

Reflective Teaching-- an Effective Path for EFL Teacher's Professional Development

ENSEIGNEMENT RÉFLÉCHI- UN MOYEN EFFICACE POUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT PROFESSIONNEL DES PROFESSEURS DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ANGLAIS COMME UNE LANGUE ÉTRANGÈRE

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Abstract: This article addresses the need to implement reflective inquiry in classroom settings and ways to improve the teaching and learning of English through on-going reflection, it also points out that experience coupled with reflection can be a powerful impetus for teacher's professional development.

Key words: Reflective teaching; Reflective approaches; Professional development

Résumé: Cet article répond à la nécessité de mettre en oeuvre l'enquête réfléchie dans la classe et trouver des moyens pour améliorer l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'anglais par la réflexion en cours. Il remarque aussi que l'expérience accouplée avec la réflexion pourraient être un puissant pour le développement professionnel des professeurs.

Mots-Clés: Enseignement réfléchi; Approches réfléchies; Développement professionnel

1. INTRODUCTION

Excellence in teaching has always been a demanding and absorbing concern in institutions of higher learning. It is too easy for teachers to become entrenched in their way of doing, seeing and understanding teaching and learning events. The particular configuration of strategies a teacher uses constitutes his or her teaching style. While a teacher's teaching style provides a means of coping with many of the routine demands of teaching, there is also a danger that it can hinder a teacher's professional growth. How can teachers move beyond the level of automatic or habitual responses to classroom situations and achieve a higher level of awareness of how they teach? One way of doing this is through observing and reflecting on one's own teaching, and using observation and reflection as a way of bringing about change. In this

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paper I want to explore how a reflective view of teaching can be developed and how a teacher's practice in the classroom can be improved through reflective teaching and action research.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Reflective thinking is not an innovation in teaching. It has its roots in the work of a number of educational theorists and practitioners. The concept has been around for more than 50 years. Reflective teaching is undoubtedly a valid means towards effective teaching practices. Authors like Richards, Lockhart, Ramirez, and Wallace, have carried out studies to help EFL teachers to teach reflectively.

Reflective teaching is an approach to teaching and to teacher education which is based on the assumption that teachers can improve their understanding of teaching and the quality of their own teaching by reflecting critically on their teaching experiences. J. Richards (1996) pointed out that reflective teaching is one in which teachers and student-teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching.

Reflective teaching asks EFL teachers to stop, to slow down in order to notice, analyze, and inquire on what they are doing. It tells them to relate theory and practice, to evaluate both old and new teaching experiences, and to make interpretations on the situations encountered.

3. SUGGESTED PROCEDURES FOR REFLECTIVE TEACHING IN EFL CONTEXTS

The daily lessons can be observed from different perspectives to gain insights on understanding our own teaching (through analysis and interpretation) as well as the effect teaching has on students, positively or negatively. Many different approaches can be employed if one wishes to become a critically reflective teacher, including observation of oneself and others, team teaching, and exploring one's view of teaching through writing. Let us examine approaches to reflective teaching.

3.1 Peer Observation

Peer observation can provide opportunities for teachers to view each others' teaching in order to expose them to different teaching styles and to provide opportunities for critical reflection on their own teaching. In a peer observation project initiated in our own department, the following guidelines were developed. First, Teachers would work in pairs and take turns observing each other's classes. Prior to each observation, the two teachers would meet to discuss the nature of the class to be observed, the kind of material being taught, the teachers' approach to teaching, the kinds of students in the class, typical patterns of interaction and class participation, and any problems that might be expected. In addition, the observer would then visit his or her partner's class and complete the observation using the procedures that both partners had agreed on. Finally, the two teachers would meet as soon as possible after the lesson. The observer would report on the information that had been collected and discuss it with the teacher (Richards and Lockhart, 1991). The teachers identified a variety of different aspects of their lessons for their partners to observe and collect information on. These included organization of the lesson, teacher's time management, students' performance on tasks, time-on-task, teacher questions and student responses, student performance during pair work, classroom interaction, class performance during a new teaching activity, and students' use of the first language or English during group work.

