

# Reflective Practice for Language Teachers

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## Framing the Issue

There is a longstanding recognition in the field of language education that teachers must continually reshape their knowledge of teaching and learning (Farrell, 2007). This knowledge is developed initially in teacher education programs, and then becomes part of teachers' education throughout their careers when they engage in reflective practice (Farrell, 2015). Reflective practice in its simplest terms means examining what teachers do in the classroom and why they do it (Farrell, 2022). Indeed, many years ago Dewey (1933) noted that teachers who do not bother to reflect on their work become slaves to routine because their actions are guided mostly by impulse, tradition, and authority rather than by informed decision making. This reliance on routine and daily repetitive actions eventually leads to burnout. However, if teachers engage in reflective practice, they can avoid such burnout because they take the time to stop and think about what is happening in their practice, making sense of it so that they can learn from their experiences rather than mindlessly repeat them year after year.

Dewey (1933) also noted that for any meaningful reflection to occur, teachers must take on a reflective disposition that includes three essential attitudes that are central to the reflective process: (1) *open-mindedness*, (2) *wholeheartedness*, and (3) *responsibility*. Open-minded reflective practitioners are not afraid to heed the facts or evidence they obtained from their systematic reflections and admit that they could be wrong. Responsible reflective practitioners consider the consequences of their actions on their students' learning, their school, and the community in which they teach. Wholehearted reflective practitioners continually reflect and seek professional development throughout their career.

Dewey's ideas were further developed by Donald Schön (1983) when he suggested that teachers should not only reflect on their action after stepping back from it, but also reflect during and while doing the action, which he called reflection-in-action. For example, Schön (1983) wondered what would happen

when a teacher's established routines did not work because of an unforeseen event, leaving the teacher having to experiment in some manner while in the midst of the action in order to cope. In such a manner, Schön's reflection-in-action built on Dewey's reflection-on-action and the result of both can be used to direct a teacher's future decisions (or reflection-for-action).

Reflective practice occurs, then, when teachers consciously take on the role of reflective practitioner and subject their own beliefs about teaching and learning to critical analysis, take full responsibility for their actions in the classroom, and continue to improve their teaching practice (Farrell, 2007, 2015). That said, in order to engage in reflective teaching, teachers must systematically collect information about themselves, and their classroom happenings and then analyze and evaluate this information and compare it to their underlying assumptions and beliefs so that they can make changes and improvements in their thinking and teaching (Farrell, 2019). Thus, reflective practice is defined as

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. (Farrell, 2015, p. 123)

## **Making the Case**

Some teachers may wonder why they should bother to reflect because they prepare well and try their best in class when they are teaching and spend untold hours (usually unpaid) grading papers after class. In addition, they say that they are always trying to follow the million mandates sent from the administration, curriculum developers, school boards, and ministry of education officials, which leave little time or energy for reflecting on their teaching. However, when teachers engage in reflective practice, they have the opportunity to examine their relations with students, their values, their abilities, and their successes and failures in a realistic context. Teachers who engage in reflective practice can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop more informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching. Indeed, reflective practice can be seen as a "compass that allows teachers to stop for a moment or two and consider how we can create more learning opportunities for students" (Farrell, 2015, p. 15).

It is true, as mentioned above, that teachers are busy, so we must also be realistic with reflective practice in terms of who can do it and when, and so reflective practice in reality takes place along a continuum of opportunity, where teachers will vary in their opportunity to reflect given their context and their own personal psychological makeup. In other words, some contexts may make it difficult for teachers to come together to reflect on their practices and, as such, teachers may only be able to reflect on their own individual practices. As a result, it may be unreasonable

to expect all teachers to engage in reflection at every moment or stage of their teaching. However, certain activities can help teachers with their reflections at various stages of their careers and these are outlined in the section that follows.

## Pedagogical Implications

Language teachers can choose from a number of tools that help facilitate their reflections, which can be utilized as individuals or in combination with peers, including teaching journals, critical friends, teacher reflection groups, classroom observations, and action research, to mention but a few. In addition, teachers can choose what to reflect on from their identity to the metaphors they use, and their overall beliefs related to teaching and learning English as an additional language.

### Teaching Journals

Teaching journals provide teachers with a written record of various aspects of their practice, such as classroom events, and enable them to step back for a moment to reflect on their work. When teachers write regularly in a teaching journal, they can accumulate information that on later review, interpretation, and reflection can assist them in gaining a deeper understanding of their work. Farrell (2007, 2013a) suggests that writing regularly in a teaching journal can help teachers clarify their own thinking, explore their own beliefs and practices, become more aware of their teaching styles, and be better able to monitor their own practices. The added advantage of writing a teaching journal is that it can be shared with other teachers. When teachers share their reflective journals, they not only foster collegial interaction, but they can also gain different perspectives about their work while also contributing to professional knowledge in the field as a whole.

