own lives and how they think their past experiences may have shaped the construction and development of their basic philosophy of practice.

Principles, the second stage of the framework, include reflections on teachers’ assumptions, beliefs, and conceptions of teaching and learning. Teachers’ practices and their instructional decisions are often formulated and implemented (for the most part subconsciously) on the basis of their underlying assumptions, beliefs and conceptions because these are the driving forces (along with the philosophy reflected on at stage one) behind many of their classroom actions. One of the means that teachers have at their disposal when accessing their principles (assumptions, beliefs and conceptions) is by exploring and examining the various images, metaphors and maxims of teaching and learning.

Theory, the third stage of the framework, considers all aspects of a teacher’s planning and the different activities and methods teachers choose (or may want to choose) as they attempt to put theory into practice. As they reflect on their approaches and methods at this level, teachers will also reflect on the specific teaching techniques they choose to use (or may want to choose) in their lessons and if these are (or should be) consistent with the approaches and methods they have chosen or will choose. To reflect on these, they will need to describe specific classroom techniques, activities and routines that they are using or intend to use when carrying out their lessons.

Practice (see also below), the fourth stage of reflection in the framework, begins with an examination of observable actions while teaching, as . . . well as students’ reactions (or non-reactions) during lessons. Teachers can reflect while they are teaching a lesson (reflection-in-action), after they teach a lesson (reflection-on-action) or before they teach a lesson (reflection-for-action).

Beyond Practice, the fifth stage of the framework entails teachers exploring and examining the moral, political and social issues that impact a teacher's practice both inside and outside the classroom. Such a critical focus includes teachers examining the moral aspect of practice and the moral values and judgments that impact practice. As noted at the beginning of this article, within the TESOL profession, the moral dimensions of teaching have received relatively little analysis or discussion, yet language teachers deal with moral issues in their everyday teaching, such as deciding which materials to use in lessons. For example, each teacher can decide if the textbook he or she is using reflects his or her morals and as a result, can decide to highlight convergences or divergences of morals and this can generate discussions of appropriateness of topics that are presented in lesson materials, not only among teachers, but . . . also between teachers and students. Thus when, teachers take a more critical reflective stance on their roles and the materials they use, they can become agents that promote social changes that can positively impact their learners' lives (Farrell, 2018).

That said, the . . . issue of what is morally correct will depend on each teacher's individual morals as well as each individual student's morals. In addition and more recently, morality and teaching English to speakers of other languages has included the idea of religious beliefs as part of teacher knowledge (Baurain, 2012; Baurain, 2015). Baurain (2012: 312) has argued that 'spiritual and religious beliefs should be part of academic conversations and research about teacher knowledge, especially because spiritual and religious beliefs already fit the area of inquiry the field has defined for itself'. If spirituality is to be included in this model, how might that look? How might teacher reflection in these areas affect self-knowledge, practice, and the process of professional growth?

## Spirituality and Reflective Practice

From the perspective of teacher's personal and professional being and becoming, spirituality can be seen to permeate the five stages of the model. In the first stage, Philosophy, a teacher's spiritual perspectives and values can be a vital aspect of their self-knowledge and basic philosophy of life. The second stage, Principles, explicitly includes teachers' assumptions and beliefs, at least some of which might be spiritual in nature. Since teachers do not leave who they are and what they value at the door of their classrooms, but rather tend to interact as whole persons with their whole-person learners, it must be assumed – as described in the third stage, Theory – that teachers' spirituality then becomes part of how they conceptualize their professional identities and activities as well as of how they attempt to put those conceptions into Practice (the fourth stage). That is to say, teachers' inner spirituality can and does influence such practical matters as lesson planning, classroom management, and materials selection. This might happen consciously or subconsciously, depending on how much of the self-that-teaches is allowed to participate in the reflective process. Since an individual's spirituality does not exist in a vacuum, the fifth and final stage of the framework, Beyond Practice, provides additional room for exploring and examining the impacts of spirituality in interaction with others (learners and colleagues) and with regard to political, social, and moral issues in larger communities and contexts.

Recent qualitative research within education indicates that teachers' spirituality does in fact help shape their interactions with and applications of disciplinary knowledge (Lindholm and Astin, 2006). For example, the Spirituality in Higher Education project at UCLA (<http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu>) found spirituality to be a major identity factor among American professors. Eighty-one percent considered themselves to be spiritual 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent,' with 69 percent also indicating that they look for opportunities for spiritual growth. About 61 percent reported that they pray or meditate, with or without connections to organized religion. Furthermore, the survey revealed that significant links exist between teacher spirituality and the use of learner-centred, highly effective teaching practices such as small groups and project-based curricula. Lindholm and Astin (2008: 198) concluded that their findings 'reinforce the notion that the teaching methods faculty elect to use reflect who they are and what they believe'.

