

'Teacher You Are Stupid!' – Cultivating a Reflective Disposition

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Introduction

There is a longstanding recognition in the field of language education that teachers must continually shape and reshape their knowledge of teaching and learning throughout their careers (Farrell, 2015). Much of a teacher's early knowledge is developed initially in teacher education programs, and then through teaching experiences and reflections throughout their careers. Nonetheless, teaching experiences are not enough to foster development unless they are consciously reflected on, and teachers are encouraged throughout their careers to take on the role of reflective practitioners where they consciously subject their beliefs and classroom practices about teaching and learning to critical analysis (Farrell, 2007, 2015). As Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest, reflection can thus be understood as "the process of critical examination of experiences, a process that can lead to a better understanding of one's practices and routines" (p. 7).

Most educators agree that reflective practice is desirable indeed. As Tabachnick and Zeichner (2002) have noted, "there is not a single teacher educator who would say that he or she is not concerned about preparing teachers who are reflective" (p. 13). However, it has been difficult to reach consensus on a definition of reflection and even to find a consensus on what type of reflective practices are beneficial to teacher learners in teacher education programs. Additionally, there is little consensus on whether reflective practice can promote teacher development and improved classroom practices once teachers have graduated (Farrell, 2015). As a consequence of these divisions, many different models of reflective practice and strategies on how reflection should be implemented have developed over the years, and again as Tabachnick and Zeichner (2002) have noted, "the criteria that have been attached to reflective practice are so diverse" that we do not know what it is teachers should be reflecting on, or "the kinds of criteria that should come into play during the process of reflection" (pp. 13-14).

It is not my intention however in this article to outline a comprehensive framework that can bring reflective practice (definitions, models and strategies for its implementation) to all levels in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers, as I have already attempted to tackle that issue with a new book (see Farrell, 2015). Instead, I would like to focus on a neglected yet necessary aspect of implementing the *process* of reflective practice in language education. What is missing in many of the discussions on reflective practice in many fields of study is the need to

develop a reflective disposition. As I will point out in this article, I believe that in order for teachers to be reflective, we must return to John Dewey's work on reflective thinking and realize that there can be no true reflection without a teacher developing a set of attitudes that are at the heart of the reflective process. Therefore, I maintain that when teachers engage in reflective practice they not only develop knowledge of reflective methods and strategies to achieve an end product of reflection, but also develop necessary three main character attitudes to accompany the reflective process, which include open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness. . In this article, I will discuss these three attitudes as they apply to TESOL and to my own teaching.

Reflection: Product AND Process

The great American educator John Dewey has maintained that reflection encompasses three major components. The first of these components involves a process (a systematic way of thinking) and an end product (or meaning-making). The second component of reflection includes a specific reflective disposition composed of three main attitudes: open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility. Dewey noted that these dispositions are not passive attitudes, but a desire to actively consider multiple viewpoints of all people concerned. The third component is that any real reflective thinking involves some kind of language and communication, which is best accomplished in the company of others.

Unfortunately, just like our continual methods fetish in language teaching, many scholars and practitioners over the years seem to have focused solely on the strategies and methods associated with achieving some fast and neat end product of reflection, which has tended to turn reflective practice into some routine action. Dewey (1933) ironically considered that such routine action can lead to achieving a pre-desired end with the means for getting those ends problematic. Above all, Dewey (1933) considered reflection a form of freedom from routine behavior:

Reflection emancipates us from merely impulsive and merely routine activity, it enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view or purposes of which we are aware, to act in deliberate and intentional fashion, to know what we are about when we act. (p. 17)

Reflective action, as Dewey (1933) suggests, entails "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it leads" (p. 9). Thus, reflection is not a point of view with end products (however well-intentioned), but a process of planned exploration and examination of also the means (process and context) associated with reflection. The means associated with reflection must also be accompanied with a disposition to reflect, or a willingness to actively challenge our comfortable and for many, taken for granted parts of our professional lives and undergo the trouble of searching while at the same time enduring a state of suspense as we do not know what we will find. As Dewey (1910) noted, "Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance" (p. 13). Dewey (1910) then maintains that the essence

of reflective thinking is the suspension of judgment but that this “suspense is likely to be somewhat painful” but that the:

Most important factor in the training of good mental habits consists in acquiring the attitude of suspended conclusion, and in mastering the various methods of searching for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur. To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry—these are the essentials of thinking. (p. 13)

Thus, reflection entails that the practitioner not only has knowledge of the methods and strategies of reflective practice, but also cultivates a reflective disposition to be able to carry out the process of reflection.

