

Reviews

Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice.

Thomas S. C. Farrell. London: Continuum, 2007. viii + 202 pp.

Reviewed by

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Reflection, as a broad concept, is an idea that has been gaining currency in the language teaching world since the 1980s. Most teachers recognize that their professional development is enhanced by looking critically at what they do, and why they do it. This practice has been taken up by teacher educators, and some form of reflection has become a common component of pre-service training. Whether there is a direct link between reflective teaching and student learning is yet to be determined. However, the long-term motivation of career teachers does seem to be enhanced by enthusiastic and positive self-analysis. Farrell points out in the introduction that teacher burnout was a catalyst for the development of reflective practice; it is interesting to consider the parallels between the birth of learner autonomy in the 1960s sociopolitical milieu and the emergence of reflective practice for teachers. As research also suggests that the best learners are those who can reflect on how they learn and what they are learning (Rubin, 1975; Oxford, 1990), it can only be beneficial for teachers to practice what they preach.

Farrell attempts to bring together research and practice in this functional book for teachers who would like to explore their own professional development. The author is well placed to write this particular book, having published extensively on the topic over the last 10 years; indeed, his bibliography includes more than 25 papers that he himself has authored or co-authored. Much of this research is summarized and gathered here, and his passion for the topic comes across clearly.

There are 14 chapters, the first an introduction to reflective language teaching and the last neatly tying together the threads in the preceding chapters. Chapters 2 through 13 are divided into two parts: six chapters discussing themes for reflection, and the next six focusing on methods of reflection. This works very well as an organizational structure, and although it would be possible to dip in and read chapter by chapter, it may be more

effective to read from start to finish. Each of the chapters follows a similar pattern, moving from a brief context-setting literature review to one or two case studies (often carried out by the author himself), to a reflection on the case studies. In keeping with the subtitle of the book, the key section of each chapter is "From Research to Practice," in which Farrell enlarges on the literature and links it to both the case studies and practical methods to put this knowledge into action. In fact, there is more of an interplay between theory and practice in this book than the subtitle suggests, not only from research to practice, but from practice to research. The reflection questions at the end of each chapter help maintain the momentum by reminding readers that they are supposed to actively engage with what they are reading.

The chapter on action research (chapter 8) is a good example of what this book provides: a concise guide to both the rationale and processes of personal classroom research projects for practicing teachers. Another highlight is the fifth chapter, written with Jack Richards, which focuses on the teachers' language proficiency. This is not a topic commonly addressed in this type of book, an omission which not only sidelines nonnative English teachers, but also assumes native speakers have no need to attend to their language skills. As Farrell and Richards point out, limited language proficiency restricts a teacher's classroom flexibility and the ability to provide accurate models for learners.

For those interested in investigating reflective practice further, there is an extensive bibliography, although its depth is perhaps greater than its breadth. Applied linguistics is a maturing field. We should be proud that our field has reached a level of confidence and accumulated a body of research from which we can all draw; however, it is cross pollination which keeps us healthy. Previous generations of language teaching professionals were forced to look outside the then nascent field of study and adapt what they found for their own purposes. Ironically, this limitation may have encouraged more creative thinking. Reflective practice is being vigorously pursued in mainstream education, social work, and healthcare; there is even a refereed journal entitled *Reflective Practice*. It would have been useful if some of this research had worked its way into Farrell's book to give a broader perspective. Doctors and social workers come from different contexts, but can provide us with meaningful insights because contrasting perspectives are vital in keeping reflection fresh and relevant.

One of the greatest difficulties in effective critical reflection is asking the right questions. Another is finding valid answers, that is, finding out what we really believe rather than what we *think* we believe. Breaking this stalemate is one of the most challenging aspects of reflection. As Farrell puts it, "what

teachers say they do (their espoused theories) and what they actually do (their theories in action) are not always the same" (p. 29). Outside the English language teaching field, some have made greater use of metaphor and creative writing (Bolton, 2005), or mentoring to find core beliefs to change behaviors (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). In fairness, the author is mindful of this problem throughout the book, and there is an emphasis on collaboration in chapter 10 on teacher development groups and in chapter 12 on critical friendships, but a broader perspective would have helped separate this book from others that language teachers interested in reflection may already be familiar with.

Despite this criticism, *Reflective Language Practice* is a very user-friendly, "state-of-the-art" text for any teacher considering embarking on self-initiated professional development, either alone or in collaboration with peers. In updating and organizing current thinking, the author has produced an excellent primer for less-experienced teachers. If teachers with experience in reflection are looking for reinvigoration, they, too, may find it here, and as such it is an excellent addition to the field.

References

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