
Unraveling Reflective Teaching

Thomas Farrell

National Institute of Education, Singapore

Introduction

Reflective practice is becoming a dominant aspect of ESL/EFL teacher education programs worldwide. Reflection in teaching refers to teachers subjecting their beliefs and practices of teaching to a critical analysis. Most teacher educators do not dispute the benefits of reflective teaching for both pre-service and inservice teachers. However, despite the seemingly unanimous opinion regarding the benefits of the practice, the concept of reflective teaching is not at all clear, and a plethora of different approaches with sometimes confusing meanings have been published. This article reviews some current approaches to reflective teaching in general and as they apply to the teaching of English (TESOL) in particular. The article also attempts to unravel the different definitions of reflective teaching and critical reflective teaching, and discusses criticisms of reflective teaching. This article also outlines some benefits of reflection in teaching, and discusses the implications of the reflective teacher movement for the practicing ESL/EFL teacher.

What is Reflection?

In a review of the literature on reflective teaching, one discovers terms that vary in meaning, and there is much variance in the definition of any single term. In TESOL, reflective teaching is defined by Pennington (1992) as “deliberating on experience, and that of mirroring experience” (p. 47); she also extends this idea to reflective learning. Pennington (1992) relates development to reflection where “reflection is viewed as the input for development while also reflection is viewed as the output of development” (p. 47). Pennington (1992) further proposes a reflective/developmental orientation “as a means for (1) improving classroom processes and outcomes, and (2) developing confident, self motivated teachers and learners” (p. 51). The focus here is on analysis, feedback, and adaptation as an ongoing and recursive cycle in the classroom.

In a more recent article, Pennington (1995) says that teacher change and development require an awareness of a need to change. She defined teacher development as “a metastable system of context-interactive change involving a continual cycle of innovative behavior and adjustment to circumstances” (p. 706). She sees two key components of change: innovation and critical reflection. In her study of how eight secondary teachers moved through a change cycle as they learned about

innovation, she noted that through “deep reflection, teachers were able to reconstruct a teaching framework to incorporate the previously contradictory elements” (p. 725).

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). In referring to critical reflection Richards says:

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 (Farrell, 1995, p. 95).

Outside TESOL, the terms involving reflection become less clear. The definitions move from simply looking at the behavioral aspects of teaching to the beliefs and knowledge these acts of teaching are based on, to the deeper social meaning the act of teaching has on the community. Zeichner and Liston (1987) define teaching as “taking place when, someone (a teacher) is teaching someone (a student) about something (a curriculum) at some place and sometime (a milieu)” (p. 87). Dewey (1933) sees a further distinction in teaching when he says “routine teaching takes place when the means are problematic but the ends are taken for granted” (p. 9). However, he sees reflective action as entailing “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads” (p. 9). According to Zeichner and Liston (1987) reflective action “entails the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge. Routine action is guided primarily by tradition, external authority and circumstance” (p. 24).

By far the most comprehensive discussion of reflective teaching is found in the work of Schon (1983, 1987). Drawing on the writings of Dewey, Schon writes about reflective practice in terms of the immediacy of the action in the setting. For Schon, when a practitioner is confronted with a problem, he/she identifies the problem as being of a particular type and then applies an appropriate technique to solve the problem. This is assuming that the problems of practice are routine, knowable in advance, and subject to a set of rule-like generalizations that are applicable in multiple settings.

However, he asks what happens if these problems are non-routine. In this case Schon says that practitioners engage in a process of problem setting. Clarke (1995) explains this process of problem setting:

When confronted by non-routine problems, skilled practitioners learn to conduct frame experiments in which they impose a kind of coherence on messy situations. They come to new understandings of situations and new possibilities for action through a spiraling process of framing and reframing. Through the effects of a particular action, both intended and unintended, the situation ‘talks back.’ This conversation between the practitioner and the setting provides the data which may then lead to new meanings, further reframing, and plans for further action (p. 245).