The teachers who participated in the project reported that they gained a number of insights about their own teaching from their colleague's observations and that they would like to use peer observation on a

regular basis.

3.2 Written accounts of experiences

Another useful way of engaging in the reflective process is through the use of written accounts of experiences. A number of different approaches can be used.

3.2.1 Self-Reports

Self-reporting involves completing an inventory or check list in which the teacher indicates which teaching practices were used within a lesson or within a specified time period and how often they were employed (Pak, 1985). The inventory may be completed individually or in group sessions. The accuracy of self-reports is found to increase when teachers focus on the teaching of specific skills in a particular classroom context and when the self-report instrument is carefully constructed to reflect a wide range of potential teaching practices and behaviors (Richards, 1990). Self-report describes the teaching philosophy, strategies, methods and objectives. It typically includes beliefs about optimal teaching and learning, examples of how you put these beliefs into practice, and your goals' about your teaching and your goals for students' learning.

Self-reporting allows teachers to make a regular assessment of what they are doing in the classroom. They can check to see to what extent their assumptions about their own teaching are reflected in their actual teaching practices. For example a teacher could use self-reporting to find out the kinds of teaching activities being regularly used, whether all of the programs' goals are being addressed, the degree to which personal goals for a class are being met, and the kinds of activities which seem to work well or not to work well.

3.2.2 Teachers' diaries

A procedure which is becoming more widely acknowledged as a valuable tool for developing reflective teaching is the journal or diary. While procedures for diary keeping vary, the participant usually keeps a regular account of learning or teaching experiences, recording reflections on what he or she did as well as straightforward descriptions of events, which may be used as a basis for later reflection.

Diary studies take a lot of dedication because they are time consuming in nature and can become laborious. However, taking the time to put one's thoughts down in writing seems to be the most practical means for language teachers. Writing and analyzing the diary was a motivational experience. Focused, short-term diary studies may provide a rewarding experience for new and experienced teachers, they are able to provide benefits to those interested both in professional development and in reconsidering what they see in the classroom. In other words, the process of conducting a diary-study can help language teachers better understand themselves and their learners, and foster a greater understanding of the complex dynamics that take place within the classroom.

3.3 Recording Lessons

For many aspects of teaching, audio or video recording of lessons can also provide a basis for reflection. Many significant classroom events may not have been observed by the teacher, let alone remembered, hence the need to supplement diaries or self-reports with recordings of actual lessons.

At its simplest, a tape recorder is located in a place where it can capture the exchanges which take place during a lesson. Pak (1985) recommends recording for a one or two week period and then randomly selecting a cassette for closer analysis. This recording could be used as the basis for an initial assessment. Where video facilities are available in a school, the teacher can request to have a lesson recorded, or with access to video equipment, students themselves can be assigned this responsibility. A 30 minute recording usually provides more than sufficient data for analysis. The goal is to capture as

much of the interaction of the class as possible, both teacher to class and student to student. Once the initial novelty wears off, both students and teacher accept the presence of the technician with the camera, and the class proceeds with minimum disruption.

Observing one's teaching through video and audio recordings can be very valuable. The information portrayed in these recordings will answer those doubts that usually arise when we have finished a class. Examples of specific focus would be recording interactions of students' use of language in pair work or recording the language the teacher uses to give instruction. Even teacher's non-verbal communication, like facial expressions can be recorded if that is what the teacher is concerned about or wants to reflect about.

