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Reflective practice in an EFL teacher development group

T.S.C. Farrell

*National Institute of Education, English and Applied Linguistics, Nanyang Technological University,
469 Bukit Timah Road, 259756, Singapore*

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Abstract

Reflective practice is becoming an important feature of ESL/EFL teacher education programs worldwide. One way that may promote reflective practice for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers is the formation of teacher development groups. This study sought to investigate in what ways regular group discussion promotes reflective thinking. The study focused on three experienced EFL teachers in Korea who came together in weekly meetings to reflect on their work. The study examined: (1) what the teachers talked about in the group discussions; (2) whether the level of reflection was descriptive or critical; and (3) did this reflection develop over time? The group discussions were audio-taped and coded according to the topics they talked about, and these topics served as a measure of critical reflectivity. Results showed that: (1) the teachers talked about their personal theories of teaching and the problems faced in their teaching; and (2) all three teachers were reflective, to a certain extent, in their orientation to teaching, although they varied in their degree of reflectivity in each or all of the categories. Implications for the use of teacher development groups as a means to promote critical reflection for ESL/EFL teachers are discussed. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Reflection in teaching refers generally to teachers learning to subject their own beliefs of teaching and learning to a critical analysis, and taking more responsibility for their actions (Korthagen, 1993). One method of encouraging this reflection is for teachers to form groups in which they discuss and reflect on their work. This paper

reports on the process of reflection in one English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher development group in South Korea. Specifically, this paper suggests answers to the following questions: (1) What do a small group of experienced EFL teachers in Korea talk about when they come together to reflect on their work? (2) What is the level of reflection? Is it descriptive or critical? (3) Does this reflection develop over time? The paper starts with a working definition of reflection. Next, an outline of the study is presented along with the findings. Then the reflection process as a whole is discussed from the point of view of two of the participants. Finally, suggestions for future teacher development groups are presented.

2. Working definition of reflection

In English language teaching, Pennington (1992) proposes a reflective orientation "...as a means for (1) improving classroom processes and outcomes, and (2) developing confident, self-motivated teachers and learners..." (p. 51). In a more recent article, Pennington (1995) says that teacher change and development requires an awareness of a need to change. This awareness for change can be brought about by reflection. Richards (1990) sees reflection as a key component of teacher development. He says that self-inquiry and critical thinking can "help teachers move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition, or routine, to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking" (p. 5). Richards noted further that:

...critical reflection refers to an activity or process in which experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to a past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making, and as a source for planning and action... (cited in Farrell, 1995, p. 95)

For the purposes of this study the group recognized the importance of Pennington's (1992, 1995) and Richards' (1990; expressed in Farrell, 1995) ideas of reflection and critical reflection. We use Pennington's (1992) broad definition of reflection as a guide for this study where she says teachers analyze their own practice and its underlying basis, and then "consider alternative means for achieving their ends" (p. 48). Furthermore, this study consulted Ho and Richards' (1993) ideas on defining critical reflection (see Appendix).

3. The study

3.1. Context

The study took place in Seoul, South Korea, in the autumn semester of 1994. Three EFL teachers met weekly as a group to reflect on their work. They also observed each other's classes, and kept professional journals (see Farrell, 1996, for a

complete description of the observation, group and journals). This paper reports only on the reflections of the group at the weekly group meetings and outlines some of the participants' written comments on the process as a whole.

3.2. Participants

The three participants in the study are all experienced EFL teachers in Korea. Two of the participants are native Korean females teaching in the university system; one is full-time (T3), the other is part-time (T1). The other participant (T2) is a native-speaking EFL teacher in a private, South Korean company. Also, each participant had a different education level and varied teaching experience: T1 had a Master of Arts degree in Translation Studies and 5 years' teaching experience; T2 was finishing a Master of Science degree in Education and had 10 years' teaching experience. T3 had a Master of Science in Education with a specialization in English teaching and 5 years' teaching experience. Both of the Asian teachers were native-like speakers of English.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Data collection

The collection of data was accomplished by: (1) researcher's field notes and written logs; (2) group meetings; (3) individual meetings/observations; (4) participants' written reaction-journals; and (5) written artifacts.

