

Reflective Teaching and Practice: Interview with Thomas Farrell

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Interviewed by Alvin Pang, SEAMEO RELC



Thomas Farrell (pictured) is widely known for his views and publications on the topic of Reflective Practice, which is key to the professional development of teachers in 21st century classrooms. He is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Brock University, Canada. Farrell has been a language teacher and teacher educator since 1978 and has worked in Korea, Singapore and Canada. He has published widely and presented worldwide on the topic of Reflective Practice. Among his publications are *Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice* (2008), *Teaching Reading to English Language Learners: A Reflective Guide* (2009); *Reflective Writing for Language Teachers* (2012); and *Promoting Teacher Reflection in*

Second Language Education: a Framework for TESOL Professionals (2015). His current research interests include language teacher beliefs and practices, and Reflective Practice for language teachers.

Q. Tom, you are a strong advocate of the continuous professional learning and development of teachers. Can you share with us your beliefs and thoughts about teacher learning and the importance of teacher professional development?

Ever since I was a teacher learner myself and had experienced some dubious initiations into teaching, I became very interested in other teacher learners' experiences as well as professional development of in-service teachers. For example, when I was being observed as a pre-service teacher, the observer just showed up at different times during the year and sat in class and wrote and then just left. I had no pre-observation or post-observation conference, not to mention any idea about how I was doing until I got the final grade at the end of my teacher training year. I reflected on that experience for many years and actually began my writing on that topic many years ago. Also during my novice year, I experienced a really difficult supervisor who observed me teach a class (I took a CLT approach as this was what I learned in my MA programme) and suddenly jumped up in the middle of the class and said that was not the way to teach; she then led the class in grammar drills. If it were not for close colleagues, I would have quit teaching but they kept me going. So I believe the initial part of a

teacher's career is very important because it sets the foundations for his or her future professional development and how open (or closed) he or she will be to learn more because our initial teacher education cannot possibly prepare us for all we will experience in our years of teaching. Take the technological developments today that were nowhere to be seen in my teacher training programmes. So I view all our teaching as professional development and we are unable to develop if we are not reflective practitioners.

Q. What led you to researching and publishing extensively on the topic of Reflective Practice?

Following on from my comments to your previous question, I believe Reflective Practice can provide the tools for our development throughout our teaching careers. As I became more experienced as a teacher, I got deeper into Reflective Practice. I completed my PhD on this complex topic in TESOL when nobody had ever heard of it really. I decided that there was enough in this topic to keep me busy for my career and I am still researching it 35 years later as I still don't really know what it is all about. I know colleagues who are really brilliant and can research many different topics but I am not. So I focus exclusively on this interesting but complex topic because I don't have the capacity to focus on many different topics at one time. My hat (literally) goes off to them.

Q. Most people would attribute the notion of a reflective practitioner to Donald Schon's book *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think In Action* (Schon, 1983), in which he explained concepts such as *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action*. What are your own views on these concepts and the idea of a reflective practitioner, in particular within the teaching profession?

Before I get to Donald Schon's brilliant work, I must refer to John Dewey first because many would agree he was the originator of Reflective Practice in Education and he talked about reflection-ON-Action which came before reflection-IN-action which Schon is associated with. Dewey's reflection-ON-action is really an ends-based model and it is initiated by a problem perceived by the teacher which must be solved. There is no room for uncertainty as the teacher goes through different iterations of reflection until the problem is solved. Schon's work is a development of Dewey's (he completed his PhD on Dewey's theory of inquiry) in that he wondered what a teacher was thinking about while he or she was teaching and especially when a problem seemed to appear. So Schon's approach like Dewey's proceeds along a causal chain that is initiated by a problem while in action, or reflection-IN-action, and this eventually leads to reflection-ON-action. I recently designed a framework for reflecting on practice for TESOL professionals that builds on both Dewey and Schon's work that is more holistic as it includes the teacher-as-person as a central part of Reflective Practice. Many approaches detach values from reflection but I believe that values should be interwoven with methods of reflection otherwise it is just following a checklist. In other words, the teacher cannot be separated from the act of teaching. In addition, the framework I designed is very context sensitive in that reflection is eco-logical rather than ego-logical and thus is in terms of the total event that includes the context. I also believe that uncertainty in the reflective

process is OK and should be embraced rather than always trying to reach a specific solution to a perceived problem that many of the other approaches suggest. Sometimes we cannot reach a clear solution and this is OK.

- Q. You have written quite a bit about adopting a reflective approach to language teaching, for example, one of your books is about teaching reading through a reflective approach and another book is about reflective writing for language teachers. Tell us more about the reflective approach which is key to language teaching and vital for language teachers.

As noted in the above answer, my framework (you can call it the 'Farrell Framework for Reflecting on Practice' if you like) is grounded in the belief that teachers are human beings first and teachers second. Therefore, I do not subscribe to methods when it comes to teaching English to speakers of other languages because I believe the teacher is the method. As a profession, TESOL has been barraged with different methods (by publishers and some unscrupulous TESOL authors) that are snake oil sales driven as the latest cure or panacea to teaching and learning English. These are all too visible at conferences and presenters sponsored to sell that oil regardless of what it means for regular teachers in regular classrooms who are supposed to 'teach' their students. These 'one size fits all' glossy textbooks that now have digital podcasts or the like to make them look and sound more modern are money driven, rather than learner driven, and have been a curse to this profession for a long time.

