

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner in EFL/ESL: An Inquiry Inspired by Some Noted Western Scholars' Curriculum Tradition and Teaching Studies

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Abstract: This paper explores the crucial role of reflective practice in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. The article commences with a thorough literature review of some noted American scholars in the field of curriculum tradition and teaching studies, followed by an analysis of the need for critical thinking skills in curriculum design and instruction. The authors assert that teachers must become reflective practitioners who consistently evaluate their teaching practices and strive for improvement based on self-observation. Additionally, the authors suggest that these practices align with Dewey's educational philosophy of reflective practice. The authors highlight the benefits of reflective practice, such as the development of self-awareness and critical thinking skills, as well as its potential to lead to more effective teaching practices. They argue that reflective practice is not only beneficial for the teacher but also for the students, as it allows the teacher to understand and cater to their individual needs. The authors conclude by emphasizing that professional development is an ongoing and never-ending process that requires continuous reflection, evaluation, and improvement.

Keywords: Curriculum and instruction; Reflective practitioner; Reflective practice; ESL; EFL; Reflective teaching

Introduction

Before we entered the education field, we were language teachers in Taiwan. Although we had professional competency and skills in language teaching, we had never thought of our personal educational philosophy or method of inquiry. We treat teaching as a service and not merely a job, but we often puzzled over how to facilitate students immersion into language to assure enjoyable learning; however, we did not try to devise my own teaching philosophy. We merely followed trends popular among others.

During the years studied in the curriculum and instruction field, we learned about the need to develop the skills of a critical thinker. Sitting in the classroom and contemplating the professors bearing and scholarship, we have thought about how to foster our own critical thinking; in fact, in our inner heart we have constantly reflected and asked ourselves whether or not we am qualified to accept our educational calling and whether or not we am prepared with sufficient professional knowledge in teaching and a harmonious heart to deal with our students and colleagues. What are the requirements of a critical thinker? What should we do so that we can become to be a responsible and reflective practitioner? We have found partial answers to these questions in the philosophies of several noted scholars, whose work we regard as classics worthy of synthesis by a strong reflective practitioner.

1. What is a Reflective Practitioner?

Everyone knows that a teacher can affect eternity, and we want this impact to be positive. Thus, every classroom needs a competent, caring, and qualified teacher.

During our years of study in curriculum and instruction, we have learned the most important assets for a reflective practitioner to possess, other than professional knowledge in the field, are a personal philosophy circumscribed by a democratic open-minded spirit, a caring and ethical heart, and a reflective sense of teaching and curriculum inquiry. As reflective practitioners, they must open their hearts and let students and colleagues come into their inner lives; they must hear their voices and in those voices find inspiration for

growth of thinking, new insights, and sound judgment. Through dialogue with students and colleagues, the reflective practitioner can build a learning community in which we can mutually share experiences, facilitate problem-solving, and weave a connected fabric, a learning community—moreover, a really caring learning community^[1].

Noddings (1992) stated that caring teachers are willing to listen and respond differently to their students. Her concept of "one-caring" involves a "feeling with" the other, and it is called "empathy," which entails putting oneself into another's shoes. Noddings also emphasized that the "caring" is not merely a touch for one student and a gentle, permissiveness with another (2003). Her philosophy was influenced by Deweyan pragmatism by which we "develop a concept that will be useful in our daily lives and work" (Noddings, 2001, p. 99^[2]). She said, "Dewey urged philosophers to abandon concepts that have outgrown their usefulness for social life" (p. 99).

Palmer (1998) noted that we as teachers in general remain too distant from our students and colleagues. He said, "Fear is what distances us from our colleagues, our students, ourselves. Fear shuts down those 'experiments with truth' that allow us to weave a wider web of connectedness and thus, shuts down our capacity to teach as well" (p. 36). Palmer pointed out another reality:

When we walk into our workplace, the classroom, we close the door on our colleagues. When we emerge, we rarely talk about what happened or needs to happen next, for we have no shared experience to talk about. Then, instead of calling this the isolationism it is and trying to overcome it, we claim it as a virtue called "academic freedom": my classroom is my castle, and the sovereigns of other fiefdoms are not welcome here. (p. 142).