4.1.1. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using a procedure of data reduction, and confirming findings. Data analysis began early, as suggested by Ely (1991), and actually started with the very first log notation. From this point, data were analyzed on an ongoing basis (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

4.2. Data reduction

For help with this phase, I followed Jorgenson (1989) who said, "As different ways of arranging materials are explored, you may find it useful to consult or revisit existing literature and theories related to your problem..." (p. 110). Costas (1992) also provided support for the use of a priori frameworks in qualitative data analysis. In discussing the coding of data he says:

Researchers who attempt to build on the discoveries of research conducted in situations and on topics similar to the ones they are investigating may refer to research or published works in the relevant area. Categories are then derived from statements or conclusions found in the literature of other researchers who investigated a similar phenomenon... (p. 258)

This study used a modified version of Ho and Richards' (1993) categories as a priori framework for data analysis. Thus, all the group meetings were coded according to six general categories or themes. Category one includes theories of teaching; category two includes approaches and methods used in the teachers' classes; category three includes evaluating teaching; category four concerns teachers' self awareness of their teaching; category five includes questions about teaching and asking for advice; and category six includes direct references to the group itself.

5. Findings

I present the findings as answers to the three research questions posed in the beginning of this paper.

5.1. (1) *What do a group of experienced EFL teachers in Korea talk about when they come together to reflect on their work?*

Table 1 shows the categories of topics that the teachers talked about at the group meetings. Generally, the group process itself was discussed most, with teaching coming second. I present a discussion of teaching first. Specifically, two topics—personal theories and problems in teaching—generated a lot of discussion in the group. I will outline some representative quotes from both these sub-topics and also comments about the group process.

5.1.1. *Personal theories*

The group discussions of theories of teaching centered on personal opinions, with little or no evidence of application of these theories to classroom practices. T3, for example, was interested in talking about her personal theories of teaching. In the second group meeting (10 September 1994) she said: "Good teaching is a feeling; (the) class is not a system. It is the chemistry between the students and the teacher. There is good and bad teaching." In the third group meeting (17 September 1994) she said: "Nobody can teach language. It's a habit, by themselves, they (the students) have to feel motivated. Model for them, if they feel bored, the teacher must motivate them."

5.1.2. *Problems*

When the teachers evaluated their teaching they focused more on their teaching problems, and on evaluating their lessons, while generating few solutions to these problems. All of the teachers evaluated their teaching in terms of the problems they encountered.

For example, T2 said at the second group meeting (10 September 1994) that the feeling he gets from class is "...not about what I think I should be. I want to feel good about teaching, but I don't. There must be a perfect way for teaching for everyone." At the 5 November 1994 meeting, T2 said that in his previous class "...everyone did not participate. The class could have produced more questions with more participation."

Table 1
Topics the teachers talked about in group meetings

Topic category	Sub-category	Number (total)	Category (total)	Number (average)	Teachers		
					T1	T2	T3
Theories of teaching	Theory	22		7.3	3	11 ^a	8 ^a
	Application	1		0.3	0	1 ^a	0
			23				
Approaches and methods	Approaches and methods	15		5.0	3	6 ^a	6 ^a
	Content	5		1.6	2 ^a	0	3 ^a
	Teacher's knowledge	10		3.3	2	2	6 ^a
	Learners	5		1.6	1	1	3 ^a
	School context	8		2.6	3 ^a	0	5 ^a
				43			
Evaluating teaching	Evaluating	9		3.0	3	3	3
	Problems	10		3.3	3	4 ^a	3
	Solutions	4		1.3	3 ^a	0	1
			23				
Self-awareness	Perception of self as teacher	8		2.6	1	3 ^a	4 ^a
	Personal growth	0		0.0	0	0	0
	Personal goals	3		1.0	1	2 ^a	0
			11				
Questions about teaching	Asking for reasons	2		0.6	0	2 ^a	0
	Asking for advice	4		1.3	1	3 ^a	0
			6				
Comments on the group		59		19.6	11	29 ^a	19
Total		165		54.4	37	67 ^a	61 ^a

^a Indicates the number of comments greater than average.

