



## Promoting Teacher Reflection in Schools: Becoming Centers of Inquiry

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### Abstract

For some time, schools have been consumers of others' investigations and reflections rather than generators of their own research and reflections. However, if schools adapt a culture of collaboration this can result in a shared sense of values and beliefs about teaching and learning, where they are all there together working for their students' collective success. Building such a collaborative school culture can be achieved through the adaption of reflective practice in the workplace through the development of reflection-generating activities as collaborative teacher evaluation and mentorship, critical friends, team-teaching, and peer coaching. Teachers themselves can also engage in their own bottom-up reflections through reflection-generating activities as writing, classroom observations, action research, narrative study, and lesson study.

This paper first outlines and discusses how reflection can be promoted at the institutional level in schools and institutions (top-down), and then outlines and discusses how teachers themselves can engage in their own (bottom-up) reflection-generating activities.

## Introduction

Reflective practice generally means that language teachers systematically examine their beliefs and practices about teaching and learning throughout their careers (Farrell, 2007). Research indicates that when language teachers engage in reflective practice, they can explore connections between their beliefs (espoused theories) and what actually occurs in their practices (theories-in-use) about learning and teaching, and results can be transformative for many (Farrell, 2018a,b). One of the main benefits of engaging in reflective practice as Freeman (2016, p. 208) has noted, is that reflection offers a way into the less “accessible aspects of teacher’s work”; however, he also pointed out that the level of access actually depends on how reflection is operationalized or implemented. Indeed, many practicing teachers must implement their own reflections and as such left to the prevailing cultures that exist in that school or institution that exist on a continuum from a highly individualistic culture, or as Lortie (1975, p. 195) has noticed as a “live and let live, and help [only] when asked”, to a culture of collaboration where teachers “have peers but no colleagues” (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986, p. 508).

This paper promotes the latter school culture of collaboration because this results in a shared sense of values and beliefs about teaching and learning, where they are all there together working for their students’ collective success. However, for such a school culture of collaboration to work, school leaders must be fully invested in promoting collaboration, because if a school pursues such a culture of individualism, it can damage the long-term interests of that school. Building such a collaborative school culture can be achieved through the adaption of reflective practice in the workplace through the development of reflection-generating activities as collaborative teacher evaluation and mentorship, critical friends, team-teaching, and peer coaching. Teachers themselves can also engage in their own bottom-up reflections through reflection-generating activities as writing, classroom observations, action research, narrative study, and lesson study. This paper first outlines and discusses how reflection can be promoted at the institutional level in schools and institutions (top-down), and then outlines and discusses how teachers themselves can engage in their own (bottom-up) reflection-generating activities.

### Institutional Level Reflective Practice

For too long now most institutions and schools have been the target of other academics or scholars’ inquiry, where a so-called expert comes into to the school to ‘examine’ or ‘investigate’ various teaching methods and behaviors as well as student learning behaviors. The results of many of these ‘studies’ usually end up as top-down policies far removed from the everyday lives and experiences of teachers on the front lines. Thus these institutions and schools rather than becoming generators of research from their center of inquiry, have unfortunately become consumers of others’ research where they then must attempt to implement regardless of the realities of *their* classrooms or its appropriateness for *their* students’ learning benefits. However, if the culture of reflective practice is developed, each school can generate their own research knowledge and where each teacher can engage in furthering their professional knowledge together with the school administration rather than opposed to it. Thus, schools can establish a system of teacher evaluation through self-reflection, they can engage in mentoring to guide less experienced teachers, encourage critical friendships, team teaching for teachers to reflect with each other, as well as peer coaching.

### Collaborative Teacher Evaluation

It is a fact of life that for most TESOL teachers they will be evaluated in some capacity over their careers. Although each teacher evaluation may vary, the evaluation process invariably involves observations of some kind of the teacher in action in the classroom by someone who ‘visits’ or drops-in the class on one or more days to appraise ‘features’ of the teacher’s teaching behaviors. These ‘features’ (usually in terms of behaviors) are often pre-determined by others (inside or outside the school) and presented as checkmarks on what is commonly called a teacher evaluation form. Such approaches to teacher evaluations have many shortcomings that include the following: no agreement on what ‘good’ teaching is, rating of teaching behaviors is ambiguous, and the process is top-down.