Based on observations from our own teaching experiences on the elementary, secondary, and university levels in the past years, we believe Palmer's assessment is true in most teaching situations.

Likewise, Brookfield (1995) ^[3]presented a thoughtful view of becoming a critically reflective teacher, stating that critically reflective teaching happens "when we identify and scrutinize the assumptions that undergird how we work" (p. xii). Brookfield indicated that the critical reflective process happens when teachers discover and explore their assumptions by observing their practice through four distinct lenses: (a) our autobiographies as teachers and learners, (b) our students' eyes, (c) our colleagues' experiences, and (d) theoretical literature. "Seeing ourselves through our students' eyes and our colleagues' experience" is a notion most impressive to us. We believe that this is the best way to reflect and self-assess in our teaching practice; furthermore, if we have fear in our heart with regard to my students and colleagues, we need to discard it and accept them.

In a sense, teaching practice includes caring, dialogue, and reflection that constitute a cycle; and these elements are interrelated and connected. Noddings ranked dialogue second most important in a teacher's moral education. She said dialogue is far more than meaningless conversation or oral presentation. Instead, dialogue is open-ended and sincere, and no one involved knows at the outset what the outcome or decision will be. It entails respectful deliberation and eventually decision-making (2001)^[4]. We appreciate Noddings' thoughts on caring; they have left a profound impression on us and have impacted our learning about our profession, which led us in exploring critical thinking and reflective teaching to become a reflective practitioner.

Young (1980) pointed out that typically, critical thinking can be described by the modes in which the contents and mechanism of human cognition are involved in problem-solving, decision-making, and judgment, arguing that teaching is related to the development of these mechanisms. Critical thinking is a worthwhile practice needed for skilled thought^[5]. Young (1980) concluded that curricula and teaching methods aim to foster the development of critical thinking towards its appropriate end, a virtual critical thought and action. Young's view of fostering critical thinking is similar to that of scholars who advocated that curricula should include inquiry and students' real life experience in classroom practice in the way that Dewey (1916, 1929), Henderson & Kesson (1999), Graves (1996, 2000), and Linse (1993) also recommended. This curriculum inquiry also can lead to action research in both the curriculum for and teaching of problem solving, making sound judgments, resulting in the modifying of curriculum and teaching. Schon's (1983) idea of "reflection-in-action" demonstrates both curriculum inquiry and teaching practice. He also addressed "knowing-in-action" to refer to the sorts of know-how we reveal in our intelligent action" (1987, p. 25). For example, in the publicly observable, in physical performances like riding a bicycle, the knowing is in the action. Clearly, "reflection-in-action" shows us that human beings' knowledge and performance are growing in action, and we all are involved. As reflective practitioners, we need to understand this and rethink it frequently^[6].

Dewey (1933) ^[7]stated that the best thinking is called reflective thinking, which he defined as that which "consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration" (p.3). According to Dewey, reflection is not just merely a sequence of ideas; it is "a consequence—a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each outcome in turn leans back on, or refers to, its predecessors" (p. 4). Dewey's view of reflective thinking is practically identical with believing; furthermore, when we produce reflective thinking, it impels us to inquiry. He reminded us that in any field

regarding teaching issues, the teachers beliefs and teaching are always connected. For a language teacher the basic beliefs about teaching include the following questions: How do I see my role in the classroom? How can I help a student succeed in learning a second language? What are the qualities of a good teacher?^[8]

Palmer wrote that “good teaching cannot be reduced to techniques; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teachers” (1998, p. 10). Using himself as an example, he informed us what he did when he taught. He said that he always projected his soul onto his students, his subject, and their union. He stated that teaching holds a mirror to the soul, that if [he is] willing to look in that mirror and not run from what [he sees, he has] a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing [himself] is as crucial to teaching as knowing [his] students and [his] subject (p. 10)^[9].

