

Contemporary Teaching is not the Process of Cutting a Slice Off the Roast

Reflective Teacher Development through observing classroom processes

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Abstract

The core concept of teaching serves a dynamic world of the classroom that faces a number of different approaches to professional development. From that point of view, teaching can be considered as a very personal practice employing the individual teachers bringing to teaching very distinctive principles, habits of critical thinking, personal interpretations and convictions about the effectiveness of teaching. Accordingly, the whole teaching session is a reflective thinking process concerning the different options to be chosen for the final goal. If not so – it is just thoughtless (and, correspondingly less efficient) cutting off a slice from the roast. The purpose of this study is to investigate the nature of reflective thinking amongst teachers and to highlight the degree of their engagement in reflective teaching. The research revealed that reflective teaching is a ground for decision-making, instructional planning, self-observation and self-evaluation serving the whole progress of professional development.

Key words: reflective teaching, critical thinking, self-observation, self-evaluation, professional development.

One day a young girl was watching her mother cooking a roast of beef. Just before the mother put the roast in the pot, she cut a slice off the end. The ever observant daughter asked her mother why she had done that, and the mother responded that her grandmother had always done it. Later that same afternoon, the mother was curious, so she called her mother and asked her the same question. Her mother, the child's grandmother, said that in her day she had to trim the roasts because they were usually too big for a regular pot.

Thomas Farrell

Introduction

The rather figurative title of this article tends to highlight the great importance of reflective teaching in teachers' professional development. Throughout the paper I would strive to view critical reflection as an inevitable process in contemporary language teaching. The perception of reflective teaching is thought-provoking due to its nature, as the teaching process without critical reflection is deemed to be a process of 'cutting a slice off the roast' unconsciously. Today's classroom does not look like a 'regular pot' employing the preordained methodology. On the contrary, it forces teachers to be agile and consciously involved in teaching through seeking ways to reflect on their work.

While looking through literature on education, I found that John Dewey's definition of reflective teaching sounded professionally important to commence with. Dewey (1993, 17) points out that it is reflection that "emancipates us from merely impulsive and routine activity,...enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view, or purposes of which we are aware. It enables us to act in deliberate and intentional fashion to know what we are about when we act". According to Hubball, Collins and Pratt (2005, 60), reflective practice is

"the thoughtful consideration and questioning of what we do, what works and what doesn't, and what premises and rationales underlie our teaching and that of others". Since reflective teaching enhances teachers' professionalism to think about what, how and why they do it, it provokes them to leave behind the routine action and adapt to on the spot decisions to tailor the learning process. Consequently, through critical reflection teachers are able to monitor and evaluate their teaching from different angles. The whole monitoring and evaluation process serves to develop strategies to change and consider the effect of employing these strategies in the classroom setting. It has to be noted that the existing conventional approaches in teachers' development cannot always assist the teachers in tackling the problems they encounter in the classroom. Therefore, the objective observation of teaching and critical reflection on what one discovers play a vital role in shaping a perfectly personalized teaching environment. This obtained information, which is useful to many extents, is illustrated in the figure below

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PRODUCT	PROCESS	RESULT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better understanding of own assumptions about teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The process leads to richer conceptualization of teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is a focal component of professional development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better understanding of own teaching practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The process serves as a basis for self-evaluation 	

Table 1. Cycle of reflective teaching

The reflective process that leads to the productive conceptualization of teaching entails asking ‘what and why’ questions, that goes beyond the simple instructional design and planning. As Bartlett (1990) points out, asking “what and why” questions give us a certain power over our teaching. We could claim that the degree of autonomy and responsibility we have in our work as teachers is determined by the level of control we can exercise over our actions. In reflecting on the above kind of questions, we begin to exercise control and open up the possibility of transforming our everyday classroom life. (p. 267)

Feasibility of reasoning and enhancing the high-order thinking skills enables the teachers to be very agilely involved in reflecting on their practice during and after the classes. It is note-worthy to stress Schon’s (1983) approach towards the types of reflection. He designates two sorts of reflection: a) reflection-in-action, which comes with experience and b) reflection-on-action regarding the teachers’ reflection during and after teaching practice. Reflection-in-action takes precedence over the teaching process and identifies the teachers’ unconsciousness over decision making and problem solving towards the following actions. Reflection-on-action happens after the teaching session has been completed and views the teachers’ focal role in observing, scrutinizing, and evaluating the teaching situation. This process is more deliberative and conscious as the teachers are given more opportunities to scrutinize their practice by looking on the teaching session and evaluating it.