In the third meeting (17 September 1994) T1 said her class the previous night was "...a disaster. I wanted to scold the speaker about his speech, it was too long, too vivid, and too strong." At the ninth group meeting (5 November 1994) T1 said that she was exhausted during the class: "I couldn't open my mouth and I worried about my grammar mistakes. The subject of my class was a little difficult and (the students) were all not getting into it as they were before. They remained silent."

T3 talked about motivating Korean students. For example, in the third group meeting (17 September 1994) she said: "We must motivate the students because Korea is different than other countries; we have passive learning (to deal with) and the students can't think independently. That's what I found." In the fourth group meeting (24 September 1994) we were talking about how we ask questions in class and T3 said: "Korean college students know everything but if we do not ask easy questions (in English) they get bored. It is beyond their thinking; they stop thinking. The challenge is a language and culture problem-both." Also, in the fifth group meeting (1 October 1994) T3 said that she was not happy with her class because she

“thought I gave a lot of information for them to study by themselves, but they never study.”

However, only T1 generated solutions to these problems. For example, in the fifth meeting (1 October 1994) she complained about the quality of commercial textbooks, in that her students had not talked about a topic in the previous class: “I Koreanized the topics from the book. The Western books are not our culture. This (a Korean topic) is an example around us so my students can think about it more easily.”

Regarding the group itself, T2 was most vocal, and his comments were more negative than positive. For example, at the second group meeting (10 September 1994) he wondered about the approach of looking at our classes: “It is difficult to put a finger on what to look at. I don’t know if coding (of classes) is the right thing to do.” At the ninth group meeting (5 November 1994) he said he would like to change the approach of the group meetings from just talking about teaching in general to “. . . talking about our classes together. We could listen to the tape (of the class) and look at the video [of the class] together.” However, later in the same meeting he realized that he did not do any coding himself.

5.2. (2) *What is the level of their reflection? Is it descriptive or critical?*

My second research question sought to find out the extent to which the teachers reflected critically. Again, I took Ho and Richards’ (1993) work on reflective teaching as a heuristic device for defining critical reflection (see Appendix for an explanation of the difference between descriptive and critical reflection in this study). Table 2 outlines the extent of critical reflection in the group meetings.

Table 2 shows that T3 and T2 used the group meetings for a critically reflective experience. T3 reflected on her students’ learning style and how this influenced her teaching style. For instance, in the third group meeting of 17 September 1994, she said: “Korean students are different from other countries’ students, they are passive learners. The students can’t think independently.” She continued reflecting on this theme at the following group meeting of 24 September 1994 when she commented

Table 2
Traits of teachers’ critical reflection in each category in the group meetings

Category	Number (total)	Number (average)	Number of occurrences of traits of critical reflectivity in group meetings		
			T1	T2	T3
Theories of teaching	21	7.0	4	9 ^a	8 ^a
Approaches and methods	23	7.6	6	3	14 ^a
Evaluating teaching	23	8.0	9 ^a	7	7
Self-awareness	11	3.6	1	5 ^a	5 ^a
Questions about teaching	2	0.6	0	2 ^a	0
Total	80	26.8	20	26 ^a	34 ^a

^a Indicates number of comments greater than average.

that Korean college students know a lot, but, when confronted with expressing themselves in English, they cannot do it clearly. She blames their passiveness on both a language problem and a cultural trait of passiveness. This has influenced her teaching style. She said:

I am teaching a sophomore class, so they are not good at English that much so. You know, I don't expect too much. Sometimes they never talk. I ask them questions, you know, I'm—I just keep talking. . . If they don't speak to me in English, I just drop the subject and do other things.