Cultivating a Reflective Disposition

The term ‘disposition’ can mean different things to different people. For example, some may think it a particular habit, or an attitude, an outlook or a particular temperament or even in terms of a person’s personality. It most likely includes all of these. Dewey (1933) has maintained that knowledge of the strategies and methods of reflective practice are not enough because “there must be the desire, the will, to employ them. This is an affair of personal disposition” (p. 30). In other words, knowledge is not enough as attitude all matters if one wants to engage in reflective inquiry. Indeed, Dewey (1933) suggests that “there must be understanding of the forms and techniques that are the channels through which these attitudes operate to best advantage” (p. 30). Dewey (1933) continues to state that:

No matter how much an individual knows as a matter of hearsay and information, if he has not attitudes and habits of this sort, he is not intellectually educated. He lacks the rudiments of mental discipline. And since these habits are not a gift of nature (no matter how strong the aptitude for acquiring them) ; since, moreover, the casual circumstances of the natural and social environment are not enough to compel their acquisition, the main office of education is to supply conditions that make for their cultivation. The formation of these habits is the Training of Mind. (p. 28)

So how does one cultivate such a reflective disposition? Dewey (1933) pointed out that there is a duality attached to reflection; yes, it is cognitive in every sense of the word, but a reflective disposition must also be accompanied by a set of three essential attitudes that must be cultivated to engage in reflective inquiry: *open-mindedness*, *whole-heartedness*, and *responsibility*. Dewey (1933, 1986) has noted that all three of these attitudes are not only important in “order that the habit of thinking in a reflective way may be developed...they are traits of personal character that have to be cultivated” (p. 139).

I will discuss these three essential attitudes in some detail in terms of their implications for language education using examples from my own teaching career. However, for now I operationalize *open-mindedness* to mean a desire to listen to more than one side of an issue so that we can give attention to possible alternative views. *Responsibility* means careful consideration of the consequences to which an action leads; in other words, what the impact of our reflection is, as well as who is impacted by our reflection. *Whole-*

heartedness implies that teachers can overcome fears and uncertainties to continuously review their practice.

Open-mindedness

Dewey (1933, 1986) defined the disposition or attitude of open-mindedness as “freedom from prejudice, partisanship, and such other habits as close the mind and make it unwilling to consider new problems and entertain new ideas” (p. 136). However, he noted that open-mindedness is not the same as empty-mindedness, which he likens to some hanging “out a sign saying ‘Come right in; there is no one at home’ is not the equivalent of hospitality” (Dewey, 1916/1980). Rather he continued there is a “willingness to let experiences accumulate and sink in and ripen, which is an essential of development” (p. 183). Thus, Dewey (1933, 1986) maintains that to be truly open-minded one must have an active desire to listen to more sides than one; to give heed to facts from whatever source they come; to give full attention to alternative possibilities; to recognize the possibility of error even in the beliefs that are dearest to us (p. 136).

So how does all this impact language teaching and why should teachers remain open-minded and question our philosophy, assumptions and beliefs? As Dewey (1933/1986) noted, all of this “requires troublesome work to undertake the alteration of old beliefs” (p. 136). Well we may be wrong, and we may need to reexamine our beliefs and practices and whatever we discover when we get the facts of what we do may need to be changed, or in other words we may need to “admit that a belief to which we have once committed ourselves is wrong” (Dewey (1933, 1986, p. 136).