Smaller-scale studies also confirm the links between spirituality and teaching. Cecero and Prout (2014), for example, employed a questionnaire which, instead of using faculty ratings of their own spirituality, used students' ratings of faculty spirituality. Their data also revealed significant positive correlations between spirituality and student-centred teaching styles. Other sources suggest the same with specific reference to religious beliefs. Sharma (2013) found connections between Hinduism and current professional TESOL ideas of student-centredness and learner autonomy. We also note such connections to be an important part of teacher knowledge; however, we suggest that more research of this sort is needed in the field of TESOL and language education.

Spirituality, then, is a potentially significant aspect of teacher identity and practice, and therefore needs to be more explicitly addressed and included within processes of professional reflection and development (Mayes, 2001; Palmer, 2003). The goal of this essay is, via the five-stage model, to further encourage this way of thinking so as to lead to more fully integrated reflective language teachers.

## Implications

The above discussion on contemplation, reflective practice, and spirituality in the field of TESOL centres around the important central question of 'who is the self that teaches' English to speakers of other languages and the notion that the teacher as a person cannot be separated from the act of teaching as a reflective and spiritual endeavour. Unfortunately, in the past, second language . . . teacher education programmes have not acknowledged the spiritual dimensions of the profession. Plenty is said about what teachers should know and what they should do, but the topics of who the teacher is and what the teacher believes remain unconsidered. An examination of recent textbooks on second language teacher education programmes, for example, will turn up no reference to this topic either explicitly or implicitly. Topics covered include language, teaching practices, and learners, but nowhere does the focus turn to teachers' identities – including spiritual aspects – and how these might interact with teaching and learning processes (see above).

The same is true for English learner course books. Both teachers and students might want to incorporate spirituality into a common unit such as 'family' or 'talking about future goals and dreams'. Instead, 'family' becomes a matter of vocabulary acquisition.

'Talking about future goals and dreams' becomes an opportunity to learn conditionals or certain sentence structures. Any personalization – without reference to spiritual beliefs, values, identities, ethical principles, mental health, or overall well-being – becomes by default self-centred, consumerist, and sterile. Potentially rich topics are handled thinly because spirituality and whole-personhood are largely ignored.

What about books addressed to TESOL teacher educators and trainers? Again, 'the self that teaches' and spirituality are more often than not omitted. Freeman (2016: 161), for example, discusses teachers' thought processes and their 'beliefs, assumptions and knowledge', but 'beliefs' here refers to professional beliefs about teaching rather than more personal or fundamental beliefs about life. Contributors to Farrell (2015b) also make reference to teacher beliefs, but again, these are about teaching rather than about life. The closest reference is when Richards and Farrell (2005), in their chapter on self-monitoring, recommend starting teacher development with 'an awareness of what the teacher's current knowledge, skills, and attitudes are' (2005: 34) as the first step in self-appraisal.

Indeed, this is similar to what happens in much of the teacher cognition research which also focusses on professional beliefs, but . . . not much on personal beliefs and how this impacts teaching. For example, teacher cognition research tends to have academics approach practicing TESOL teachers to ask them to engage in a research project that will enable them (academics) to examine the beliefs of teachers in order to further knowledge on so-called teacher cognitions. This is research conducted by academics *on* teachers (rather than *with* teachers) and their beliefs about teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language. The researchers are more interested in learning more about beliefs and practices only where both intersect with language teaching where the act of teaching is separated from the teacher-as-person (or the philosophy stage of Farrell's (2015a) model above). In addition, the 'results' of such research is rarely fed back to the teachers who have participated as the results are usually only published in academic journals that teachers rarely read.

We believe that to ignore the spiritual dimensions of language classroom life can be very limiting to the development of the TESOL profession. One example on the topic of 'cheating' in these books often devolves into discussions of technique (how to prevent it), motivation (why students cheat), or applied linguistics (patchwriting, developmental stages in writing). Another example is this: treatments of 'building classroom community' tend to revolve around technical considerations (lowering the affective filter) or counseling – therapeutic language (taking responsibility, empowering learners).

The main implication here is that spirituality – while often relevant to the 'self who teaches' (as well as the 'self who learns') and thus significant to the classroom in general and the TESOL classroom in particular – is rather systematically ignored in the mainstream professional TESOL literature. In fact, we are professionally socialized to act as if it is not there. We believe the reflective framework presented above is one effective means for beginning to address this gap to discover who we are when we teach. As described above, the various reflective stages create opportunities and open doors to spirituality, broadly conceived, but neither compels anyone to communicate in such terms nor silence anyone who wishes to do so.

## Conclusion

For too long TESOL as a profession has separated the teacher from the act of teaching as publishers have long searched for *the* correct method, while all along ignoring the person who must deliver such a method, the teacher. The first letter in the acronym TESOL is ‘T’ (teacher), but this has been ignored over the years. In fact, as this article points out, the teacher *is* the method. By reflecting on their philosophy, principles, theory, practice and then beyond their practice, TESOL professionals can reach a fuller understanding of the important question: ‘Who is the self that teaches?’ We teach who we are regardless of which method or approach we use.

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