Palmer (1998) made us aware that self-knowledge is essential for teachers. If teachers do not possess the sensitivity necessary for self-knowledge, they will not be able to reflect themselves, and this will result in a failure to examine their profession. Palmers view that self-knowledge is essential when teachers deal with their calling derives from the notion that self-knowledge enables teachers to know themselves, and thereby helps them to know their students and their subject^[10]. If they do not know themselves, they will not know who their students are, and they cannot know their subjects at the deepest levels of embedded and personal meaning.

Palmer's words have inspired us as English language faculties to reflect upon whether we thought of our students carefully, cared for them, and integrated our subject into our teaching context when we taught in the classroom or merely regarded our teaching as a vocation, doing our job, finishing our work, nothing more^[11]. As a reflective practitioner, Palmer offered six paradoxical tensions that build into the teaching and learning space to illustrate how the principle of paradox might contribute to pedagogical design in the classroom. One of these paradoxes follows: “the space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group” (1998, p. 74). The tension between the two illustrates that teachers need to give student a space to support their learning, which will not happen if students cannot express their ideas, emotions, confusions, ignorance, and prejudices. Palmer said, “In fact, only when people can speak their minds does education have chances to happen” (p.75)^[12].

Sometimes in education teachers experience paradox because they care about only heads (facts) and not the hearts (meaning) of their students. If a teacher talks only about facts and not meaning, then the student is not getting a good education; therefore, Palmer appealed to educators to try to use paradox to understand how to be better teachers and help students learn more effectively.

Palmer aligns with Henderson (1992), who described the “classroom as a democratic learning community, in which the caring teacher is the leader [who] begins with the ideas of shared purpose and mutual respect” (p. 87). In addition, Henderson and Kesson (2004a) pointed out that the relationship between democracy and curriculum is that “curriculum wisdom is practiced from a different frame of reference. Educational quality is linked to instances of democratic living” (p. 93)^[13]. Obviously, these scholars fully demonstrated that education should always occur in a safe place open to students. The teachers task is to listen to students voices and to play those voices back from time to time so that students can hear their own voices, even change that voice and mindset. Meanwhile, teaching centers on students interests and life experiences. In the teaching and learning space, teacher and students will be able to weave a connected net and then achieve high quality teaching and purposeful learning^[14].

We know that teaching is more than knowledge bound by competencies learned during student teaching in the classroom. Instead, teaching must reflectively support teachers growth and professionalism through raising questions, problem solving, and securing the outcome of actions (McKernan, 1996). Teachers as reflective practitioners and researchers operate in terms of their teaching practice and democratic concept of teacher autonomy in professional curriculum inquiry^[15].

In curriculum inquiry, the reflective practitioner is a leader who invites her or his colleagues, encouraging them to discuss curriculum practice in the classroom. Through this process, teachers can make judgments and inquire what they should teach, what will be the backbone of what they teach, and how their curriculum can meet their students needs.

Henderson and Kesson (2004a, 2004b) advocated efforts to create an elaborate caring learning community in which the curriculum integrates critical conversation with progressive practice (Pinar, 1999). Henderson (1999)^[16] stated that the purpose of the holistic vision of a caring, collaborative learning community is to “establish a rhythm between attention to the details of curricular change and continuing critical reflection on the big picture of this reform effort” (p.16). Pinar quoted Kesson to point out that a moral conversation is essential as are “acts of political solidarity with our colleagues in the field who struggle daily to actualize emancipatory ideals” (p.xi). Kessons words remind us as practitioners of the importance of reflection, dialogue, and the divergent voices of others^[16].