T3's concern with her students' learning styles continued throughout the group meetings and, in the next to last group meeting of 19 November 1994, she reflected that:

Korean students are not ready to talk. . . They have every skill but are not ready to talk. When foreign teachers see the Korean students cannot talk, they think they have no idea about English. In my video class, I ask the students to write a paragraph about the movie and they are great. I cannot force them to talk; language is a tricky thing.

T3 seems to have used the group meetings to reflect critically on an issue that influenced what and how she was teaching and which also caused her some concern.

In contrast, T2 used the group meetings to explore his theories of teaching from a critically reflective point of view. For example, in the third group meeting (17 September 1994), he said that “. . . teaching English is entertainment, but it's English to motivate to study English. My definition of a teacher is someone whose students become good at English.” He further discussed his beliefs and theory of language teaching in the group meeting of 22 October 1994. In that meeting he said that any native English speaker can be a teacher of English:

If you can speak it, you can teach it. I think it's like. . . you bring in someone who has worked in physics as a physicist, and they go into the classroom and they start teaching physics to high-school students. I think, eh, this would be a good way to teach physics to kids. . . Don't need a qualification in teaching, there's no real knowledge base in teaching. . . Teachers can't really describe what they are doing.

He reflected on the same theme in the next meeting (29 October 1994) when he said:

Teaching is enclosed; we should bring in life (from) outside the classroom. . . (The) Classroom should not be separated. In medicine, doctors are professional, but teachers are not professional. Doctors have done the study, but teachers have a problem of showing others their profession.

5.3. (3) *Does this reflection develop over time?*

This question of the development of a more reflective approach is important because some teacher educators think that regular journal writing will increase critical reflection over time; although Ho and Richards' (1993) study on this topic was inconclusive. They cite their experience of using journals in their inservice TESOL teacher education program that "suggests that journal writing can provide an opportunity for teachers to write reflectively about their teaching" (Ho and Richards, 1993, p. 20).

I had hoped that my third research question would shed some more light on this topic and, therefore, I again referred back to Ho and Richards' (1993) study for guidelines. In that study, they developed seven traits of development in critical reflectivity; I used a slightly modified version of this to analyze the group discussions. I looked at the general pattern of individual comments to the group. The traits are as follows: (1) a greater variety of types of reflectivity over time; (2) discussing more theories that the experts developed; (3) being able to reflect through experiences of teaching; (4) being able to go beyond the classroom to the broader context; (5) being more able to evaluate both positively and negatively; (6) being more able to talk about problems and offer their own solutions; and (7) being able to ask more questions about teaching to themselves and each other.

These seven traits are of course related to the initial five general codes I had developed: theories, approaches, evaluation, self-awareness, and questions. I then compared the early and later entries of the group meeting comments to see if there was any development of the above seven traits; Table 3 shows the findings.

Overall, it seems that the teachers did not change their degree or focus of critical reflection a lot over the 16 weeks. Only T2 tended to change his degree of reflectivity in the group meetings. He became more critically reflective during the later meetings and began to evaluate his teaching more positively. For example, in the meeting of 11 November 1994, he said that he was moving "...towards a development in my

Table 3
The development in the degree of critical reflectivity as shown in group discussions

Traits of development in critical reflection	The development in the degree of critical reflection		
	T1	T2	T3
A greater variety of traits of critical reflection	–	+/-	–
Discussing theories of expert and own	–	+	–
Being more able to reflect through teaching experience	+/-	+/-	+/-
Being able to go beyond the classroom to greater context	+/-	–	–
Being more able to evaluate both positively and negatively	–	+	–
Being a better problem solver	–	+/-	–
Asking more questions	–	–	–

–, Shows no sign of development; +/-, mixed or unclear; +, shows signs of development.

looking at my teaching, before it was a theoretical thing. This probing has seemed to make me think more. I never knew that other teachers had the same problems.” Also, in the 25 November 1994 meeting, T2 said that he was “...trying to develop a new teaching method because I do not want to continue the same old way.” So T2 was beginning to open up a little and critically reflect on himself as a teacher. He was at a stage of asking himself questions but he did not discuss the questions or try to solve any of the problems he discussed. T3, although considered critically reflective in the group meetings, was mostly critically reflective from the beginning and generally used the same approach in her reflective thinking throughout the 16-week semester.