It is an interesting point that all the above mentioned assumptions serve to frame the ‘looking-glass nature’ (Cooley, 1902) of teaching practice and the teacher’s professional identity itself. The main aim of my research paper was to identify teachers’ attitudes towards being reflected in a variety of mirrors. A simple one-page questionnaire was constructed taking into account the point of reflective teaching amongst a group of language teachers.

Method

Qualitative and quantitative approaches were adopted to collect the data considering practical and analytical issues. The research provided substantial empirical input into the academic debate about the effectiveness of reflective teaching. I have applied web-based online questionnaires because of their apparent advantages over on-paper approaches. It gave me an opportunity to reach respondents by sending email invitations to online surveys. The online survey software package www.surveymonkey.com was used for conducting the internet based surveys. To see the questionnaire online please click the following link - <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3W6HXCB>. The respondents could access the survey questionnaire by clicking on the link emailed to them. A short letter of introduction explaining the purpose of the research project was given in the body of the email invitation to the online questionnaires. In order to generate the data, responses were arbitrarily coded. A separate code for non-response was not included in the coding schemes as most questions required an answer before submitting the form and could be skipped. Some responses from paper-based questionnaire were added through manual data entry. A total of 100 questionnaires were completed and returned by English language school and university teachers from 4 schools and 6 universities in Georgia with teaching experience of 3 -10 years. 85.7% of females and 14.3% of males completed the questionnaire.

Qualitative data was also obtained through the interviews to collect further information about the reflective practice process.. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three English Language teachers at the International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia.

Results

Question 1: What does it feel like to be monitored, assessed and scrutinized?

The data revealed that majority of the applicants (77%) were quite seasoned professionals (teaching experience 5 years and more) indicating the role of the experience as the

main source of productive teaching and an opportunity to employ the established practice.

They responded positively to the question concerning the process of being monitored, assessed and scrutinized.

'I'd welcome any kind of assessment if it is done for teachers' professional development.'

'It's good for motivation'

'It is quite OK, informative and necessary for me, not irritating'

'It's quite convenient for me and helps me to improve myself'

The teachers, who elucidated their unwillingness towards being the participants of the reflective process- were a small percentage (13%). It is notable to mention here that these subjects were not very experienced teachers (teaching experience between 1 and 4 years)

'Anxious'

'Stressful'

'It feels like being uncomfortable, a bit nervous'

'Unpleasant'

It was quite a surprising fact that only 10% of them pointed out their consciousness of monitoring and its importance for the professional growth, but indicated the process as inconvenient.

'I realize it's necessary, but it's not very pleasant'

'It's a good way to develop yourself as a professional, but it is really hard to be monitored and assessed'

'I prefer self-observation, and group discussions, as they are rather less stressful.'

Question2:What are the ways you would like to reflect on your teaching? (You can opt more than one option)

a) **Group discussions**- simply get-together, where the members reflect on their work

b) **Self-observation**- observation is carried out alone (audio and video recordings, lesson reports, etc.)

c) **Pair-observation**- pairs observing each other's classes

d) **Journal-writing**- in the form of a diary, where pairs write to and for each other

e) **Critical Friends**- colleagues link critical friendship for professional development

Summing up the collected responses, I received the following data for analysis, where 92.9% of the subjects have chosen the group discussions as the most convenient way to reflect on their work. 50% of the teachers have found the self-observations process suitable for their personality. It is thought-provoking that the majority of the subjects preferred not to have any sort of observer while teaching. 35.7% constituted the teachers who are willing to have critical friends to monitor, scrutinize and evaluate their performance. It is not staggering that none of them have chosen writing a journal. The point could be that it is a time-consuming task for the teachers, who have a very busy profession.

