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REFLECTIVE TEACHING IN EFL CLASSES: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the 20th century, professionals in language teaching have strived for ways that could guarantee better outcomes in language teaching classes. Different methods were used mostly in the first half of that century. Then some language teaching professionals moved beyond methods with the hope of gaining greater results. In one case, some language teachers moved towards what is now called reflective teaching (RT). RT requires teachers' self-observation as well self-evaluation which should go on in a cyclical manner to ensure teachers' understanding of their own classroom actions so that refinements can be introduced where necessary. RT is a process whereby teachers' reflect on their own classroom actions to collect and analyze descriptive data which can show where a change for better can be made. RT results in teacher and material flexibility and teacher professionalism. This paper provides a descriptive account of RT in language classrooms.

Keywords: Frierian Fish Bowl, Adult Education, Reflective Teaching, Professional Development, Constructivism.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past couple of centuries, the profession of foreign/second language teaching has witnessed many fluctuations all of which were based on good will. In their quest for better outcomes, teachers, educators, and other involved parties moved beyond the age of traditional methods to effective and reflective teaching. This, in turn, gave way to the post method age to ensue. Although apparently distinct, the method era, the beyond method phase, and the post method condition share one major concern: finding practical options for professionalism. The field (of foreign/second language teaching) has failed to achieve ideal professionalism due to a number of factors. As (Burt & Keenan, 1998) noticed, these factors include, at least, the following:

- The range of program types
- The part-time workforce
- The limited financial resources for training
- The varied policies and requirements for professional credentialing or certification

It is therefore a challenge to find and implement approaches that accommodate these factors and provide language teachers with opportunities for professional development. Many scholars agree that one such approach is Reflective Teaching (RT) whereby teachers engage in a successive series of reflection and modification. That is, reflective teachers reflect on their own teaching practice (i.e., self-observation) and then modify their practice (i.e., self-evaluation) to make sure the outcome will be satisfactory. This paper elaborates on the reflective practice process and dicusses its implications for foreign/second language teachers.

1. RT: Foundations and features

Perhaps the most influential discussion of reflection can be attributed to Dewey (1933) who wrote:

> In every case of reflective activity, a person finds himself confronted with a given, present situation from which he has to arrive at, or conclude to, something that is not present. This process of arriving at an idea of what is absent on the basis of what is at hand is inference. What is present carries or bears the mind over to the idea and ultimately the acceptance of something else. (p. 190).

Dewey's notion of inference is synonymous to reflective thought. Reflective thought can be defined as "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 tends"

(Dewey 1933, p. 118). That is, reflection is in essence of a proactive, ongoing process of evaluating one's beliefs and practices, their origins, and their impacts (Stanley, 1998). Through reflection, teachers make visible to themselves what is apparent to others but a mystery to themselves. Reflection is the process of bridging the gap between experience and learning.

Dewey's discussion of what comprises reflection entails five states of thought and feelings which Dewey (1933, pp. 199-209) identifies as follows:

- Suggestions, in which the mind leaps forward to a possible solution.

- An intellectualization of the difficulty or perplexity that has been felt (directly experienced) into a problem to be solved.

- The use of one suggestion after another as a leading idea, or hypothesis, to initiate and guide observation and other operations in collection of factual material.

- The mental elaboration of the idea, or supposition as an idea or supposition (reasoning, in the sense in which reasoning is a part, not the whole, of inference).

- Testing the hypothesis by overt, or imaginative action.

More recently, however, scholars criticized Dewey's notion of reflection on several grounds. Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990), for instance, noted that Dewey's notion of reflection implies a sense of linearity and sequencing as if reflection is a plan for action. They also noticed that his perspective on reflection is not an "interactive or dialogical process" since he takes it for granted that a given "individual student teacher learns to reflect on a particular experience individually" (p. 58). In much the same way, Rorty (1987) argued that Deweys had defined reflection in such a way as to indicate that "a correct account of the nature of thought would make possible the sort of improvement in thinking which had been promised in the past by others" (p. xvii). Furthermore, Dewey failed to include individuals' emotions in his definition of reflection (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry, and Osborne, 1983).

The flaws found in Dewey's definition of reflection led others to redefine the term in a comprehensive and exhaustive way. In one case, Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) addresssed the role of teacher emotions in their definition of reflection. In their view, reflection can be best defined as a process whereby individuals "recapture their experience, think about it, pull it over and evaluate it" (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985, p. 19). Their conceptualization of reflection includes the following features:

- Returning to experience defined as recalling or detailing salient events in the action;

- Attending to (or connecting with) feelings which includes (i) using helpful feelings, and (ii) removing or containing obstructive ones; and

- Evaluating experience which involves (i) re-examining experience in the light of one's intent and existing knowledge, and (ii) integrating this new knowledge into one's conceptual framework.

