Reflective Practice in the Professional Development of Teachers of Adult English Language Learners

Thomas S. C. Farrell, Brock University, Ontario, Canada

Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels, and adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for teachers, program administrators, education researchers, and policy makers. It describes the foundations for and components of reflective practice to facilitate the use of this approach among educators who work with adult English language learners.

Introduction

There is a longstanding recognition in the field of language education that teachers must continually reshape their knowledge of teaching and learning (Brookfield, 1995; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Farrell, 2007, 2009; Heimlich & Norland, 1994; Mann, 2005; Rivers, 1970). This knowledge is developed initially in teacher education programs, then becomes part of teachers' education throughout their careers through reflective practice (Tedick, 2005). Reflective practice occurs when teachers consciously take on the role of reflective practitioner, 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; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Valli, 1997). This brief describes the theoretical basis for and research on reflective practice and suggests ways that teachers of adult English language learners can incorporate reflective practice into their teaching.

Reflective Practice

Many years ago, Dewey (1933) called for teachers to take reflective action that entails "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further con-

sequences to which it leads" (p. 9). Dewey identified three attributes of reflective individuals, which are still important for teachers today: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Open-mindedness is a desire to listen to more than one side of an issue and to give attention to alternative views. Responsibility involves careful consideration of the consequences to which an action leads. Wholeheartedness implies that teachers can overcome fears and uncertainties to critically evaluate their practice in order to make meaningful change.

The resurgence of interest in reflective practice may be due in part to other emergent trends in education, such as a renewed interest in constructivist learning theory. In constructivist theory, the learner constructs knowledge through engaging and interacting with content and the world (Piaget, 1932; Vygotsky, 1982).This theory regards reflection as a central factor in the teaching and learning process.

The use of reflective practice in teacher professional development is based on the belief that teachers can improve their own teaching by consciously and systematically reflecting on their teaching experiences (Farrell, 2004, 2007). As reflective practitioners, teachers can use the data gathered from these systematic reflections. As Valli (1997) suggests, they can "look back on events, make judgments about them, and alter their teaching behaviors in light of craft, research, and ethical knowledge" (p. 70). For teachers of adult English language learners, Richards (1990) maintains 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).

Theoretical Background

It has been difficult to reach consensus on a definition of reflection and on which reflective practices promote teacher development and improved classroom practices (Farrell, 2007). Two main forms of reflection have emerged: a weak form and a strong form. In its weak version, reflective practice is said to be no more than thoughtful practice, where teachers sometimes, as Wallace (1991) suggests, "informally evaluate various aspects of their professional expertise" (p. 292). This type of informal reflection does not necessarily lead to improved teaching and can even lead to more "unpleasant emotions without suggesting any way forward" (p. 13). However, a second, stronger form of reflection involves teachers systematically reflecting on their

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4646 40th Street NW
Washington, DC 20016-1859

own teaching and taking responsibility for their actions in the classroom (Farrell, 2007). Richards and Lockhart (1994) emphasize this stronger version when they say that teachers should "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). This brief supports the stronger form as outlined by Richards and Lockhart (1994) and reviews research and practice within this form.

Research

In order for teachers to engage in reflective practice as outlined in the stronger version, they must systematically gather data about their practice. This type of research engagement shows that teachers make their beliefs and assumptions about their practices evident in their analysis of their teaching. This stance toward reflection on practice becomes especially important for teachers of adult learners who have made a choice to attend an educational program and learn a new language and content.

Research on how experienced language teachers have reflected critically on their beliefs, on critical incidents in the classroom, and on classroom practices is limited to a few studies. Coro (2004) investigated teachers' reflections about methods for adult literacy instruction vis-à-vis their beliefs about effective adult literacy instruction. He found that in some cases, "participation in practitioner inquiry research appeared to correlate with the use of more student-centered approaches" (p. 213). Generally speaking, he found that across teachers, instructional approaches were diverse, and beliefs about the ways that literacy is learned were complex. Farrell and Lim (2005) examined the beliefs of two experienced language teachers and their instructional practices while teaching grammar and discovered some discrepancy between what the teachers said they did in the classroom and what they actually did. For example, it was observed in the classroom that both adopted a somewhat traditional approach to grammar teaching—teacher-centered, with overt teaching of grammar structures and little integration of grammar into speaking and writing activities—although they said that they were communicative language teachers. Farrell (2007) reported on a critical incident in which an ESL teacher received unsolicited negative comments from a student at the end of a class. As a result of articulating this critical incident in a reflective practice group, the teacher was able to place the comments in the larger context of her teaching and to understand the student's comments as emanating from a desire to learn.

Practice

Teachers can choose a number of approaches to facilitating reflection over the course of their professional careers. Each approach can be used alone or in combination with others, depending on the topic of investigation. This brief outlines three approaches: action research, teaching journals, and teacher development groups. Each approach is valuable for promoting reflective teaching.

Action Research

Action research involves investigation of the values held and the practices engaged in while carrying out an activity—in this case, teaching (McFee, 1993; Quigley & Kuhne, 1997). As McFee points out, "It is research into a particular kind of practice . . . in which there is a craft-knowledge . . . based on a particular model of knowledge and research with action as an outcome. . . . This knowledge is practical knowledge" (p. 178). Although educators may engage in action research independently, it can also be a collaborative process in which teams of teachers from homogenous or heterogeneous backgrounds exchange ideas and findings to improve instruction among themselves. An example is the Pennsylvania Action Research Network (PAARN) (Kuhne & Weirauch, 2001), which promotes action research on both the individual and team levels. Wallace (1991) maintains that action research can have a "specific and immediate outcome which can be directly related to practice in the teacher's own context" and is "an extension of the normal reflective practice of many teachers, but it is slightly more rigorous and might conceivably lead to more effective outcomes" (pp. 56-57). Gow, Kember, and McKay's (1996) study of action research in Hong Kong focused on attempts by teachers to encourage more independent student learning and reported improved student learning as a result of the action research project.