How can we in language education implement this first open-minded attitude that Dewey so passionately argued is essential for reflective inquiry to be meaningful? This may sound easier than it seems because most people will consider that they are open-minded. I have given talks and workshops all over the world over the past few years, and when I ask teachers if they are open-minded to consider that their current beliefs may be incorrect and need some readjustment, most suggest that they are very open-minded and are eager to examine and re-evaluate their beliefs. However, when I begin to discuss the details of intensive reflections of teacher beliefs and practices, many teachers become a bit uncomfortable and some become resistant to change. One of the questions I ask in such workshops concerning the idea of remaining open-mindedness is: *Do I consider why I teach my lesson(s) in a particular way or am I faking it?*

This question can be somewhat of a shock for some teachers because the idea of ‘faking’ teaching is rather insulting to many. Yet, this was my own beginning as an English as a second language (ESL) teacher in Korea when after five years of teaching the same way (group discussions in most classes regardless of the students’ level really), I began to wonder what was really happening in my lessons. My classes and lessons seemed to be going ‘well,’ and the students seemed happy with them. However, I often felt some unease but could not say exactly why until one day I began to ask questions about my teaching and wondered what was *really* happening in my English lessons. In fact, I still remember the particular class I was teaching when I allowed myself to ask whether the students were really learning or just practicing their mistakes. I wondered if the lesson was successful, why was it successful and many more such questions. So I realized,

somewhat painfully, that I would have to remain open-minded about my approach to my teaching from this day on because I felt like I was somewhat faking it up to that point.

The word 'faking' seems very strong (see Hobbs, 1987, for an interesting account of the real possibility of faking in reflective practice), but I now consider that I think I was not as genuine a teacher as I should have because I was not fully aware what was really happening in my lessons but I was too scared to examine my teaching. I have continued to ask myself that question because I consider it important, and also because it serves as a continual reminder to myself that I should always be alert to what is *really* happening in my classes. I have continued to ask this question in my workshops and recently one teacher admitted that she too has felt uneasy about her lesson for the past ten years as an ESL teacher. She felt that she did not know what her students were learning, and wrote me the following short note after taking one of my workshops:

Before I always felt like there was something missing and I almost felt like I was faking it. And now, I know after reflection that there still are things to be learned, but I know that I won't be faking it any more.

I maintain that the particular lesson in 1983 at a university in Seoul, Korea that I talked about above was my first introduction to conscious reflection on my practice. However, I was to realize later when I really studied the concept of reflective practice that I was in fact introduced to the concept a lot earlier, namely in my first year teaching in Ireland. I just did not know it then.

Another difficult question I ask teachers to reflect on in my workshops related to the attitude or disposition of open-mindedness is: *Do I actively seek student input into how and what I teach?* The following is my own personal story that outlines a very early critical incident in my professional teaching life that really allowed me to reflect on my level of open-mindedness in terms of the importance of listening to our students and my need to admit that I could be wrong sometimes (from Farrell, 2015):

One morning in 1977 as a student-teacher teaching on my teaching practice assignment in a high school in Dublin, Ireland, I was teaching a business English class to junior high school students and in my 4th week or so, during one class a student suddenly shouted out: "Teacher you are stupid!" I was astonished, as I had no idea at that moment how to respond. Although I was in shock for a few moments, I remember that I said to the boy that he could and should not say this to me, his teacher or any teacher, and that he should write a letter of apology to me before I would let him back to my class. I then asked him to leave for the remainder of that lesson. Just before class on the following day he handed me a letter which he said he wrote an apology. In that letter (of which I still have today) he wrote the following reason for saying what he had the previous day: "Teacher, I called you stupid because you were stupid because you gave us the same homework the day before and that is why you are stupid." (n.p.)

When I read that note, I realized that he was correct as I had mistakenly given the class the same homework before the previous class. I also realized that even though we may think that our students may not be listening to their teachers, in fact, they are. Unfortunately, the student who made statement was actually deemed a 'problem'

student by his regular teachers, in that he was always at the center of any class activity that the teachers had difficulty controlling; however, I had always had a good relationship with him probably because he reminded me of when I was a student at his age. I have never forgotten this ‘critical incident’ and now after many years working within the topic of reflective practice, I realize it was my first introduction to Schön’s (1983) reflection-in-action (my immediate response to the student’s statement) and reflecting-on-action (my later responses). Over the years, I have had many more occasions where I have experienced both reflection-in-action moments and reflection-on-action examples in different classrooms, contexts, and countries. However, it was that early classroom example that has stayed with me for many years although I had no real understanding of its true meaning until I began to read Schön’s (1983) seminal work on reflective practice (see below for more on this).