Although according to Boud et al. reconceptualization of reflection tried to include individual's emotions, it is not comprehensive in that it turns reflection into a kind of mental activity which lacks "the behavioural element and dialogue with others involved in the situation" (Cinnamond & Zimpher, 1990, p. 67); hence, it constrains reflection. This shortcoming led Schön (1983) to argue in favor of two forms of reflection:

(a) reflection in action, and

(b) reflection on action.

For Schön, reflection in action requires the teacher to allow himself to "experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique" (Schön, 1983, p. 68). The teacher reflects on the task at hand as well as on the prior understanding implicit in his own behavior. The teacher then carries out an experiment which, on the one hand, generates a new understanding of the task and, on the other hand, leads to a change in the situation. This does not necessarily require the teacher to stick to an *a priori* method since every task or every situation is unique in its own right. The teacher can draw on and benefit from what has gone before (Schön, 1983). By way of contrast, reflection on action is *a posteriori* in that it is done only after

the task has already been performed. Reflection on action enables teachers to explore why they acted as they did, what was happening in that situation, and the like. This leads them to develop a repertoire of ideas about their practice and actions.

In spite of several criticisms addressed towards Schön's conceptualization of reflection, it survived the test of time (Eraut, 1994; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). Eraut (1994), for instance, argued that when the task is to be performed in a very short time, the scope for reflection will definitely be very limited. Munby and Russell (1989), too, expressed doubts about the psychological reality of reflection in action. Needless to say, Schön's conceptualization of reflection has been really significant in that many training and education programs adopted it not only in organizing experiences but also in the teaching of content.

More recently, reflective teaching has influenced and has been affected by several philosophical as well as pedagogical theories. One such pedagogical theory is constructivism. It views learning as an active process which requires learners to reflect on their current as well as past knowledge and experiences to generate new concepts and ideas. In addition to constructivism, humanism in education has found reflective teaching suitable for learners' personal growth in a way that serves the goal of liberating from values that hinder growth (Kullman, 1998). Critical pedagogy, too, has influenced and shaped the concept of reflection through its emphasis on the examination, upon reflection, of the power bases, ideologies, and struggles that underlie education (Brookfield, 1995). Finally, reflective teaching has been influenced by American pragmatism which emphasizes (a) active implementation, (b) testing, and (c) refining of ideas through experience (Brookfield, 1995).

2. The reflective process

Reflection, as it is seen today, it is an ongoing process which requires practitioners (i.e., teachers, learners, and so on) to engage in a continuous cycle of observation-of-the-self and evaluation-of-the-self. The aim of reflection is to help practitioners understand their own actions as well as the reactions they stimulate in their interlocutors (Brookfield, 1995; Thiel, 1999). Very often reflection does not start with a

specific predefined problem or question. However, the process requires several things to be done. On the whole, the integral steps of reflection can be identified as the following:

2.1 Collection of descriptive data

The first basic element of the reflective process is 'collecting descriptive data' on what is happening in the classroom. Such data can be collected from several different sources the most important of which are (a) autobiographis (i.e., written record of personal experience by teachers and learners), (b) learners' eyes, (c) colleagues' eyes and experiences, and (d) existing theoretical literature (Brookfield, 1995).

To collect data, teachers can access several sources of information. Colleagues may be asked to observe classes, to write their notes, and to discuss them at a later time. Students' learning logs and journals are also useful for this purpose. The teachers' own audio log can also be used as a source of information for data collection. The Frierian Fish Bowl is also a very good technique; students may be asked to reflect on the class activities and write their own views on pieces of paper which do not include their names. The pieces of paper are then placed in a hat in the middle of a circle so that no one knows which piece of paper was written by whom.

More recently, other sources of reflective data have become popular. For example, reflective essays written by students on specifically designated issues are one example. Reflective essays are formalized journal entries which focus on predefined issues and are to be completed at specified times. The issues may be related to the class action; they may also focus on outside-class topics (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Learning contracts and logs can also be employed as a source of descriptive data. Students can be asked to devise a learning contract—a written document that delineates their goals and the tasks they intend to complete. This learning contract can set a specific due date for the attainment of each of the tasks identified in the contract. They can then be encouraged to keep their individual learning logs in which they record their experiences (both positive and negative) as they move towards the accomplishment of each task (Bringle &

Hatcher, 1996). Other recent sources of descriptive data include:

- *E-Mail Discussion Groups:* Electronic mailing list-servers which allow participants to form a discussion grous to discuss their experiences;

- *Portfolios:* Student-generated files including administrative documents, evidence of class outcomes, and the students' evaluation of the learning experience that enable students to demonstrate the knowledge and abilities they have acquired;

- *Presentations:* Powerpoint presentations where by students are required to reflect on different aspects of the class action; and

- *Photo Reflections:* Pictorial accounts of class activities for which students may be asked to write reflective captions.