6. Discussion

The previous reporting of the findings was my version of what happened in the group. This next section is a report of what two of the participants (T2, T3) wrote (unpublished paper, 1997) about their experiences in the group. The report gives the reasons why they joined the group and what they got out of it.

6.1. *Reasons why they joined the group*

Both wrote that they joined the group because they say: “As ESL/EFL teachers, (we) need to share our own experiences.” By participating in a continuing dialogue about their experiences in their own and others’ classes they said, “We will come to a clearer understanding of what it is to be a teacher of ESL/EFL and of how we can become better at what we do”. Individually, T2 feels “we teachers don’t have a very good idea of what we are doing when we teach.”

T3 said she seeks to become a better teacher. She must also be able to find herself as a teacher by systematically looking at what she already knows and does, examining all the ideas presented to her and then answering her own problems on the basis of her own experience.

6.2. *Reactions to the teacher development group*

The two participants wrote about their perceptions on what happened at the group’s meetings:

At the 12 group meetings, which were supportive, T led a discussion about things that had concerned the members during the week. The diverse subjects included life experiences, inability to deal with large classes, students’ responses to questions in class, handling uninvolved students, material for conversation classes, giving feedback and the concept of what it is to be a teacher.

Individually, T3 wrote that:

although the group was so intensive that I missed a couple of meetings and sometimes felt that I had lost the spirit required of a ‘good’ EFL teacher, I was encouraged by it. The group members were great. I was especially fascinated by their attitude to and enthusiasm about teaching. They didn’t mind revealing how they think, prepare and teach and they accepted the differences between themselves and myself.

However, her participation in the group, although beneficial in many ways, was not without some confusion; she wrote:

During the period the group was meeting, I didn’t actually realize much of this (what was happening), just as if I had been journeying through a wood, not being able to see it for the trees.

And, now as a result of participating in the group she writes:

This following semester I have tried to share this feeling of self-awareness by getting students to record their own voice letters to me, to listen back to them and sense their ability and the problems they have and to discuss ideas they want with me. Sharing ideas and experiences makes us grow personally and professionally I believe.

T2 wrote that:

The group experience was a high point in my ESL career. I’m not too sure why. I think it was because of my relationship with T but there are a number of other factors which are relevant. The first was that this was the first time I had been observed by another teacher, there in the room! The second point was the journals which I wrote. This was the first time I had written for so long so consistently. The third point was the meetings.

However, he did note some of the shortcomings in the meetings; he writes:

They were important but they were not responsible for the excitement I found in the group. There was too little time to get to know the other two participants. . . This is not to say the meetings were a failure, just that more time was required to tune in.

In a general comment about the whole process both participants want:

To encourage ESL/EFL teachers to join groups like this, share their experiences and become able to look at themselves from different perspectives. We believe that the successful sharing which can result from this kind of dialogue group empowers every member of the group.

Because they found the whole experience a little bewildering to analyze, they asked themselves two questions to help clarify their thoughts: (1) Was the experience

empowering? (2) Are we better teachers? Their answer to the first question includes the following:

If empowerment is a feeling of confidence associated with autonomy, or freedom from being controlled (then) we had those feelings. It is sharing that was responsible. We were not told to do this or that. Because there was no authority structure and it was a voluntary group we felt able to be open with each other. But we also were not immune from outside influences like pressure and time and these affected us as a group. Whether this actually resulted in any development was up to the individual. But we are in the process of development. One semester is too short a period to expect any major development.

Their answer to the second question includes the following:

Are we now better teachers? We believe we are more efficient. We believe we can more easily understand our students' point of view. But does this mean we really are better? We wanted to be better. We did try. If trying means one becomes better, then we are now better teachers. We did do a lot of talking about our problems in different school settings and from different perspectives and if sharing knowledge helps then this also means we are better teachers.