Responsibility

Dewey said that the attitude of responsibility means considering the consequences of what one has done and what one has learned. For Dewey (1933, 1986) a responsible attitude is one where people “consider the consequences of a projected step; it means to be willing to adopt these consequences when they follow reasonably from any position already taken” (p. 138). However, he says that it is not uncommon to see people continue to hold onto false beliefs, and Dewey (1933, 1986) notes, “They profess certain beliefs but are unwilling to commit themselves to the consequences that flow from them. The result is mental confusion” (p. 138). As Dewey (1933, 1986) mentioned, to complete one must have the attitude of responsibility to complete any project.

If we look closely at the attitude of responsibility, we can see that it concerns the impact of our reflections on ourselves, our students, the community in which we teach and the greater society of which we are members. So the main question I ask at my workshops related to the attitude of responsibility is: *What is the impact of what you do and your reflections on what you do at the descriptive, conceptual and critical levels?* This question coincides with Christopher Day’s (1993) notion of teachers acting within three different hierarchical levels of reflection: the first is where teachers focus their reflections on behavioral actions (*descriptive reflection*), the second is where teachers also include justifications of these reflections based on current theories of teaching (*conceptual reflection*), while at the third level teachers include the first two and look beyond theories and practices to examine their meaning within ethical, moral and social ramifications (*critical reflection*).

Descriptive reflection is where teachers reflect at the level of classroom actions, and this means teachers systematically collect data about what they do rather than suggesting what they think they do because what teachers say they do in their lessons can be a lot different from what they actually do. This evidence-based approach to reflection encourages teachers to avoid making instructional decisions based on impulse or routine; rather, teachers are now encouraged to use the data they have obtained so that they can make more informed decisions about their practice. Richards and Lockhart’s (1994) definition summarizes this evidence-based reflective approach as they encourage teachers to “collect data about their teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for

critical reflection about teaching” (p. 1). I ask questions related to helping teachers reflect at this level of reflection in my workshops such as: *What do you do in your lessons? How do you do it?*

The level of *conceptual reflection* encourages teachers to consider the different reasons they do what they do. At this level of reflection, teachers conceptualize their practice and ideally they can compare what they do to what their immediate colleagues do. These conceptualizations can also be compared either to what they read about in a literature review of particular topics of interest. I ask questions related to helping teachers reflect at this level of reflection in my workshops such as: *Why do you do it? What is the result?*

Critical reflection, as Brookfield (1995) has noted, has two purposes: “(1) to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions. (2) To question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against or own best long term interests” (p. 8). Although largely ignored within TESOL until very recently, scholars such as Graham Crooks have called for a more critical second language pedagogy that includes “teaching for social justice, in ways that support the development of active, engaged citizens who...will be prepared to seek out solution to the problems they define and encounter, and take action accordingly” (Crooks, 2013, p. 8). I ask questions related to helping teachers reflect at this level of reflection in my workshops such as: *What is the impact of what you do at the political, moral and ethical levels? Whose interests are being served by my teaching and the school I teach in?*

Whole-heartedness

When a reflective practitioner has a *whole-hearted* attitude, he or she takes up a project with a *whole heart*, and “throws himself into it” Dewey (1933, 1986, p. 137). Dewey (1933, 1986) goes on to say that “There is no greater enemy of effective thinking than divided interest... [but] “when a person is absorbed, the subject carries him on” (p. 137). Thus a teacher is excited to look at his or her practice and does so in an undivided manner as “questions occur to him spontaneously; a flood of suggestions pour in on him; further inquiries and readings are indicated and followed” (Dewey (1933,1986, p. 137). In other words, a reflective teacher who has a whole-hearted attitude will reflect-*in-action*, *on-action* and *for-action* throughout his or her career. As Stanley (1998) has noted, all three levels of reflection is what “reflective practitioners do when they look at their work in the moment (reflect-*in-action*) or in retrospect (reflect-*on-action*) in order to examine the reasons and beliefs underlying their actions and generate alternative actions for the future” (p. 585).

There are said to be three major types (or moments) of reflective practice where teachers can undertake reflection. The first moment happens during the event, such as classroom teaching, and is called reflection-*in-action*. The second moment is thinking about the event after it has happened, which is called reflection-*on-action*. The third moment occurs when teachers think about future actions, and is called reflection-*for-action*.