2.2 Data Analysis

Once descriptive data have been collected, the data should be analyzed to reveal attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, goals, power relations, and consequences hidden in classroom action. As Crandall (2000) argued, in this phase questions like the following can be asked:

- What happened that was expected or surprising?

- What theories about teaching or personal experiences with learning are revealed in the data?

- How do these theories relate to the practitioner's stated beliefs and attitudes?

- What is revealed about the relationships among the participants?

- What are the consequences of the practitioner's actions?

Data can be analyzed and attempts can be made at identifying patterns in the data (Crandall, 2000; Gebhard, 1996; Stanley, 1998). For instance, the reflective teacher can search the data to see if a pattern of learner reluctance to speak during class activities emerges from the data. If so, the learners' can be asked why.

2.3 Reflection

In this phase, the reflective practitioner can consider how the situation or the activity could have been different (Stanley, 1998). Alternatives to the choices which have been made during the class action can be considered. Moreover, the beliefs and ideologies behind those alternatives can also be evaluated in a critical light. The reflective practitioner can also ask other teachers to see how they would address similar situations. The reflective teacher can ask 'what if' questions in this reflection phase (Gebhard, 1996). He can also observe colleagues' classes to see how they resolve class problems.

2.4 Plan for action

After reflection, the reflective teacher needs to create a plan which will enable him to incorporate new insights. Information and insights that emerge from the reflective process should be utilized to improve class action and instructional practice (Farrell, 1998). Changes and improvements do not need to be huge and radical (Gebhard, 1996). Even small changes and adjustments can finetune the flow of classroom action.

It is important to note that the reflection process does not end here. Rather, reflection should go on as the teacher introduces his new action plan in the class. That is, the teacher needs to reflect on his new planning and decision making, to observe their impact, and to continue the reflection process in a cyclical manner. As such, the reflective process is not linear; rather, it is cyclical in nature. It is spiral in that it creates a tornado effect. As the process goes on, it gathers size and momentum.

3. Pros and Cons

Reflective teaching has certain advantages and certain disadvantages. What follows is a summary of the benefits and challenges of RT as discussed by Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, (1998), Crandall (2000), Farrell (1998), Stanley (1998), and Thiel (1999).

3.1 Pros

The main benefits of RT fall under such headings as (i) Flexibility, (ii) Practicality, (iii) Professionalism, and (iv) Sustainability.

Flexibility: Language teaching is a varied field because of the variety inherent in instructional contexts, learner groups, curricula, available resources, and amount and type of

teacher preparation. This variety requires attention, and RT is the best candidate which can address this variety. Although RT is collective in nature, it can be constructed as an individual process. The whole RT process is constructive in that it provides the new teacher with the opportunity to examine the success and/or failure of his class action in a reflective light. Moreover, the so-to-speak seasoned teacher can deepen his self-awareness and professional knowledge through RT.

Practicality: Reflective teaching links theory to practice. It provides the teacher with opportunities to reflect on and explore new ideas, techniques, and approaches. These are part and parcel of the reflective process. As such, they empower the teacher with the ability to teach in varied contexts since it requires the teacher to make connections between their own beliefs and what is happening in various teaching contexts. It makes teachers plausible.

Professionalism: RT requires teachers to engage in an ongoing process where they exercise intellect, responsibility, and professional development. Reflective teachers are expected to promote deliberate actions in planning and implementing classroom activities which, in turn, require ongoing attention to teaching and learning theories. The reflective teacher assesses, revises, and implements approches and activities as the teaching process goes on. This leads to professional development; hence, professionalism.

Sustainability: Teaching second/foreign languages is never possible in the form of discrete workshops and conferences. Rather, language teaching, especially where adults are involved, requires sustained development (Burt & Keenan, 1998; Crandall, 2000). This is best guaranteed through RT since it creates a cyclical process which spares time for reflection, adjustment, implementation, finetuning, and follow-up.

3.2 Cons

Reflective practice, due to its ongoing nature, may prove emotionally challenging (Burt & Keenan, 1998; Crandall, 2000). The teacher needs to reflect on the teaching process. This implies that the teacher can never be certain about his class action or his instructional philosophy. This uncertainty is emotionally demanding since some teachers may find it hard to confront ambiguity.

Conclusion

It was argued in this paper that RT has several important merits that make it a suitable alternative for language teaching methods especially where adults learners are concerned. RT offers options, both practical and theoretical, to guarantee professional development. Moreover, due to its cyclical and additive nature, RT results in an ever-increasing class outcome. It can therefore be concluded that, if willing to invest in time and resources, adults foreign/second language learners and teachers should resort to RT as the choice.

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