

Reflective Practice In ELT

THOMAS S. C. FARRELL

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REVIEWED BY JENNIFER WALLACE

As a learner or teacher, you have doubtless encountered lesson activities that include elements of reflection, perhaps in the form of questions or a journal. But was the activity you undertook really reflection? This is the question Thomas Farrell poses in the opening to his book, *Reflective Practice in ELT*. With the rising popularity of reflective practice (RP) in language teaching and the proliferation of approaches to reflection, how can and should RP in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) be characterised? Farrell's proposal is a multi-layered, holistic conception of RP, encompassing a discussion of the breadth of previous RP research, a proposed RP typology, 'reflective break' questions for teacher training, and how his ideas can be applied. Farrell's book presents a compelling case for refining understanding of RP in TESOL.

Drawing from the field of education research generally, the first chapter, 'What is reflective practice?', provides definitions of RP from 22 salient studies. Despite a number of publications on the topic of RP in TESOL, few attempt to define RP in this context, and this leads Farrell to the overall purpose of this chapter: his working definition of RP in TESOL. Chapter 2, 'Typologies of reflective practice', explores existing key typologies of RP in general education. These, with the working definition, laid the groundwork for Farrell's 'Framework for Reflecting on Practice' (2015). According to Farrell's framework, RP for a teacher comprises five 'stages/levels of reflection' (p. 51): philosophy (self-knowledge shaped by background and experience); principles (underlying beliefs about the profession); theory (the reasons behind working choices); practice (observable actions in the classroom); and beyond practice (consideration of broader moral and affective issues).

Chapter 3, 'Six principles of reflective practice', proposes that for a teacher to truly practise reflection, their engagement with the stages of RP must be underpinned by holding a set of principles of RP. RP is holistic, is evidence based, involves dialogue, bridges principles and practices, requires an inquiring disposition, and is a way of life (p. 58). It is difficult to argue with Farrell's choices, as most, if not all, these principles are those that many teachers aspire to or claim to teach by. Each principle is described in theory and practice. For example, Farrell argues that establishing a critical friendship could engender the 'involves dialogue' principle of RP. However, even with the examples, the reader is left at the end of Chapter 3 with many questions about how to operationalise the framework and principles in tandem. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 attempt to answer those questions by laying out concrete tools for and methods of RP through practical examples.

Chapter 4, 'Tools of reflective practice', is similar in structure to research methods sections of teacher training books. Farrell discusses eight familiar methods of data collection. Each description outlines different techniques teachers can try, along with the benefits and challenges inherent in using each tool. For teachers accustomed to reading about the benefits of, for example, peer observation, but coming up against the personal or institutional barriers to using such a tool, this inclusion is reassuring because it shows that Farrell practises principles of RP in his own work.

An illustrative case study in Chapter 5, 'One teacher's reflective journey', contextualises the RP framework, principles and tools. For a teacher reader, this kind of exemplification of the principles is engaging because the case study teacher's personal and professional experiences, conveyed through analysis of interviews, classroom recordings and written reflections, are relatable. The participant's experience highlights that, while a teacher's disposition is integral to fostering a reflective approach, the institution in which the teacher works is also responsible for cultivating a 'climate of reflection' (p. 125). Chapter 6, 'Cultivating reflective practice', draws on John Dewey in outlining three 'attitudes' (p. 128) which are key to promoting a reflective disposition in individual teachers: open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness. Farrell details approaches and techniques schools can implement to develop a culture of collaboration and reflection, such as teacher evaluation and mentoring. The message is that more supportive institutions lead to more reflective teachers, and an overall better learner experience.

Drawing to the end of the book in Chapter 7, 'Ten questions for reflection', Farrell attempts to address remaining questions the reader might have related to the 'ambiguity of the concept of RP' (p. 145) and its application. Among them, the most provocative for me is 'Can reflection be faked?' Farrell's answer reveals an unpalatable truth in TESOL, which is that the reflective hurdle components of many courses often

lead to rote reflections. This is a reminder to the reader that the complex framework Farrell outlines in the book is complex for a reason: 'recipe-following checklists' for RP (p. 154) will not lead to productive reflection. Farrell ends by looking to the future of RP and summarising a forthcoming series of books on the subject.

There might be more literature review in this book than a busy teacher is looking for, but it is well worth the read for its overview of the tools of reflection and its acknowledgement of the affective and ethical dimensions of RP. Curriculum writers can derive much from its warning against how a 'discourse of reflection' (p. 155) could lead to less-than-honest reflections in language courses. Teacher trainers will appreciate the pedagogical nature of the book, with its inclusion of reflective breaks. The attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and whole-heartedness that Farrell argues are essential to cultivating RP are in fact central to the experience of reading this book. They are exemplified by the writer's persistent questioning of both his own ideas and those of the reader, and his willingness to confront the ambiguity in the field. I suggest that this book is needed now for the reminder it provides that, despite recent seismic shifts in the logistics of our profession, we still reflect and teach with our whole selves.

REFERENCES

Farrell, T. S. C. (2015). *Promoting teacher reflection in second language education: A framework for TESOL professionals*. New York: Routledge.

Jennifer Wallace is an EAP teacher at UTS Insearch, Sydney. Her research interests include teacher beliefs, attitudes and cognition. She is also passionate about supporting academic English students to develop critical thinking skills.

jennifer.wallace@insearch.edu.au