Schon (1993) says: “We name the things to which we attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them” (p. 39). So reflection for Schon is a process of framing and reframing. Figure 1 outlines Schon’s idea of reflective practice.

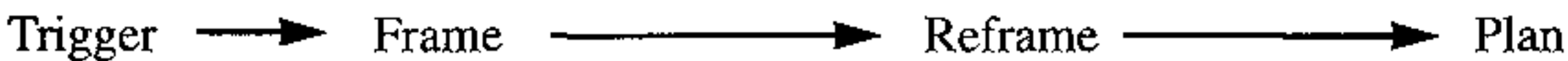
Figure 1

Schon’s Definition of Reflective Practice

(Adapted from Clarke, 1995, p. 246)

A Practitioner is Reflective When He/She is:

Curious or intrigued about some aspect of the practice setting	Frames the aspect in terms of the particulars of the setting	Reframes that aspect in the past knowledge or previous experience	Develops a plan for future action
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So we can see that the literature on reflective practice has used different, and also conflicting terms to define reflective teaching. These definitions also imply different approaches to reflective practice. In order to unravel some of these competing definitions and assumptions, Table 1 gives a summary of the major approaches to the study of reflective practice.

Table 1**Summary of Different Approaches to Reflective Teaching Outside TESOL**

Reflection Type and Author(s):	Content of Reflection:
Technical Rationality (Schulman, 1987; VanMannen, 1977)	Examining one's use of skills and immediate behaviors in teaching with an established research/theory base
Reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983, 1987)	Dealing with on-the-spot professional problems as they occur. Thinking can be recalled and then shared later.
Reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983, 1987; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Gore & Zeichner, 1987)	Recalling one's teaching after the class. Teacher gives reasons for his/her actions/ behaviors in class
Reflection-for-action (Killon & Todnew, 1991)	Proactive thinking in order to guide future action
Action Research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986)	Self-reflective enquiry by participants in social settings to improve practice

The first type of reflection, "technical rationality", examines teaching behaviors and skills after an event, such as a class. The focus of reflection is on effective application of skills and technical knowledge in the classroom (VanMannen, 1977), and it also focuses on cognitive aspects of teaching (Schulman, 1987). Many beginning teachers start to examine their skills from this perspective in controlled situations with immediate

feedback from teacher educators; this may be useful for the beginning teacher trying to cope with the new situation of the classroom.

The second notion of reflective practice is called reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983, 1987). For this to occur, the teacher has to have a kind of knowing-in-action. Knowing-in-action is analogous to seeing and recognizing a face in a crowd without “listing” and piecing together separate features; the knowledge we reveal in our intelligent action is publicly observable, but we are unable to make it verbally explicit. Schon (1987) says that we can sometimes make a description of the tacit, but that these descriptions are symbolic constructions; knowledge-in-action is dynamic, facts are static. For Schon (1983, 1987), thought is embedded in action, and knowledge-in-action is the center of professional practice.

Reflection-in-action, according to Schon (1983, 1987), is concerned with thinking about what we are doing in the classroom while we are doing it; this thinking is supposed to reshape what we are doing. There is a sequence of moments in a process of reflection-in-action: (a) A situation or action occurs to which we bring spontaneous routinized responses, as in knowing-in-action. (b) Routine responses produce a surprise, an unexpected outcome for the teacher, that does not fit into categories of knowing-in-action; this then gets our attention. (c) This surprise leads to reflection within an action. This reflection is to some level conscious but needs not occur in the medium of words. (d) Reflection-in-action has a critical function; it questions the structure of knowing-in-action. Now we think critically about the thinking that got us there in the first place. (e) Reflection gives rise to on-the-spot experimentation; we think up and try out new actions intended to explore newly observed situations or happenings. Schon (1983, 1987) says that reflection-in-action is a reflective conversation with the materials of a situation.