As you have noted in the question, I have written how teachers can take a reflective approach to teaching reading and writing where they are sensitive to their learner's needs and their context and thus read the relevant theories about teaching reading, writing and other skills, and then make them their own for their particular context. As reflective practitioners they will be aware of their own needs as teachers and their students' needs for learning and the impact of all of this within their particular context. Thus I think that teachers as reflective practitioners can produce their own materials for their own classes that suit their own students' needs, regardless of the skill they are teaching.

- Q. Would you agree that the reflective process for language classroom practitioners should start from identifying the core set of beliefs they hold about how languages are learnt before committing themselves to laying out the principles and strategies that guide their classroom teaching? What are your thoughts?

Good question because it brings in the whole idea about the competencies of language teachers and what is important for them to know as teachers. There is a lot out there already about what competency a language teacher should have and much of this is conflicting and controversial. For example, some say teachers need to know SLA (second language acquisition) theory (which includes how languages are learnt) and others think that effective teachers possess particular characteristics such as superior subject matter knowledge, good classroom management skills, good instructional skills and many more diverse behaviours too long to list. In fact, I agree with Jack Richards who pointed out that it is not always easy to identify what a teacher needs to know because conceptions of good teaching differ from culture to culture, hence, reflecting on

practice is highly context specific. To date, there are no precise benchmarks of what constitutes effective second language teaching in all settings, nor are there agreed effective strategies that teachers should implement in their classes (not to mention what exactly effective teachers would look like in a classroom). This shows even more the vital need for teachers to be reflective practitioners and as such embrace all theories of SLA and other knowledge but refuse to be blown off their feet by any one theory as they must decide what knowledge is relevant for their needs to be effective and also their students' learning needs.

Q. Some writers have advocated that Reflective Practice should be taught explicitly to student teachers? What are your views on this?

Yes, I agree as it is a skill that can be learned. The controversy to date is how we can accomplish this. One thing for sure is that in order for teacher educators to teach Reflective Practice, they must themselves engage in reflecting on their own practice, a process that I do not think happens enough. In addition, when teachers are encouraged to reflect, we must be clear in whose tradition this reflection is mirrored because we must be cautious against hasty referencing to Dewey, Schon or Farrell to legitimize an approach without a full understanding of the approach. This is why many pre-service teachers may tend to fake their reflections because they are not informed about the meaning of reflection; they are only told to 'reflect' and take this as giving what they think is the correct answer, or worse faking their reflections to sound a particular way. As I said part of this problem lies with teacher educators who do not understand reflection themselves and do not reflect on their own practices. This is also why I developed the new framework (Farrell, 2015) so that we can teach pre-service teachers how to reflect. The five stage process takes them on a reflective journey that can result in them developing their reflective portfolio in which their philosophy, principles, theory, practice and beyond practice (critical) reflections will be documented and a reflection of who they are as teachers and who they want to be.

Q. Could you elaborate a little more on the framework and how it can be applied in beginning teachers' context?

I would suggest a deductive approach that begins with philosophy and moves into practice and beyond as teachers go through each of the five stages of reflection in the framework. From beginning teachers' perspective, stage 1, philosophy would be most appropriate to begin reflections because they do not have much actual teaching experiences to begin there. When beginning teachers reflect on their philosophy they can consider why they became language teachers, what it means to them as well as who they are as humans – or the teacher-as-person approach first. Next, beginning teachers start to reflect on their principles which include looking closely at their assumption, values, beliefs and conceptions of teaching and learning English as a second/foreign language. After this, they move onto the third stage, theory, where they consider the content and delivery of their lessons for a particular group of students. Then they get into practice in the classroom and see how their previous reflections on philosophy, principles and theory are reflected (or not) in their actual classroom practices. Finally, they move in their reflections beyond practice and begin to

take a more critical stance on the profession by examining the sociocultural influences on their reflections on all previous stages of the framework. This framework is descriptive rather than prescriptive and so beginning teachers can use it as a mirror and look at all aspects of their practice so that they can make informed decisions about their practice.

- Q. We have touched on the importance of Reflective Practice for student teachers and beginning teachers. What about experienced teachers who have had many years of teaching in the classroom? Would they reflect on their practice differently? Or would they even see the necessity of engaging in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action? How do you think experienced teachers you have come into contact with in the course of your work and research relate themselves with Reflective Practice?

For experienced teachers I would suggest a more inductive approach to Reflective Practice because they have much more actual teaching practice. Then opposite to the sequence I proposed in the previous question, experienced teachers can go through the framework until they reach philosophy which would be their final stage. In addition, more experienced teachers may just decide to focus on reflecting on their practice, and this is OK but I would suggest eventually they reflect on all stages of the framework (but not necessarily in a linear manner as they can jump about) because they are all linked. Each teacher behaviour in a classroom reflects the teacher's philosophy, principles, theories and critical view of what they do.

- Q. What future directions for research in Reflective Practice would you like to suggest?

Recently I reviewed 116 articles for a different journal on the practices that encourage TESOL teachers to reflect. The results are overwhelmingly positive of the transformative potential of engaging in Reflective Practice and the power of awareness of who we are, what we do, how we do it and why we do it. One finding was that many of the studies were concentrated with the principles, theory and practice domains of reflection. So I would encourage teacher educators and teachers to engage in reflections on who they are as teachers as they articulate their philosophy of practice as well as the context they are reflecting in. However, this does not mean that Reflective Practice is egocentric and only within the person reflecting. Rather it means that locus of Reflective Practice is in the total event and includes the context in which it takes place. Thus I would suggest that future research should not only look at what works and does not work in the classroom and why but also include the teacher as whole person (we cannot separate the teacher from the teaching) and the impact of the social, moral, ethical, and political issues on our practice.

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