McCutcheon (1995) claimed that a practical way to accomplish reflection is through “deliberation,” in which teachers solve problems regarding teaching issues. Teachers build teams and work together through dialogue and conversation with colleagues, using deliberation to develop thinking skills. Meanwhile, they may experience interpersonal relationships and collaborative problem solving. “Through teachers working together and closely examining the curriculum being developed or curriculum materials under

consideration, they will understand more deeply the content they teach” (McCutcheon, 1999, p. 33).

McCutcheon (1995) noted that practical theories of action are “interrelated concepts, beliefs, and images teachers hold about their work” (p. 34). These ideas can guide teachers in their course decision-making and lead them to engage in a decision-making process before and during teaching and to shape the interpretive lens when they apply them to their post-teaching reflection and face their problems. Palmer (1999) also said: “It is said that all of us together are smarter than any one of us alone, and that maxim is more than wishful thinking” (p. 128). We strongly support this point of view of teaching in community and will transmit this idea to my students as well as recommend it to my colleagues in the future.

Clearly, a reflective practitioner in education should possess multifaceted insights into curriculum and teaching. Again, teaching and curriculum cannot, in fact, be separated. Eisner (1994) noted that “curriculum is the content that is taught, and teaching is how that content is taught” (p.166). These involve in the ideals of curriculum inquiry, teaching reflection, and a harmony with students and colleagues in community. Thus, as reflective practitioners they should not only be insightful but also capable of connecting the working net with others and absorbing different voices.

Preeminent in west countries, specially, American thought and education, pragmatism has played an important role. More than a philosophers philosophy, it focuses on experience, experimental activity, the creative role of intelligence, and the values and procedures of democracy that brought these elements in the life of the American people into fuller consciousness and thereby enhanced their influence in public affairs, including the enterprise of education (Childs, 1956). Philosophers of pragmatism stressed that knowledge derives from experience. No truth is constant; truth exists in a continuous state of flux. These philosophical bases promote democratic and social living.

John Dewey (1859–1952), the most influential American pragmatist, is ultimately responsible for the current international renaissance of interest in his ideas. His hundreds of works served us with a broad understanding of his ideas about how people learn, how they think, the nature of experience, and how to educate students to achieve participation in a democratic life of learning (Henderson & Kesson, 2004a). Teachers, whether they have studied Dewey or not, teach in terms of his ideas when they practice inquiry-based learning, school–community projects, whole language, or cooperative learning (Henderson & Kesson, 2004a). West regarded “American pragmatism as ‘a component of a new and novel form of indigenous American oppositional thought and action’ that may be a first step toward fundamental change and transformation in America and the world” (cited in Henderson & Kesson, 2004a, p. 27)^[17].

John Dewey's philosophy strongly influenced later curriculum theorists and philosophers in teaching research in America. These philosophers and theorists all have applied Dewey's ideas and then developed their own philosophy, hence creating many different thoughts and perspectives in different dimensions. For example, in research on teaching studies, Greene (2001) acknowledged the influence of Dewey's philosophy upon her in *Reflections on Teaching*. She said, “I have been [affected] by John Dewey's explorations of experience and by the existential phenomenologist view of consciousness and being in the world” (p. 82). In addition, Henderson and Kesson wrote: “Dewey's ideas are very much at the center of our interest in democratic inquiry” (2004a, p. 28)^[18].

Dewey's philosophy is relevant to personal experience, social equality, social justice, and democratic living^[19]. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey stated that “education in order to accomplish its ends both for individual learners and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life—experience of some individual” (1938, p. 89)^[21]. He was concerned with the continuity of experience and emphasized the importance of this principle for the philosophy of educative experience (1938), claiming the goal of education is the growth of experience of the individual. Similarly, Reconceptualists apply this view and have focused on Dewey's observation of the way one learns through experience (Uhrmacher, 1993, p. 7).

Dewey's pedagogical process included the following:

Identifying individual student interests, encouraging students to share these interests within a community of learners, excavating common human interests symbolized by individually identified interests, tapping a broad array of experiential resources (persons who have experienced similar problems) as precedent, and drawing on the fund of written knowledge (the logical or extant disciplines and areas of study) in pursuit of original interests and the discovery of new interests. (Marshall, Sears, & Schubert, 2000, p. 6)^[20].