The third notion of reflection is called reflection-on-action. Reflection-on-action deals with thinking back on what we have done to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected action (Schon, 1987; Hatton & Smith, 1995). This includes reflecting on our reflecting-in-action, or thinking about the way we think. But it is different than reflecting-in-action.

The fourth notion of reflection is called reflection-for-action. Reflection-for-action is different from the previous notions of reflection in that it is proactive in nature. Killon and Todnew (1991) argue that reflection-for-action is the desired outcome of both previous types of reflection, reflection-on-action, and reflection-in-action; however, they say that “we undertake reflection, not so much to revisit the past or to become aware of the metacognitive process one is experiencing (both noble reasons in themselves) but to guide future action (the more practical purpose)” (p. 15).

The fifth notion of reflection presented in this paper is connected to action research. Action research is the investigation of those craft-knowledge values of teaching that hold in place our habits when we are teaching (McFee, 1993). It concerns the transformation of research into action. As McFee (1993) says: "It is research into (1) a particular kind of practice—one in which there is a craft-knowledge, and (2) is research based on a particular model of knowledge and research with action as an outcome . . . this knowledge is practical knowledge" (p. 178). Carr and Kemmis (1996) say that action research:

is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants (teachers, or principals, for example) in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understandings of these practices, and (c) the situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out (p. 182).

We can see, then, that there is a big difference between reflective action and routine action.

Critical Reflection

Outside TESOL, Hatton and Smith (1995) point out that the term critical reflection "like reflection itself, appears to be used loosely, some taking it to mean more than constructive self-criticism of one's actions with a view to improvement" (p. 35). Hatton and Smith (1995), however, point out that the concept of critical reflection "implies the acceptance of a particular ideology" (p. 35). This view of critical reflection in teaching also calls for considerations of moral and ethical problems (Adler, 1991; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; VanMannen, 1977), and it also involves "making judgments about whether professional activity is equitable, just, and respectful of persons or not" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 35). Therefore, the wider socio-historical and politico-cultural contexts can also be included in critical reflection (Zeichner & Liston, 1987, Schon, 1983, 1987).

In TESOL too, the term critical reflection has been used rather loosely. Richards (1990) does not distinguish between reflection and critical reflection. Neither does he take the broader aspect of society into consideration when defining reflective practice. Also, Pennington (1995) defines critical reflection as "the process of information gained through innovation in relation to the teacher's existing schema for teaching" (p. 706). Again, the broader aspect of society does not play a significant role in her definition of critical reflection. However, Bartlett (1990) sees a need to include the broader society

in any definition of critical reflection. He says that in order for teachers to become critically reflective, they have to “transcend the technicalities of teaching and think beyond the need to improve our instructional techniques” (p. 204). He sees critical reflection as “locating teaching in its broader social and cultural context” (p. 204).

So after choosing a definition of reflective teaching and approach that best suits the individual teacher’s situation and context, the ESL/EFL teacher is again faced with another decision as to the level of critical reflectively he/she wants to get into—to include the broader society outside the classroom into the reflective cycle and to what extent, or to stick to the problem at hand in the classroom. Problems like these have inevitably led to criticisms of the reflective teaching movement.

Criticisms of Reflective Practice

A number of scholars have urged caution as to the applicability of reflective practice in education. Hoover (1994) cautioned: “The promising acclamation about reflection has yielded little research qualitatively or quantitatively” (p. 83). He does not, however, rule out reflection in teaching but says reflection is a learned activity; he says it is “a carefully planned set of experiences that foster a sensitivity to ways of looking at and talking about previously unarticulated beliefs concerning teaching” (p. 84). He also says that this self-analysis requires time and opportunity. In addition, Goodson (1994) points out that the concept of teacher as researcher has some problems:

- (1) It frees the researchers in the university from clear responsibility from complementing and sustaining as researcher.
- (2) The teacher as researcher focuses mainly on practice; the New Right is seeking to turn the teachers practice into that of a technician which turns teaching into a routinized and trivialized delivery of predesigned packages (p. 30).