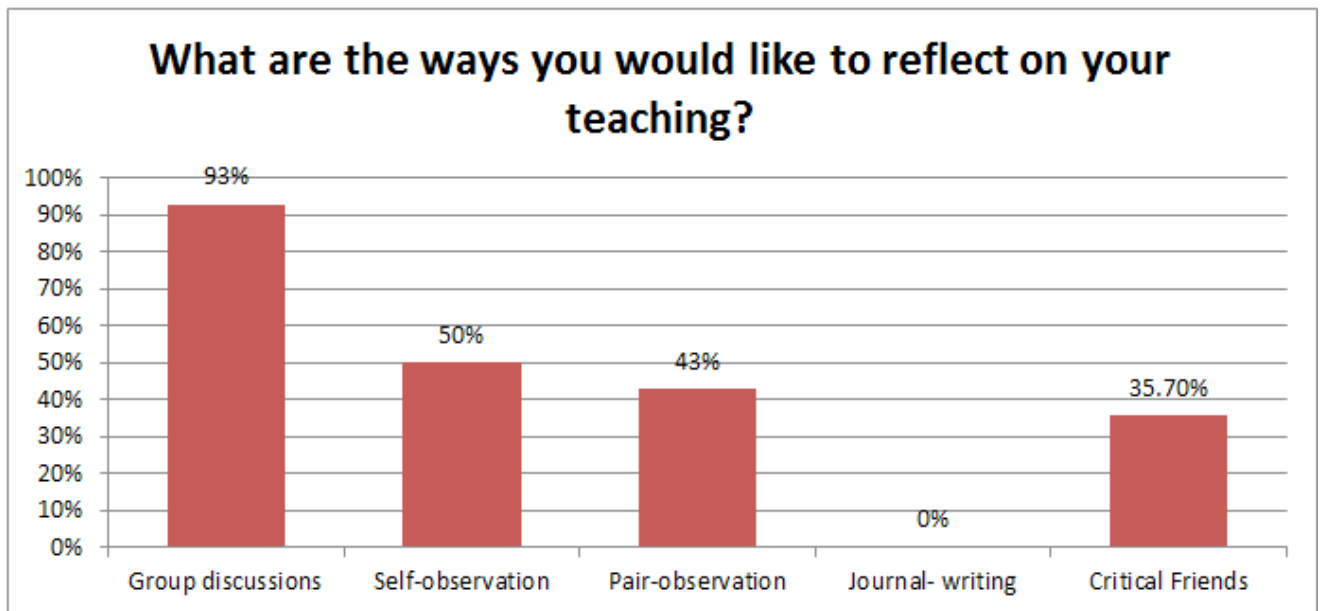


Figure 1. Ways of critical reflection

Question 3: Have you ever applied any methods of reflecting on your teaching?

Related to the question whether they applied any methods of reflective teaching or not, 85.7% of the subjects responded positively and 14.3 % stated that they have never tried to apply the reflective approach to teaching.

Question 4: If yes, what kinds of concerns were useful to focus on? (You can opt more than one answer)

Interestingly, out of 85.7% of those subjects who indicated their awareness of reflective teaching in practice, the ma-

majority of them (91.7%) marked teaching style as the most focal concern of their professional interest. 58.3 % of the teachers preferred to have more control over classroom management through different ways of observation. An equal number (50%) was allocated for the language usage (amount of English) and students' interaction. In addition 41.7% reflected on their preference to pinpoint the instructional design.