Teacher evaluations can be more collaborative, however, if both sides share the burden of evaluation and this can be encouraged if teachers are given more responsibility in the evaluation process. In other words, we can *shift* the burden of evaluation from solely on the shoulders of administrators and supervisors to more of a sharing process where each teacher is required to compile a teaching portfolio (Farrell, 2021). A teaching portfolio is a collection of information about a teacher's practice. It tells the story of the teacher's efforts, skills, abilities, achievements, and contributions to students, colleagues, institutions, academic disciplines, and community. A teaching portfolio might include (but is not limited to) lesson plans, anecdotal records, student projects, class newsletters, videotapes, annual evaluations, and letters of recommendation. It should be remembered that the teaching portfolio is not a one-time snapshot of where the teacher is at present; it is a growing collection of carefully selected and recorded professional experiences, thoughts, and goals. After collecting and assembling all the materials for their teaching portfolios, teachers reflect with their supervisors on what they have put together and assess their current and future teaching plans. In such a manner, teaching portfolios can provide teachers with opportunities for self-reflection and collaboration with colleagues in addition to opportunities to collaborate with the school for the purposes of teacher evaluation as well as planning individual professional development paths. Thus, if we consider teacher evaluation through reflective practice this produces a more collaborative school environment and is beneficial to both the teacher who is being evaluated, and the supervisor doing the evaluation (and the school) because both discuss a teacher's development over time.

### **Mentorship**

Another important collaborative relationship that can develop among teaching peers as well as the administration in a school is mentoring of some sort to help each other grow. A mentor is usually an experienced teacher that is appointed or volunteers, to support a new teacher. These mentor teachers have usually been drawn from veteran teachers within a school who help beginners learn the philosophy, cultural values and established sets of behaviors expected by the schools employing them. Research indicates that beginning teachers who are mentored are more effective teachers in their early years, since they learn from guided practice rather than depending upon trial-and-error efforts alone (Ingersoll, 2012). It was found with TESOL that generally mentored novice TESOL teachers tend to leave the teaching profession at a rate lower than non-mentored novices (Manuel & Carter, 2016).

Within English language teaching, Malderez and Bodoczky (1999, p. 4) describe five different roles that mentors can play: (1) they can be models who inspire and demonstrate. (2) They can be acculturators who show mentees the ropes. (3) They can be sponsors who introduce the mentees to the "right people". (4) They can be supporters who are there to act as sounding boards purposes, should mentees need to let off steam. (5) They can be educators who act as sounding boards for the articulation of ideas to help new teachers achieve professional learning objectives. Malderez and Bodoczky (1999, p. 4) suggest that most mentors will be involved "to a greater or lesser degree in all five roles."

### **Critical Friends**

Critical friends are teachers who collaborate in a two-way mode that encourages discussion and reflection in order to improve the quality of language teaching and learning (Farrell, 2019a,b). Teacher critical friendships entail entering into a collaborative arrangement with another teacher "in a way which encourages talking with, questioning, and even confronting, the trusted other, in order to examine planning for teaching, implementation, and its evaluation" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 41). This arrangement also leads to development of a culture of reflection in an institution if such friendships are encouraged from the administration; however, such friendships should also be on a voluntary basis. In such arrangements, peers collaborate with trusted colleagues who give advice as a friend rather than consultants in a structured environment.

Critical friends can stimulate self-reflection and encourage discussion to improve teaching and learning in a safe environment that leads to an increase in collegiality in the institution. The purpose of entering into critical friendships is for mutual development of the teachers as there is no hierarchy of expertise among the friends. As a result of entering into such arrangements, teachers can gain new and deeper understandings and insights about

their practice and try out new ideas and strategies as they reflect on their practice. Critical friendships can help to highlight any gaps between beliefs and practices because as Lakshmi (2014, p. 202) notes, “Teachers constructed their own explanations of teaching derived from their own practices, and the explanations (or knowledge) were socially negotiated and restructured within their classrooms.” Indeed, Lakshmi (2014, p. 200) links the collaboration involved in such arrangements as beneficial to their self-evaluation (for more on self- and teacher-evaluation, see above): “Teachers realized the need for collaborative work, and sought advice from their senior colleagues to solve their classroom problems and for their self-evaluation.”

### **Team Teaching**

Team teaching is a type of critical friendship arrangement whereby two or more teachers cooperate as equals as they take responsibility for planning, teaching and evaluating a class a series of classes or a whole course (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Team teaching involves developing a collaborative partnership between two or more teachers in order to develop a lesson to teach and evaluate (see also lesson study below). It is important that in order to develop the culture of reflection within the institution that teams gather voluntarily rather than having this imposed from above by the school administration so that the teachers can take responsibility for the planning, delivery and evaluation of the lesson. Typically, in such a collaboration, teachers share responsibility for planning a class and or course, then teaching the class/course, completing follow-up work (i.e. evaluations/assessments), and making various decisions and outcomes. Teachers usually cooperate as equals, though some elements of coaching (see below) may occur (Farrell, 2019a). Of course, teachers can define their roles and responsibilities that are most suitable for their own individual needs and situations.