Marshall, Sears, and Schubert (2000) quoted Dewey's curricular view to offer a “balanced integration of emphasis on subject matter, society, and the child” (p. 5). This ideal resulted in the 3 Ss of curriculum inquiry and teaching for democratic living by Henderson and Kesson (2004a). Flinders and Thornton analyzed Dewey's claim that curriculum is designated as an “outcome of the interactions among students, materials, and teachers” (p.4). Dewey insisted that “educational experience provides the bridge between ‘self’ and society, between self-realization and democratization” (cited in Pinar, 2004, p.17). He believed education is a process of living, not a preparation for future living (1929/1997). He said, “Experience has shown that when children have a chance at physical activities, which bring their natural impulses into play, going to school is a joy, management is less of a burden, and learning is easier” (1916,

p. 228).

In sum, Dewey's educational and curriculum perspective demonstrated a reality that the purpose of all education is to combine learners' life experiences with interaction in the real world; moreover, one learns through experience and from individual interests. All educational goals entail cultivating learners' life adjustments and responsibilities to society^[22].

Change and growth are good and necessary; both of these accompany reflective teaching. Parker (1997) stated that "reflective teaching is emancipatory" (p.31). This type of teaching concerns improving practice rather than collecting knowledge; it involves fostering the rationality and autonomy of teachers in a democratic and liberal setting where teachers are self-directed^[23].

From our own exploration and insights into reflective practice in education, we have come to an awareness: the reflective practitioner should be like a sponge, absorbing wide theoretical knowledge and philosophy in curriculum and teaching as well as making all things tend to one direction. Furthermore, the reflective practitioner needs to be supportive, caring, and ethical in his or her real practice in the classroom as well as in the larger society.

2. Reflective Teaching in EFL/ESL

Recently, a trend has emerged in second language teaching in which we see a movement away from "methods" and other "external" or "top-down" view of teaching toward an approach that seeks to understand teaching in its own terms (Richards, 1994). Richards and Lockhart (1994) define reflective teaching as a means to second language classroom instruction in which teachers collect data about teaching; examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practice. They posit five basic assumptions for the critical reflection: ①An informed teacher has an extensive knowledge base about teaching; ②Much can be learned about teaching through self-inquiry; ③Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher; ④Teaching experience alone is insufficient as a basis for continuing development; ⑤Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching (cited in Murphy, 2001, p. 500)^[24]. This is good vision for language teacher to reflect their teaching process in their classroom.

As current university faculties who are concerned about the issue of caring and ethical teaching, we sincerely want to emphasize the bases necessary for curriculum studies and awareness of teaching reflection; they both should follow from language teaching and teacher education programs. Language teachers should be taught curriculum theory, philosophy, and ideas in order to have the foundational traditions of curriculum and teaching for problem-solving and decision-making. Equipped with these perspectives, teachers can practice reflective thinking and solve problems through a practical theory of action^[25].

Most contemporary scholars in curriculum and teaching studies link the following ideas from Dewey with their own thoughts on reflection. We find it difficult to determine which interpretation of reflective practice would best inform self-evaluation of EFL/ESL practices. Instead, we would say that reflective practice is the essential requirement of such inquiry and reflective thinking in the teaching process. Indeed, we would say all of these interpretations of reflective practices—those of Dewey as well as those of our contemporaries—could be applied effectively^[26]; and they are all worthy of consideration for integration and implementation in language teaching and teacher education programs.

Good quality language teachers need more than technical competence in teaching. We need to increase our capabilities in asking 'what' and 'why' questions, which will give us certain power over our teaching. Reflecting on "what" and "why" questions, we will learn to practice control and open up the possibility of transforming our everyday classroom lives. Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) advocated action research as a means of inquiry designed to improve our teaching by using informed professional eyes to observe our own practice. We collaborate with others and then enhance the power of our learning; moreover, we face the challenges with action and share the results of our analysis with the larger community for critique.