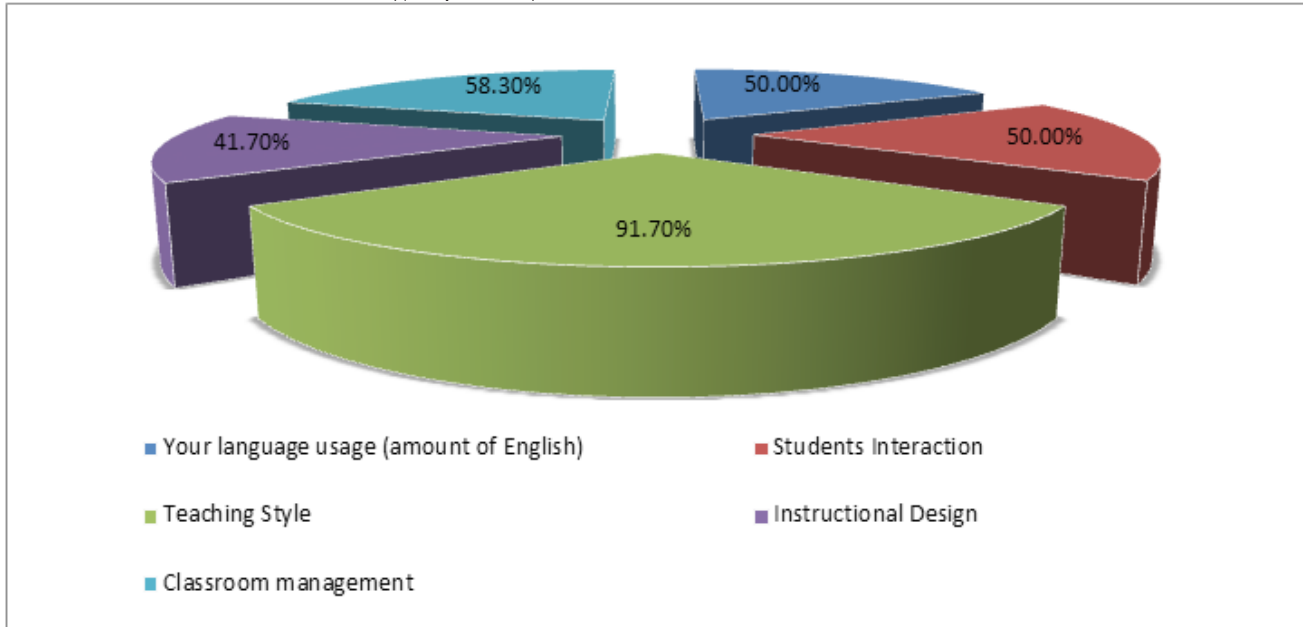


Figure 2. Concerns of reflective teaching

Question 5: What do you think, how do the critical reflections assist you to enhance your teaching skills?

The received data highlighted that majority of the subjects found critical reflection as a very their teaching skills.

'It helps to fill the gaps in knowledge and improve instruction techniques'

'It enables one to improve the teaching style and make classes more engaging'

'The more critical I am towards myself, the more enhanced my teaching skills become. The feeling of responsibility and striving towards the progress is the necessary characterization for every teacher.'

'I've found it really useful in my critical reflections to gauge how the students are reacting and learning. If the students aren't responding well or improving in their learning, then it makes me try a different and more effective teaching approach.'

The research took a careful look at the teachers' personal perceptions and experiences in their classrooms and provided them with an opportunity to express their feeling freely through the semi-structured interviews.

The interview held with 5 teachers (who had also answered the questionnaire) aimed at identifying in more detail how they reflected on their teaching and how this helped them to improve. Among the typical responses were:

'These are the questions you ask yourself as a teacher...'

'In order to reflect you have to think about what did I want to happen in my class and did it happen...did the students have the understandings and behaviors and knowledge I wanted them to have'

'You have a vision. You are always going back over and over...and most of all you think that it's a good chance to take a rest of what you've been doing so far and change your mind'

'I keep note-taking after my classes and I have the professional document to look at to guide me in my own teaching practice, evaluate myself...'

'I like to keep a reflective journal. But if you are only writing down what happened, it does not move you forward to learn from your experience. So, reflection is a critical part with understanding the necessary changes for your future professional development...'

‘Using peer to peer discussions could be more useful way to reflect on your own practice...’

Based on the responses, it is quite obvious that critical reflection is a focal component of their lesson planning component.

Conclusion

The reflective process is generally teacher-initiated and directed, as it is a self-observation process provoked by the teachers’ personal identity aiming at professional growth. The research data stressed the existing competitive world in the field of English Language Teaching. The majority of teachers view their roles as the designers of the instructional process and strive to collect data about their own teaching sessions and their roles within them and use the information obtained as a basis for personal/professional development.

Audio-visual recordings are effective as they aim at enhancing a teacher’s self-reflective competence. Class recordings can be stored for later use and can help gain insight into the teacher’s progress.

The journal writing proved to be a time consuming task for the teachers, who have a very busy profession. Furthermore, classroom experience observed through the journal writing is deemed as a conscious process recalling descriptions of certain teaching stages. It could be safe to note here that some teaching strategies and techniques obtained through experience are exploited automatically by the teachers and later reflection could not serve as a comprehensive approach towards identifying the gap between the teaching goals and learning interests.

As some teachers detected their reluctance towards observation, since it is always associated with evaluation, I consider that the role of the observation should be clearly stated by the education managers as to offer suggestions, not to judge or scrutinize. I think more training should be conducted by the educational institutions for the teachers to put a great emphasis on critical reflection of their teaching practice.

The apt supervision model could be useful. The administration units should provide the professional learning communities with amenities and time needed for collaboration.

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