7. Implications

If teachers come together to discuss their work, it is not at all clear that they will be critically reflective (as was defined in this study). The group discussions in this study tended to stay at the descriptive level of reflection. Therefore, the following five suggestions for future EFL/ESL teacher development groups are based on the experiences of the group in this study. These suggestions should not be viewed as prescriptions to be followed; rather, they are being presented here because the group reported on in this paper may have become more reflective had it (as a group) observed them. So, in fact, they are seen as shortcomings of teacher development groups. The suggestions are as follows:

1. join a group of ESL/EFL teachers;
2. build in some ground rules;
3. make provisions for three different kinds of time;
4. provide external input; and
5. provide for a low affective state.

7.1. Join a group of ESL/EFL teachers

Teachers can come together regularly to discuss their work. This can be under the sponsorship of any institution or in-service program. This, of course, would be more formal and probably have more rules imposed on the group from the outside

(top-down) rather than rules negotiated by the group participants themselves (bottom-up). However, if the group is meeting outside of any organized system (university, institute, or special interest group) then all group members have to be equally responsible to keep the group on track. Also, this type of group could consider the following suggestions as a guide to keep it on track.

7.2. Build in some ground rules

This teacher development group took a flexible, informal approach from the very beginning. Two of the participants liked this free approach; however, with this level of flexibility, each participant exhibited a different level of energy and commitment. Furthermore, it appeared that at times we drifted off into our own agendas, and that there was a danger of more pressing (sometimes important but mostly trivial) matters or problems taking over. Golby and Appleby (1995) say that too much flexibility in these situations can lead to "...a danger that it (the group) may just drift..." (p. 156). Therefore, suggestions three through five are actually ground rules that can be built into group meetings.

7.3. Provide for three distinct types of time: time-individual; time-development; and time-frame

For practicing teachers to be able to reflect on their work, time must be considered. I suggest that three different types of time be incorporated into any model of professional self-development: (1) individual time; (2) time it takes to develop; and (3) time-frames for the period of reflection.

7.3.1. Time-individual

As practicing teachers are very busy in their daily teaching and other related duties, the amount of time any one teacher is willing to invest in his/her professional self-development will naturally vary. Therefore, a certain level of commitment by each participant should be negotiated by the group at the beginning of the process. In addition, the time of each meeting has to be negotiated: our group meetings were scheduled to last for 1 h; they actually lasted for 3 h. This was both good and bad; it provided more dialogue, but it also exhausted everyone as the term progressed.

7.3.2. Time-development

Another aspect of time that is important for teacher self-development groups is the time it takes to develop. Golby and Appleby (1995) point out that "...teachers do not readily confront their problems with a reflective approach..." (p. 158). The group in this study encountered two distinct stages: the 'getting to know you' stage and the reflective stage. In the beginning we felt each other out, and negotiated our personal and group agendas. Then the group entered the reflective stage. In this latter stage the teachers started to have more trust and thus began to open up more about their teaching. The first stage took five group meetings over a 7-week period. Other groups will no doubt experience different stages over a different time period.

7.3.3. *Time-frame*

The period of time it takes to become critically reflective is connected to the time-frame for the project as a whole. Having a fixed period in which to reflect allows the participants to know what period during the semester they can devote wholly to reflection. Even though two of the participants said that one semester (16 weeks) was too short a time to develop, the group in this study survived, according to one of the same participants, because "...we had an end in sight" (T2, group meeting, 3 December 1994).

7.4. *External input*

The previous three suggestions utilize the idea of probing and articulating personal theories of teaching, which is central to teacher development. However, as Ur (1993) notes: "The teacher is almost the sole source of knowledge, with a relative neglect of external input..." (p. 20). Our group did not discuss any outside theories that may have influenced or could influence our teaching. This may be an important ingredient for future groups to consider because as Ur (1993) says "...teacher development requires input from vicarious experiences, other people's observations and reflection...and from other people's experiments and from theories learned from research and the literature..." (p. 22). Also, no matter how readily the members of a teaching group may accept each other's perceptions of their teaching, Nias (1987) points out that they "...also inhibit change; by definition there is seldom dissent or creative tension..." (p. 140). Individuals and groups in a process of professional development need to be challenged by external input for a more 'enriched reflection' (Ur, 1993). This external input can come from professional journals, other teachers' observations, and book publications of case studies.