Action research is generally conducted by groups of practicing teachers, who are valuable sources of knowledge regarding their own classroom situations. Change can be implemented readily because the participating teachers will find the results of their research credible and valid for their needs. Bailey (2001) describes action research among language teachers as "an approach to collecting and interpreting data which involves a clear, repeated cycle of procedures" (p.490). Farrell (2007) suggests the following cycle that teachers can use for action research projects:

1. Identify an issue.

2. Review the literature on the issue and ask questions to narrow the focus.

3. Choose data to be collected and a method of data collection.

4. Collect, analyze, and interpret the data selected.

5. Develop, implement, and monitor an action plan.

First, the teacher identifies a general issue and turns it into a working statement. For example, in a speaking class in which not all students participate regularly, the teacher might formulate the following working statement: *Some of the students in my speaking class never seem to take part in speaking activities.* Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest that this working statement can be changed into a more specific question such as this: *What kinds of speaking activities involve*

all of the class in speaking? The teacher then attempts to reflect on what is happening in the classroom by investigating which speaking activities are used and the types of interaction and language use they generate. Next, the teacher chooses a procedure for collecting data through observations, recordings, and transcripts. The teacher then gathers the data and analyzes the information to identify patterns and interpret the findings. For example, suppose that to investigate the question above, the teacher makes an audio or video recording of the class. A viewing of the recording reveals that the teacher leads most of the discussion in the class as well as group problem-solving tasks. In an effort to promote more evenly distributed speaking, the teacher develops and implements an action plan that includes activities that incorporate student-to-student interaction instead of using only teacher-fronted activities, in which students respond to questions initiated by the teacher. After implementing the action plan, the teacher determines the impact on student participation in speaking activities in the classroom. Through a process that includes planning, observing, analyzing, acting, and reviewing, language teachers can learn a great deal about the nature of classroom teaching and learning and also acquire useful classroom investigation skills.

Teaching Journals

Richards and Farrell (2005) describe a teaching journal as a notebook in which a teacher writes regularly about teaching experiences and other events. They argue that journal writing can help teachers question and analyze what they do both inside and outside the classroom, thus consciously exploring and analyzing their practice. McDonough (1994) maintains that teachers who write regularly about their teaching can become more aware of "day-to-day behaviors and underlying attitudes, alongside outcomes and the decisions that all teachers need to take" (p. 64-65). Farrell (2007) 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. Collaborative journal writing with peers can also benefit language teachers, because peers can both challenge and support their thinking. An interesting example of a collaborative teaching journal was a project conducted by a group of researchers in Hong Kong (Brock, Yu, & Wong, 1992). After writing with peers (once issues of trust and confidentiality had been agreed upon), the teachers gained different perspectives on their teaching, a result that might have been difficult to achieve if the teachers had attempted to reflect alone.

Farrell (2007) suggests that when starting a teaching journal for the first time, the teacher first reflect on a recent teaching practice or experience in the classroom, positive or negative, that caused the teacher to stop and think, and ask the following questions related to the experience: "What happened before this incident? What happened after it?

Why was this incident important? What does this incident tell me about myself as a teacher?" Next, the teacher writes this up in a teaching journal and continues to write about it as he or she continues teaching. Then, after each journal entry the teacher asks two or three questions about what he or she has written. After that, the teacher keeps writing about the chosen topic for at least a month, reviewing entries each week and looking for emerging patterns. Throughout the process, teachers think about ways that journal writing can help them reflect on their practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Teacher Development Groups

Farrell (2007) suggests that language teachers come together in teacher development groups to reflect so that they can complement each other's strengths and compensate for each other's limitations. Head and Taylor (1997) define a teacher development group as "any form of co-operative and ongoing arrangement between two or more teachers to work together on their own personal and professional development" (p. 91). 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 cites three types of teacher development 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. In programs for adult English language learners, practitioners might meet within a program, across programs, or throughout the state 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 (Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008). (For more information about study circles for practitioners working with adult English language learners, see Center for Applied Linguistics, 2007.)

Richardson (1997) suggests that when colleagues come together in a group to reflect on their work, four basic features will promote the success of the group: All participants need to feel safe within the group, connected in some way, passionate about the group and what they are trying to accomplish together, and grateful for the group's existence. Once the group has formed, roles must be decided for each member, with one member designated as the group leader. Farrell (2007) suggests having co-leaders, with one focused on getting tasks accomplished and the other working on maintaining group cohesion and personal relationships. In order to sustain the group, a level of trust must develop among the members so that they can be open during group discussions without feeling the need to hide their opinions. Teachers need to agree that what is said in the group stays in the group and commit to attending all of the group meet-

ings. When teachers come together in this way, they can help each other articulate their thoughts about their work and all grow professionally together (Farrell, 2007). (For more information about teacher development groups, see Brookfield, 1995.)

Conclusion

Teachers who engage in 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. Professional development through reflective practice can be seen as an opportunity to enter a process of "mental growth spurred from within" (Feiman-Namser & Floden, 1986, p. 523), where teachers are supported in seeking their own growth.

Reflective practice takes place along a continuum, where "people vary in opportunity, ability, or propensity to reflect" (Copeland, Birmingham, De La Cruz, & Lewin, 1993, p. 348). 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 benefit teachers at various stages. The three approaches described in this brief—engaging in action research projects, writing in a teaching journal, and joining a teacher development group—are appropriate for teachers working with adult English language learners. Teachers can engage in these reflective activities at any stage of their careers and at any time of the teaching day to continue constructing their own personal theories of teaching and improve their instructional practice.

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