### 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. Critical friendship is where another person reflects with a teacher and gives advice as a trusted “friend” rather than a consultant in order to develop awareness of classroom events as well as the reflective abilities of the teacher who is conducting his or her own reflections. Such critical friends can give voice to a teacher’s thinking like looking into a mirror, while at the same time being heard in a sympathetic but constructively critical way. Teachers who are reflecting can also be challenged by critical friends so that the teachers can have a deeper understanding of their teaching. This type of reflection promotes collegiality and shared observations, but teachers should constantly remember that the focus is on the friend and not the critical in a trusting relationship. Team teaching is also 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. Of course, teams should realize that team teaching is just that, not two individuals, but a team approach to planning the lessons, deciding and preparing the activities, delivering the lessons, and evaluating the effectiveness of the lessons.

### Teacher Reflection Groups

Farrell (2014) suggests that language teachers come together in teacher reflection groups to reflect so that they can complement each other's strengths and compensate for each other's limitations. A group of teachers working together can achieve outcomes that may not be possible for an individual teacher working alone, because the group can generate more ideas about classroom issues than can any one individual. Farrell (2014) cites three types of teacher groups: *peer* groups within a school, *teacher* groups that operate outside the school and within a school district, and *virtual* groups that can be formed anywhere on the Internet. For example, in programs for adult English language learners, practitioners might meet within a program, across programs, or throughout the province/state/region either in person or online. Study circles—where practitioners meet to read and discuss research and consider its implications for classroom and program practice—offer the opportunity for practitioners to focus and reflect more deeply, with a community of peers, on the content and methodologies they are learning in workshops and implementing in their classes. When teachers come together in such groups, they can help each other to articulate their thoughts about their work and all grow professionally together (Farrell, 2014). In addition, these teacher reflection groups can be conducted in either face-to-face mode or online mode making use of different platform technologies such as Zoom or MA Teams.

### Classroom Observations

Because classrooms are such busy places, with many different activities happening at the same time, much of what is really happening in the classroom for the most part actually remains largely unknown to the teacher. So, classroom observations can help language teachers develop more of an awareness of what is really happening and what decisions they make and then why they make them. Classroom observation can be carried out alone, and/or in pairs, and/or in small groups. Self-monitoring can be carried out through journal writing, self-reports, tally sheets, and recording (audio and video) lessons with or without coding schemes. By later reviewing what was written, or what is heard and seen on the tapes, aspects of teaching that may not have been obvious during the class may become clearer to the teacher (Farrell, 2007).

### Action Research

Action research comes under the umbrella of reflective practice, and it involves investigation of some problem a teacher may be experiencing with a particular class, student, curriculum, teaching method, and so on, and it usually generates

some practical knowledge for the teacher that is immediate and directly applicable to practice. Teachers can engage in action research alone or they can collaborate on one particular project or issue, but it all depends again on how the results will be used by individual teachers. The main point of action research is that teachers collect concrete evidence about the problem and its possible solution(s) within a cycle of clearly thought-out procedures. Farrell (2007) suggests the following cycle that teachers can use for action research projects: identify an issue; review the literature on the issue and ask questions to narrow the focus; choose data to be collected and a method of data collection; collect, analyze, and interpret the data selected; and develop, implement, and monitor an action plan.

*What to reflect on:* When using the reflective activities above, language teachers can also choose to reflect on a number of different issues related to their practice that can expand their understanding of their practice. Each activity promotes reflection in different ways, and some teachers may find particular activities more appealing than others, so it may be a good idea to try each approach once before deciding on a focus. For example, teachers can reflect on their role identity, their use of metaphors, and their beliefs about teaching and learning English as a subsequent language.

*Teacher identity:* Over their careers teachers construct and reconstruct (usually tacitly) a conceptual sense of *who* they are (their self-image) and this is manifested through *what* they do (their professional role identity). Teacher role identity includes teacher beliefs, values, and emotions about many aspects of teaching and being a teacher. Teachers' conceptualizations of their self-image and the various roles they play are usually held at the tacit level of awareness. As such, "reflection" is seen as a key component associated with understanding the concept of "self" because it brings these tacit conceptualizations to a level of awareness. Reflecting on teacher role identity allows teachers a useful lens into "who" they are as teachers and how they construct and reconstruct their perception of their overlapping roles both as language teachers and themselves in relation to their peers and their context (Farrell, 2011). By reflecting on their teacher identity roles, and how they have been shaped over time and by whom, language teachers can then consider how these roles need to be nurtured during their career. As such, language teachers who are more aware of their identities and who has shaped them, can further negotiate their own identities, that they consider representative of who they are and who they want to be as a language teacher.