Another type of input that may be necessary for teacher development groups to become more critically reflective is actual transcripts from each participant's class. Our group did not include discussions on actual classroom transcripts, which encouraged abstract or inconclusive discussion. John Fanselow (personal communication) has noted that:

The absence of data in the (group) discussions reminds me again of the lack of almost any meaning in the term reflection. Though they said they talked about their teaching, what they talked about was in their mind: what interactions took place are noted. The discussions are potentially about something else such as who in the conversation is taking charge of the conversation, who is putting down others, etc. Without excerpts from the lesson, without data, conversations about teaching cannot be held.

7.5. *Provide for a low affective state*

The first four suggestions presented in this paper all pose some threat and associated anxiety for practicing teachers. Nias (1987) has pointed out that change in the practice of teaching is not easy but a lengthy and potentially painful process.

Inevitably, there will be a certain level of anxiety present. Francis (1995) indicates that for in-depth reflection to occur, which is not automatic, anxiety will be present. However, too much anxiety can impede the occurrence of deep critical reflection. Therefore, a non-threatening environment should be fostered in the group by the individuals themselves. It may well be that descriptions of teaching maybe the only outcome of the reflective process until the participants are ready to accept the anxiety of probing deeper into their beliefs about teaching, but this result is acceptable if participants are not ready for higher anxiety levels associated with critical reflection.

8. Conclusion

Although I cannot say for sure that our teacher development group was very critically reflective, we managed to make a good start in our descriptive reflections, which may be a necessary prerequisite to critical reflection. Teacher development groups, like ours, can provide enriching opportunities for teachers to develop into professional educators. Also, even though the group as a whole is important, we must, nevertheless, remember that the group is made up of individual teachers, and that it is these individuals who are reflecting on their work. This reflection is very important for teachers, for as Henderson (1996) says: “If you, as a teacher, are not thoughtful about your professional work, how do you expect your students to be thoughtful about their learning?” (p. vii).

Appendix. Differences between descriptive and critical reflection

The first of Bartlett’s (1990) phases is called mapping which describes what you do as a teacher. This phase corresponds to Ho and Richards’ (1993) level one. It does not involve the teacher in critical reflection. However, Bartlett’s next four phases involve the teacher in critical reflection and correspond to Ho and Richards’ level two; phase two: informing, which is similar to evaluation in my scheme; phase three: contesting, which is a kind of self-analysis in my scheme; phase four: appraisal, which is developing a personal theory; and phase five: acting, which is making a plan for future teaching. The two levels appear in more detail in Table 4.

Table 4

Differences between descriptive and critical reflection (adapted from Ho and Richards, 1993)

	Descriptive	Critical reflection
<i>1. Theories of teaching</i>		
(a) Theories/beliefs about teaching and learning	A belief/conviction An expert's view	A justification A personal opinion
(b) Applying theories to classroom practice	How a theory was applied	Contradictions between theory and practice How theories changed
<i>2. Approaches and methods</i>	Approaches and methods in teaching The content of the lesson The learners The school context	The teacher's knowledge: pedagogical and experience
<i>3. Evaluating teaching</i>	Solutions to problems by seeking solutions from experts.	Evaluating lessons: positive/negative diagnosing problems: students; class interaction; teacher's problems Solutions to problems Alternative ways of presenting lesson Deciding on a plan
<i>4. Questions about teaching</i>	Asking for advice	Asking for reasons
<i>5. Self-awareness</i>	Perceptions of self as teacher: style and comments on language proficiency	Recognition of personal growth Setting personal goals

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