Reflection-in-action: The first type, of reflection-*in-action* (Schön 1983, 1987), occurs when teachers take their tacit knowledge of teaching for granted because many of their

actions have become routine.. In order for teachers to carry out these routine actions, they must employ a kind of knowing-in-action (Schön 1983). According to Schön, knowing-in-action is crucial for teachers because they cannot constantly question every action or reaction while they teach; otherwise, they would not be able to get through a class. For this reason, a teacher's knowing-in-action works similar to when we recognize a face in a crowd, but do not list or try to consciously piece together each separate facial feature that makes a person recognizable to us. We do not consciously think, "Could that be...?"—we just know. In addition, if you were asked to describe the features that prompted this recognition, it might be difficult because, as Schön (1983) has pointed out, that type of information usually remains at the subconscious level of our thoughts. However, when a new situation or event occurs and our established routines do not work for us, then according to Schön (1983), teachers use reflection-in-action to cope. There is a sequence of moments in a process of reflection-in-action:

- A situation develops which triggers spontaneous, routine responses (such as in knowing-in-action). For example, a student cannot answer a question about a topic he or she has explained in great detail during the previous class, such as identifying a grammar structure.
- Routine responses by the teacher (i.e., what the teacher has always done) do not produce a routine response and instead produce a surprise for the teacher: The teacher starts to explain how the student had already explained this grammar structure in the previous class and that this current silence is troubling for the teacher. Suddenly the student begins to cry.
- This surprise response gets the teacher's attention and leads to reflection within an action: The teacher reacts quickly to try to find out why the student is suddenly crying by questioning the student or asking the student's classmates why they think the student is crying.
- Reflection now gives rise to on-the-spot experimentation by the teacher: The student may or may not explain why he or she is crying. The teacher will take some measures (depending on the reaction or non reaction) to help solve the problem and either ignore the situation, empathize with the student, help the student answer the question by modeling answers, and so forth.

According to Schön, these sequences of moments are all present and lead to reflection-in-action. Reflection-in-action helps teachers become aware of what is actually happening in the present, as one teaches rather than forgetting these details after the class. This type of reflection also allows teachers to take action during a lesson, rather than waiting until after. Experienced teachers can use their repertoire of teaching routines to experiment in order to solve the dilemma, but novice teachers may have a problem reflecting-in-action because they have not built-up such an advanced schema of teaching routines. Some questions I give teachers in workshops about reflection-in-action include: *Are My instructions clear? Are the activities going as planned? Are the activities too easy or too difficult for the students? Do I need to increase student involvement or are some students over involved in the lesson? How many and what kind of questions am I asking? Do I wait long enough after asking?*

Reflection-on-action: The second type of reflection is called reflection-on-action, and involves thinking back on what was done to discover how knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected action. Here, teachers reflect on their classes after they have finished in order to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson so that they can begin to decide the future direction of their lessons. Reflection-on-action focuses on the cognitive processes of teaching that depends on retrospection for analysis. So, reflection on action would come to mean some kind of metacognitive action, while reflection in action is the ability to frame problems based on past experiences, a type of conversation that takes place between the practitioner and an uncertain situation at the time of the occurrence of that situation. Some questions I get teachers in workshops to reflect-on-action include: *What did the students learn and how do I know? Do I need to re-teach any part of the lesson? Will I teach this lesson differently next time?*

Reflection-for-action: The third type of reflection is called reflection-for-action. Reflection-for-action is different from the previous types of reflection in that it is proactive in nature. Teachers can prepare for the future by using knowledge from what happened during class and what they reflected on after class. Some questions I give teachers in workshops to reflect-for-action are: *What do I want my students to learn from this lesson? How well do I understand the content of the lesson I am about to teach? How will I organize the lesson? What activities will I include? How will I check for student understanding?*

Conclusion

Teacher reflection, as outlined in this paper, involves much more than taking a few minutes to think about how to keep students on task. Reflective language teaching involves teachers not only systematically gathering data about their teaching and using this information to make informed decisions about their practice, but also involves a particular reflective disposition. This disposition comprises of three essential attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness, all of which can make reflection meaningful for the practitioner. Reflection thus implies a dynamic way of being both inside and outside the classroom.

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