*Teacher metaphors:* Metaphors are indications of the way teachers think about teaching and also guide the way they act in the classroom; thus, when teachers begin to unpack the meaning of the metaphors they hold, they can begin to understand what they really believe about teaching and can start to change themselves as teachers. However, most teachers may not be aware of the impact of these images on their current teaching practices, because they are held tacitly.

So, at some time during their careers, teachers should explore the images and the metaphors they have built up. When language teachers identify the metaphors they use, they can also be challenged as to their current relevance and then they can begin to develop alternative and more appropriate metaphors that better represent their practice.

*Teacher beliefs:* Language teachers can also explore the beliefs they hold about teaching and learning because these are usually held tacitly and build up over a teacher's career. Language teachers must thus be given opportunities to articulate their beliefs and what they mean to themselves and then reflect on their suitability for their current practices in the light of their particular teaching context. After articulating and reflecting on their beliefs about teaching and learning, language teachers can be encouraged to reflect on their actual classroom practices (see Classroom Observations) to see if there is alignment between their stated beliefs and their actual classroom practices. Thus, when teachers become more aware of their underlying beliefs, as Knezedivc (2001) has suggested, this can be a necessary starting point in their reflections because we cannot develop "unless we are aware of who we are and what we do" and "developing awareness is a process of reducing the discrepancy between what we do and what we think we do" (p. 10).

### Framework for Reflective Practice

All of the afore mentioned reflective tools and foci of reflections are included in a holistic framework for language teachers wishing to operationalize or implement reflective practice in their professional worlds. The following framework takes a holistic approach to reflection that not only focuses on the intellectual, cognitive, and meta-cognitive aspects of reflection, but also includes reflection on the inner lives of teachers such as the spiritual, moral, and emotional non-cognitive aspects of reflection (Farrell, 2015). The framework has five interrelated levels of reflection: philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and beyond practice. *Philosophy* explores the "teacher-as-person" (Farrell, 2015, 2022) by engaging teachers in reflecting on their past experiences and their own life stories so that they can gain "a more in-depth picture of who they are as a teacher" (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021, p. 4), or their identity (see Teacher identity). *Principles* includes reflections on teachers' expectations related to teaching and learning English as a subsequent language (see Teacher metaphors and Teacher beliefs) and whether they are reflected in actual classroom practices. *Theory* explores and examines the different choices a teacher makes about particular skills taught (or that they think should be taught) and how they want to design and deliver their lessons. Reflecting on *practice* explores a teacher's observable actions while teaching (see Classroom Observations). Critical reflection *beyond practice* explores the moral, political, and social issues that impact a teacher's practice both inside and outside the classroom.

The framework can be navigated in three different ways: theory-into-(beyond) practice, (beyond) practice-into-theory, or a single stage application. Thus, it is a

descriptive rather than a prescriptive framework. Teachers who are less experienced can take a deductive approach to reflecting on practice by moving from theory-into-practice or from philosophy through the different levels and critical reflection beyond practice. More experienced teachers may want to begin with reflections on their practice and then move inductively toward their theory, principles, and philosophy, as well as their critical reflections beyond practice.

## Conclusion

Reflective practice generally means that language teachers systematically examine their beliefs and practices about teaching and learning throughout their careers. Reflective practice helps teachers avoid burnout and routine approaches to their teaching and life in general because reflection is a *way of being* or a *state of mind*. There are many different tools that teachers can use to facilitate their reflections and they can also focus their reflections on different aspects of their work. One way of implementing or operationalizing reflective practice for language teachers that encompasses a holistic approach is the framework for reflecting on practice that has five interrelated levels: philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and critical reflection beyond practice. Such an all-encompassing framework can be used as a lens through which language teachers can view their professional (and personal) worlds—which have shaped their lives as a teacher—as they become more aware of their philosophy, principles, theories, practices, and how these impact issues inside and beyond practice. It is up to each individual teacher (or group of teachers) to decide which method would be most beneficial depending on the purposes of their reflections. Most of all, reflective practice enables teachers to make more informed decisions about their teaching and, as a result, their students receive the best possible opportunities for reaching success in their learning. Finally, reflection and reflective practice is more than a method, it is a way of life—we evolve as teachers throughout our careers as we construct and reconstruct our practice (Farrell, 2013b). Teachers who engage in life-long reflective practice can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching and possibly their personal life as well.

As Kumaravadivelu (2003) has noted, language teachers who enter into “a continual process of self-reflection and self-renewal” can “construct their own personal theory of teaching” (p. 17).

**SEE ALSO:** Action Research and Teacher Inquiry; Communities of Practice; Critical Friends: How to Develop Effective Critical Friends PD Groups; Journals; Observations; Professional Development for Intensive English Program Teachers; Reflective Teaching; Teacher and Institutional Beliefs, Vision, Belonging, and Identity; Teacher Autonomy; Teacher Qualifications, Professionalism, Competencies, and Benchmarks; Teacher Resistance and Resilience; Teacher Stress and Coping

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