Team teaching can promote collegiality and alleviates the feeling of isolation of teachers and lowers student-teacher ratios in classrooms. It can build confidence in teachers because they can obtain feedback that is informal but free from bias and thus promotes mutual trust and understanding between teachers in institutions. Team teaching also enhances teaching techniques as teachers try out different activities in a supportive environment. Most of all, team teaching collaborations promote reflection for both teachers and students.

### **Peer Coaching**

Peer coaching is another collaborative arrangement between teachers in institutions that can promote a culture of reflection (Farrell, 2019a). It is different from team teaching arrangements above as it is intended to improve specific instructional techniques of one of the peers, usually the observed teacher, in a supportive environment. It is non-evaluative as the other peer (usually a more experienced teacher in the institution) provides constructive feedback in a safe learning environment so that the observed teacher (less experienced) can develop new knowledge and skills and a deeper awareness of his or her own teaching. Thus the more experienced teacher can take on a mentoring role (see above) but both teachers view themselves as peers and equals.

There are different types of peer coaching arrangements such as technical coach where a teacher seeks the assistance of another teacher who is experienced and more knowledgeable in order to learn new teaching methods/techniques (Richards & Farrell, 2005). A collegial coach is a peer relationship where two teacher-peers focus on refining their existing teaching practices (Richards & Farrell, 2005). A challenge coach is a situation where a problem arises and two teachers work jointly to resolve the problem (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Peer coaching arrangements promote greater awareness and self-confidence as well as greater collaboration among teachers in institutions. Peer coaching also improves school climate because it facilitates the exchange of teaching methods, materials, approaches, and techniques. It also promotes the implementation of new strategies in the classroom and thus improves instructional skills (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

### **Teacher Level Reflective Practice**

Teachers can come together either physically or virtually and engage in reflective discussions when implementing any of the institutionally encouraged reflective practices. Teachers can also engage in their own

reflective practice by utilizing such reflective tools as writing, classroom observations, action research, narrative study, and/or lesson study.

## **Writing**

Teachers do a lot of writing within their workday, be it on lesson planning (see also lesson study below), reports on students' progress or the like, but they seldom take time to write for themselves professionally about their practice. Writing has its own built-in reflective mechanism; the process entails that writers must stop to think and organize their thoughts before writing (either with a pen or computer) and then decide on what to write. After this they can 'see' (literally) their thoughts and reflect on these for self-understanding.

For teachers, such reflective writing can include written accounts of teachers' thoughts, classroom observations, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences about their practice both inside and outside the classroom (Farrell, 2013). Teachers can include record of critical incidents, perceived problems/issues, and insights that occurred during lessons (reflection-in-action) in order to gain new understandings of their own teacher learning and instructional practices.

There are different modes of writing for reflection some of which include teacher journals, and online writing in blogs, chats and forums. When teachers are writing as reflection on their professional practice, they can either write for themselves or keep it, or they can share it after writing. It all depends on why they write. When they write for themselves, they can include their personal thoughts and feelings as well as facts about their practice. They can read these for later reflection with the idea that they can look for patterns over time on the contents of their writing. When they reflect on the patterns they notice in their journal writing, they can become more aware of issues of interest in their practice. Teachers can also write in online formats such as blogs, chats and forums. Such online formats are easy to use (does not require understanding of HTML or web scripting), interactive and can be continuously updated (Yang, 2009). Some TESOL teachers report that online writing formats are better than discussions because teachers can challenge peers online easier than when discussing issues face-to-face (Yang, 2009).

When implementing reflective writing either in traditional pen and paper, electronic or online, it is always best to set goals for writing and choose what audience you are writing for (yourself and/or others). In addition, teachers should set a time frame for the writing activity otherwise there is a danger it may fizzle out without any such limit (Richards & Farrell, 2005). As noted above, it is a good idea to review entries regularly to find emerging patterns and also evaluate the journal writing experience to see if it meets your goals stated above (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Teachers can choose to structure their writing in a kind of developmental sequence from the non-reflective, descriptive writing to descriptive reflection, becoming more able to give a range of reasons for acting as they do. Teachers can then take a more exploratory examination of why things occur the way they do and engage in dialogic reflection. Finally, as Hatton and Smith (1995) note, teachers can take a more critical perspective depending on where they are reflectively.

Overall reports from TESOL teachers suggest that reflective writing can help them become more aware of their beliefs and practices about language learning and teaching. Genc's (2010, p. 407) research noted that for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers, "Reflective journals guided them to criticize, build knowledge about teaching a language, and gain the autonomy to make more conscious and informed decisions about their classrooms." By writing regularly teachers are able to identify and address issues critical to their practice within their teaching contexts, and as a result provide more learning opportunities for their students.

## **Classroom Observations**

Teachers can systematically reflect on their practice through classroom observations of what they do while they teach. These can be conducted either alone, with a facilitator, supervisor, mentor, or with peers (Farrell,

2019b). When teachers engage in classroom observations to reflect on their teaching they generally want to see if what they say they do (their beliefs) is what they actually do (their practice) and generally hope that there is more convergence between the two, rather than too much divergence. Thus, they must decide if they want to capture a broad picture of their lessons in a descriptive manner as a means of uncovering patterns in their actual teaching behaviors. Or they can decide to capture a narrow picture of a particular lesson by focusing on specific and/or pre-determined behaviors such as teacher questions, instructions, and wait-time and so on.

Teachers have a variety of instruments at their disposal to collect data about their teaching while engaged in classroom observations. They can for example decide to take a general approach to collecting data by using such instruments as written ethnography (Richards & Farrell, 2005) and/or they can record their lesson by audio and/or video recording (Farrell, 2011). Teachers can also look into a more detailed approach by using some form of category instrument to collect data such as check-lists (Richards & Farrell, 2005) or even a particular category instrument as SCORE (Seating Chart Observation Record) (Farrell, 2011).

As mentioned above, teachers can use the above instruments alone while reflecting on their teaching or they can get assistance from others who will observe them as they teach. Regardless of where the observer comes from, it is best that the observers are trained in some manner how to watch, listen, and record but not take active part in the lesson. Regardless of the focus of the observation or the instruments used to collect data, teachers can use classroom observations as a means of examining and analyzing teaching events as part of their overall reflections on their work.

For the most part, when teachers engage in classroom observations in a supportive environment, they can better examine what they do, rather than what they think they do, because they have obtained evidence from whatever instruments they have used to collect this evidence. For example, Farrell (2011) reported on a short series of classroom observations where a facilitator for a novice English as a second language (ESL) teacher used a seating chart observation record or SCORE as a category instrument to collect hard evidence and discovered that such a non-inferential classroom observation instrument was most beneficial to novice ESL teachers than more open-ended instruments because it enabled the teacher to move from a descriptive reflective phase to a more critical stance on her practice. The instrument allowed the teacher to see that there was convergence between her stated beliefs and her actual classroom practices.

Thus, when teachers engage in classroom observations using a variety of feedback sources such as listening to audio recordings of their teaching and/or watching videos of their teaching, they can develop increased awareness regarding their teaching and their students' learning. Such raised awareness of their teaching behaviors and their impact on their students' learning can lead to more focus on their students' needs and how to respond to these needs so that they can provide the best possible learning opportunities for their students.

### **Action Research**

Action research and reflective teaching practice are depicted as closely connected because action research comes under the umbrella of reflection. Although there are many different definitions of specifically what action research is, what the definitions have in common is that action research involves inquiring into one's own practice through a cyclical process that involves planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Farrell, 2018b). The general stages (cyclical) of the action research process are (from Farrell, 2018b): plan (problem identification), research (literature review), observe (collecting data), reflect (analysis), and act (redefining the problem).

The cycle begins with the language teacher seeing a need to investigate a problem (perceived or otherwise) and then starting to plan how to investigate ways of solving this problem. The teacher starts reading some background literature on the problem to give him/her ideas on how to solve the problem. Of course, this "research" cycle can include talking to other colleagues about the concern as they may have some advice to offer. The teacher then plans a strategy to collect data now that the problem has been identified and researched. Once the data has been collected, the teacher then analyzes and reflects on it and makes a data-driven decision to take some action. The final step in this spiraling cycle of research and action is problem redefinition. In this way,

language teachers can take more responsibility for the decisions they make in their classes. However, these decisions are now informed decisions, not just based on feelings or impulse.

Although there are challenges associated with action research especially when conducting an action research project alone, some of these issues can be alleviated when the research is undertaken with other like-minded teachers. This process is sometimes called collaborative action research and such studies have reported positive effects for all the teachers concerned as well as their students (Banegas, Pavese, Velázquez, & Vélez, 2013). By engaging in action research projects as part of their reflections on practice, language teachers can reexamine their philosophy, assumptions, beliefs and theory as they decide on action plans put in place to improve their practice.

### **Narratives**

Teachers can also reflect on their work by telling the story of their experience or their narrative accounts of their life as a teacher. These teacher-generated stories offer valuable information for the teacher because they are usually emotionally driven and can be infused with interpretation. Such teacher narratives serve to bring meaning to their experiences and as such provide more evidence of who they are, where they come from and who they want to be professionally (Farrell, 2015b). As a result of reflecting on their narratives, teachers become more aware of the emotional dimensions of their practice as well as more knowledge of the complexity of their lives in terms of their strengths, triumphs, weaknesses and disappointments and how all these combine to make them ‘who’ they are professionally (Shelley, Murphy, & White, 2013). Thus, teachers can engage in personal theorizing as a result of telling their story as each event in their experience has a particular meaning for them.

Teachers can just tell or write the story of their professional lives or they can use some scaffolds such as narrative frames for more structure when telling their stories. Teachers can reconstruct their life experiences to simply tell and/or write in chronological order an in-depth biography that can offer insight into their past to uncover their philosophy of practice. They can do this by mapping out various past experiences and how these may have been impacted by their culture, family upbringing, education, religion, community, and the various experiences that have helped shape them as individuals and as teachers. For the most part, when teachers tell their stories, they can get a better sense of ‘who’ they are professionally (and personally) and as a result if they do not like ‘who’ they have become they can then engage in a process of developing a new story about ‘who’ they want to be in the future as a language teacher. Thus, as a result of telling their stories, language teachers can gain a newfound awareness of the complexities of what shapes their practice outside lesson planning and other aspects of their theory of practice and as a result, develop plans for future action.

### **Lesson Study**

Lesson study is another reflection-generating activity language teachers can use to reflect on their practice. This involves language teachers working together to plan and teach various lessons (see also team-teaching above). Lesson study is collaborative, teacher-directed, non-evaluative and grounded in everyday classroom practices. Shi and Yang (2014) reported on the positive effects of lesson study that allowed TESOL teachers to exchange their views openly, and thus develop a shared understanding of their practice while at the same time negotiate their own views on their practice. Lesson study allows such collaboration with other teachers in order for all concerned to have a better understanding of their practice.

In a lesson study activity, teams of teachers usually co-plan a lesson and after the lesson, the team (the teacher, observers, and any outsiders invited) gather together in order to discuss their observations. After the group discussions, the team revisits the lesson based on the feedback they received, and a revised lesson is then delivered either to the same class or to a different group of students. A second review is held that focuses on the overall effectiveness of the lesson. The lesson study cycle ends with the team publishing a report, which includes lesson plans, observed student behavior, teacher reflections, and a summary of the group discussions.

More recently lesson planning has evolved into two different types of collaborative lesson planning: product-oriented approach and problem-based approach (Xu, 2015). In a product-oriented approach to lesson study,

teachers produce a complete, ready-to-use set of teaching resources as a visible product which is then shared among the team of teachers. In a problem-based approach to lesson study, teachers can co-produce discussions (may be detailed or not) on certain teaching issues, which as Xu (2015, p. 146) notes, may “not provide concrete help in physical forms but may inspire insights and facilitate exchange of teaching experience.” Xu (2015, p. 146) maintained that “product-oriented collaboration is more likely to alleviate novice teachers' anxiety as it contributes to a more supportive community environment, while problem-based collaboration tends to leave novice teachers with the impression that they are forced to struggle on their own, especially at the very beginning stage of their teaching careers.”

In addition, lesson planning can be conducted in online modes such as discussion boards, chat rooms, wikis, audio chats, virtual worlds and podcasts (Dooly & Sadler, 2013). The nature of such online lesson study collaborations can be dialogic discussions of practice, and/or displays of teacher talk that enable teachers to make more theory/practice connections and the development of critical thinking as a result of reflection on lesson study. Studies that use such online collaborative lesson study modes have reported that the intense teacher-teacher collaborations involved in lesson study actually result in improved lesson instruction (Xu, 2015). Indeed, when language teachers engage in lesson study in a supportive environment, they can learn how to innovate or refine a pedagogical approach as a result of the collaboration with other teachers.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper outlined and discussed the idea of developing a culture of reflection in the individual and the school or institution. The paper suggests that when school leaders are attentive to building a school culture of reflection, everyone benefits: the school, the teachers, and the students. This can be achieved by schools encouraging and embracing activities such as self-assessment, mentoring, critical friendships, team-teaching, and peer coaching to develop a positive school climate where everybody learns. In addition, teachers can also engage in their own reflections through dialoging with other teachers, writing, classroom observations, action research, narrative study, and lesson study. Such a top-down and bottom-up approach to promoting reflective practice within schools can result in schools becoming centers of inquiry that generate teacher knowledge rather than becoming consumers of so-called expert knowledge.

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