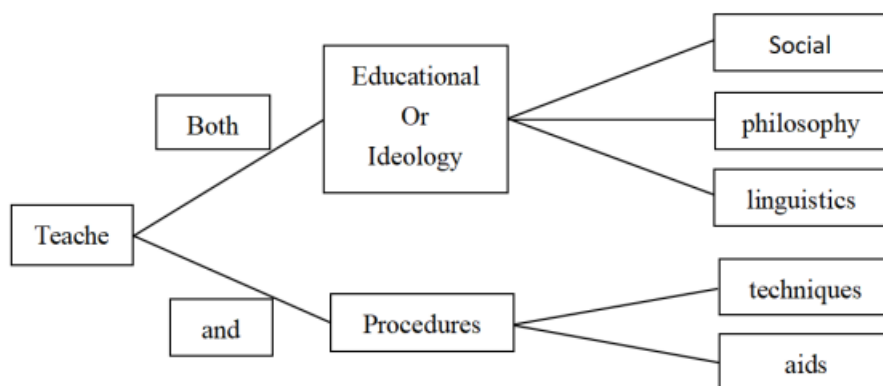
Freeman and Richards (1996) claimed that teachers learn to teach during the course their language teaching, that is, through action research involving teachers observing themselves, collecting data about their own classrooms and their role within them^[27]. They can use these data as a basis for self-evaluation, for change, and thereby for their professional growth and become critical reflective teachers (Richards & Nunan, 1990).

It is time for EFL/ESL language teachers teaching to reflect upon their teaching and learning inquiry. This reflection can begin with the teachers themselves and the actual teaching process; teachers should seek to gain a better understanding of these processes through inquiring with other teachers about what they do and why they do it.

Dewey (1938) asked, "What is the purpose of education?" The purpose of education is to help students become whole individuals. His idea of progression is a unique concept. He suggested that students of any age can learn better by doing. This is a universal belief—we all learn better by doing. We believe this particular concept will influence our most significantly as we strive to maintain reflective practice in education^[28].

3. Conclusion

We are committed to education serving as university faculties in English language of curriculum and instruction field. Too little curriculum inquiry exists in language teacher programs whereby teachers can design the curriculum suited to their teaching contexts; McArthur (1983) stated that professional language teachers have to construct a worldview about practice and theory. He built a model showing that this worldview of teachers should include “both philosophy or ideology, and procedures” (p. 89).



McArthur (1983) further explained that this model may influence teachers behavior and attitude toward the social, the educational, and the linguistic as well as techniques and aids. In this case, we recommend an addition to this model; that is, in educational dimension, curriculum studies should be considered and comprised.

Through our own reflective thinking, we have come to realize the importance of the development of curriculum and teaching. Therefore, we will constantly advocate the ideals of curriculum inquiry in English language teaching and integrate these studies into our own teaching process as well.

Teaching is an art and the teacher is an artist. How to create an effective learning environment and well-designed curriculum to engage students in an enjoyable situation is also an art for teachers. Palmer (1998)^[29] said:

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subject, and their students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and converge in the human self. (p.11)^[30].

As a reflective practitioner in education, even in language education, teachers should keep this in mind and remind themselves of the love among teachers, students, and colleagues as well as the inquiry and reflection necessary when considering subject matter, students, and society. Each plays an important part in the teaching process^[31]. We need to reflect upon all these connections from time to time.

We appreciate the opportunity we have had for self-evaluation through inquiring those who are noted American scholars, especially John Dewey's curriculum tradition and teaching studies^[32], in which we looked back at the process of our previous study in curriculum and instruction with English language teaching field. Also, self-evaluation and retrospect have helped us to think and obtain profound insights that we have applied in our teaching class. We believe that we are on the right way to a critical thinkers and reflective practitioners in higher education.

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