Important issues about reflective practice were also raised by Hatton & Smith (1994, pp. 34-36). In their paper they raise four key unresolved issues concerning reflective teaching: (1) Is reflection limited to thought process about action, or more bound up in the action itself? (2) Is reflection immediate and short term, or more extended and systematic? That is, what time frame is most suitable for reflective practice? (3) Is reflection problem-centered, finding solutions to real classroom problems, or not? That is, should solving problems be an inherent characteristic of reflection? (group discussion and journal writing are widely used as a tool for reflection but they are not problem solving.) (4) How “critical” does one get when reflecting? This refers to whether the

one reflecting takes into account the wider political, cultural, and historic beliefs and values in finding solutions to problems.

Hatton & Smith (1995) also see a number of “barriers which hinder the achievement of reflective approaches” (p. 36). (1) Reflection is not generally associated with working as a teacher; reflection is seen as a more academic exercise. (2) Teachers need time and opportunity for development. (3) Exposing oneself in a group of strangers can lead to vulnerability. (4) The ideology of reflection is quite different than that of traditional approaches to teacher education. All of these are valid criticisms which must be answered by each teacher interested in undertaking a reflective stance to their teaching.

Implications for Teachers

A reflective approach to everyday teaching is not easy to put into practice for the busy teacher. As was pointed out above, some teachers may not be interested or may not be willing to discuss their ideas about teaching in public. However, many teachers already reflect on their everyday classes by simply having such thoughts as “That was a good/bad class today”; “My students related well/badly to that activity. I must modify it for the next class.” So teachers are already defining their own needs in private. It would be better for all teachers concerned if they were able to share these thoughts with others for their own professional development. Ways of sharing could include:

- getting a group of teachers together to talk about teaching;
- collecting data from actual classroom teaching situations and sharing this data with the group for discussion by analyzing, evaluating and interpreting it in light of their unique context;
- self-observation with audio and/or video cameras; observation by group members for later group discussions;
- journal writing for reflection and comments by group members;
- taking on action research projects such as the teacher’s pattern of questioning behavior;
- going to conferences, workshops and subscribing to professional journals.

Conclusion

It may be impossible to analyze the different approaches to reflective teaching in a way that everyone will agree on. However, it should be obvious that each teacher will have to make an individual response to his/her unique teaching situation and choose a

definition and approach to reflection which best suits his/her desired objectives. This may mean deep critical reflection that includes influences outside the classroom, or it may mean problem solving within the classrooms, or it may mean continuous reflection with a group of teachers that involves discussion and writing but solves no immediate problem, or it may mean personal reflection one time during the semester.

Regardless of the definition of reflective teaching and the approach taken, and the depth of reflection teachers want to go in order to be critical, it is clear that teachers need to be reflective if they expect their students to reflect on their studies. Furthermore, reflective teaching can benefit ESL/EFL teachers in four main ways: (1) Reflective teaching helps free the teacher from impulse and routine behavior. (2) Reflective teaching allows teachers to act in a deliberate, intentional manner and avoid the “I don’t know what I will do today” syndrome. (3) Reflective teaching distinguishes teachers as educated human beings since it is one of the signs of intelligent action. (4) As teachers gain experience in a community of professional educators, they feel the need to “move” beyond the initial stages of survival in the classroom to reconstruct their own particular theory from their practice. Dewey (1993) said that growth comes from a “reconstruction of experience” (p. 87), so by reflecting on our own experiences we can reconstruct our own educational perspective. In other words, we are forever unraveling our approach to teaching and learning.

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About the Author

Thomas S. C. Farrell is currently a lecturer in the School of Arts, Dept. of English Language & Applied Linguistics, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include all aspects of reflective teaching in TESOL. He has a PhD in English Linguistics from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA.