



Reflective practice in ELT

by Thomas S.C. Farrell, Bristol (USA) and Sheffield (UK), Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2019, 1st edition, 186 pp., \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN-13 978-1-78179-654-2

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BOOK REVIEW

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Reflective Practice in ELT is the first of an upcoming series of books dedicated to the question of Reflection in the field of education. Thomas Farrell, who has devoted over 35 years to reflective practice (RP), is the author and editor of a wealth of publications about this subject. Reflection is a concept that has progressively drawn the attention of educational professionals, especially after the publication of *How We Think*, by John Dewey (1933), who deemed reflection necessary as an 'escape from the purely impulsive or purely routine action' (15). In this book, which provides an introduction to some of the major themes in Farrell's work, the reader can find insight into the many definitions, levels, typologies, principles and applications of the notion, and some of the issues and queries that remain unresolved are critically addressed.

The first chapter deals with three commonly used RP terms, namely, 'reflection', 'reflective practice', and 'critical reflection', as these seem to sometimes overlap, muddying the issue. Farrell (2019)¹ explains some of the nuances which differentiate these terms, citing some definitions of reflection and RP which have arisen within the field of education, concluding with his own definition of RP (28):

A cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and, while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom.

It seems safe to say that, as far as the length and breadth are concerned, Farrell opts for a deeper form of reflection, involving a critical approach which considers the sociocultural, historical, political and moral framework. The chapter concludes with a chronological overview of some of the models of RP based on levels of reflection, detailing the evolution of the concept in the work of various researchers. Though each author presents these levels differently, they seem to follow a common hierarchy that ranges from what is merely observed in the practice to the deeply rooted morals and values present in the community (27).

After introducing Dewey's 'Reflective Inquiry Model', in the second chapter Farrell focuses on models of reflection, distinguishing between those separated into levels and those based on iteration, though acknowledging that this distinction may be fuzzy. A brief overview is then provided for those which influenced both Farrell's early and revised models. In his 'Framework for Reflecting on Practice' (50), greater attention is paid to the 'teacher-as-person' by including levels such as their 'philosophy', and 'principles', which tie in with their practice (51). This model favors the expansion of reflective practice beyond what is observable and delves into the human side of reflection, thus providing a deeper, global and multidimensional insight into teaching practice. The last level, 'beyond practice', extends this reflection to the aforementioned 'broader socio-political' and 'affective/moral issues that impact practice', hence closing the reflective cycle (52).

In Chapter Three, Farrell provides an overview of six principles of RP, observing that ideally, it is holistic, evidence-based, dialogical, a bridge between principles and practice, entails an inquiring disposition, and is lifelong. With these principles in mind, it becomes clear that RP is not an isolated and arbitrary 'task', nor does it rely on mechanical actions, but rather aids professionals in making 'informed decisions about their practice' (62), also including 'group discussions' (68) and peer observations. Furthermore, since RP acts as a bridge between principles and practice, the underlying

¹All forthcoming references to Farrell are to the publication under review (2019).

attitudes, beliefs and ideologies of the teacher in the sociocultural context are also pertinent. In order to gain authentic insight from reflection, it is important to have a disposition of 'open-mindedness', 'wholeheartedness', and 'responsibility' (75). Farrell concludes that, for teachers to develop 'a deeper understanding of their teaching', RP should be a lifelong endeavor, and not only a strategy for problem-solving (76).

The fourth chapter focuses primarily on eight tools frequently used for RP within the educational field, as well as a series of reported advantages and challenges regarding each one. The tools in question are dialogue, writing, classroom observation, action research, narratives, lesson study, case analysis, and concept mapping. Farrell mentions that these tools are often used in a strategic combination in accordance with the individual setting.

Chapter 5, in this writer's opinion one of the most interesting in the book, presents the case study of a teacher, alias Richard, in the reflective journey on his experiences while teaching in South Korea. The study allows the reader to observe Farrell's levels of reflection in their practical application, delving into the different dimensions in detail and providing a description of the collected data, exemplified in written transcripts of his lessons. As noted previously, Farrell's model is multidimensional and therefore takes into account both the personal and professional journey of this teacher, the beliefs and assumptions that shape his practice, and a description of his approach to teaching, as well as the underlying theories which have influenced his methods. The process of this reflection is narrated in a comprehensible and appealing style, allowing the reader to sympathize and relate to Richard's experience.

The sixth chapter sheds light on how the 'ingredients for RP' presented in this book may be put into use amongst teachers in an institution, in other words, how a 'climate' for RP may be cultivated (125). Firstly, Farrell focuses on individual assets. He maintains the idea that RP could potentially serve as a tool for professional empowerment and agrees with Dewey regarding the need for an adequate disposition. He then provides an outline of some ideas to foster RP at an institutional level and develop a 'school culture of reflection' (134), including teacher evaluation, mentoring, team teaching, peer coaching, critical friends, and school-sponsored events that encourage collaboration.

The book concludes with some of the most common questions concerning the application of RP within the TESOL framework. It begins by questioning whether RP has become just another 'bandwagon' with empty promises for a definitive solution to all teaching problems (146). Other questions include aspects related to the workability of RP, and whether it has been embraced and can be adequately adapted to the TESOL framework. Finally, suggestions are provided regarding the application and assessment of reflection, with special emphasis on novice or pre-service teachers. When displaying his viewpoint about these issues, Farrell adopts a mature and critically reflective stance, pre-empting possible inquiries and counterarguments that could arise from his statements.

This first book of the forthcoming series 'Reflective Practice in Language Education' (see 166–169 for a list of upcoming titles) provides an overview of the different aspects surrounding the complexity of reflection, as well as a series of useful insights and tools for both TESOL professionals and those who are interested in embarking on a reflective journey.

In turn, Farrell's analysis of reflection is not limited to a rigid taxonomy, but rather entails a non-linear and multidimensional process in which the human factor is key. After all, it is the human side of reflection which could offer the most promise in revealing the construct of our practice, the aspects of life we value the most, and our reactions to the inevitable issues and complications that arise in our profession. By delving into this human factor, which Farrell includes in his model through the levels of the teacher's philosophy and principles, we are provided with a tool for a deeper understanding of the reasons behind our actions, as well as a potential space to learn from this reflective process.

Newcomers to this field might find the 'reflective breaks' available in each of the chapters a useful asset for contemplation, as well as for engaging in the strong form of reflection encouraged by this author. Though not necessarily a book intended for an exclusively novice audience, as at times the vast number of models and typologies may result overwhelming, it indeed proves to be very useful

for reference at any level. Farrell's reflective teaching outlook shows awareness of the dynamic and ever-changing process that our career entails. As teachers, we are lifelong learners, and reflection is undoubtedly an asset for transmitting enthusiasm and willingness to learn to the students in an era of rapid information access where critical thinking becomes a crucial element.

One of the current issues surrounding RP, as stated by Mann and Walsh (2013), is the need for 'more insider views of reflection', which can 'provide a clearer understanding of the possibilities of 'doing' RP' (296). This issue is taken into consideration in Chapter 5, as the narration of Richard's reflective journey allows the reader to envision Farrell's levels of reflection as applied to a specific and interesting context to which the reader can relate.

As a suggestion for possible improvement, it could be pointed out that there are some cases of repetition, quite likely the result of this book being a compendium of previous publications. These could become rather obvious especially in an e-book format, due to the possibility of keyword search. That said, copy-editing of some of these reiterations would be advisable if there prove to be forthcoming editions.

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