3.4 Reflective inquiry groups

A way to ensure positive changes in English teaching is through the formation of reflective inquiry groups. These are formed by faculty staff members who show respect, mutual growth and understanding on issues encountered in class such as students' learning styles, their needs, wants and lacks, and assessment instruments, among other aspects. Through this cycle, teachers can identify an issue or question to bring before the group and with the help of other colleagues, a thorough description and analyses of the issue takes place. Discussions occur and a series of interpretations are brainstormed with the purpose of planning actions that might lead to successful teaching practices. Many of these issues deal with the way a teacher acknowledges students (verbal/non-verbal), the degree of motivation of students in class, the types of materials used (up-dated/out-dated), the types of activities programmed (boring/engaging), and the types of tasks (authentic/non-authentic). Indeed, it is enriching to have opportunities for reflection, interpretation, discussion, and decision-making on all of these aspects which are part of our daily lives as teachers. It builds trust among staff, improves teachers' practice and engages staff in serious commitment on our field, and it tells learners that they are important in the process, and that there is a profound interest in facilitating the acquisition of English.

3.5 Collaborative action research

Action research can be very useful in getting to know our students. Learners' cognitive styles affect learners' preferences for particular approaches to learning (Richards, 1999). Surveying their cognitive styles of learning can indicate whether teachers and learners approach learning the same way. This can be done with the help of surveys and questionnaires. Knowing this can also tell teachers what types of activities are favored by their learners so their implementation in class can facilitate the process to them. Action research entails knowing about particular kinds of classroom activities, particular kinds of teacher behavior, particular grouping arrangements, particular sensory modes, such as visual, auditory and tactile learning, or even particular modes of learning on one's own outside class (Richards & Lockhart, 1999).

In fact, reflective teaching, as defined by Cruickshank & Applegate (1981) involves collaborative action research. Collaborative involvement in action research strengthens the decisions that teachers will make on professional practice through critical thinking, identification of classroom situations, planning, observation, reflection, and intervention.

Collaborative action research requires the intervention of several participants to gather different perspectives of situations encountered in the classroom, and this is done through a variety of data collection procedures to ensure validity and reliability of the information gathered. Most of the rich data of classroom occurrences is mostly gathered by the instructors themselves, other contributors are peers, teacher trainers, students themselves. The rich data obtained is thus triangulated or tested one against the other to mirror authentic classroom situations. Based on these findings, a great deal of analyses and reflection occurs in order to speculate reasons for these occurrences, provoking a plan of action or intervention on these happenings to later observe again for possible changes on the learning process. Much of this data is collected through the use of observational techniques such as observations, notes, diaries, journal entries, audio and video recordings, photographs or non-observational techniques such as

4. PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

An unquestionable premise involving reflective teaching is that it facilitates meaningful thought and discussion among teaching faculty about teaching and learning that will inspire appropriate change in curriculum and pedagogy. In EFL contexts, these judgmental practices can impact positively in understanding what is going on in our classrooms and in producing changes in methodology, assessment, and instruction. Language teachers cannot see themselves as passive agents in the field. Rather, teachers should be involved deeply in the process, and the only way to do this is taking time to think and reflect on their practices to foster more effective learning in their students.

Being a reflective language teacher demands teaching, thinking back, describing, investigating reasons, discovering new understandings, deciding what to do next (Black, 2001). It calls for an appraisal of our own teaching, a willingness to change, an open mind to accept suggestions, and a serious attention to reflective practice. The answers to all our problems will not arise right away, it will take time, patience, responsibility, endurance, commitment, encouragement. Teachers must reflect, analyze, and adjust or change their practice whenever it is necessary. To move from the older teaching model to the newer one, language teachers need to think about what they do and how and why they do it. Reflective practice allows instructors to consider these questions in a disciplined way.

Every instructor starts with an initial theory of language teaching and learning, based on personal experiences as a language learner and, in some cases, reading or training. In reflective practice, the teacher applies this theory in classroom practice, observes and reflects on the results, and adapts the theory. The classroom becomes a kind of laboratory where the teacher can relate teaching theory to teaching practice. Classroom observation and reflection enable the instructor to refine the theory and adjust teaching practice. Concepts that the teacher acquires through reading and professional development are absorbed into the theory and tested in the reflective practice cycle. This cycle of theory building, practice and reflection continues throughout a teacher's career, as the teacher evaluates new experiences and tests new or adapted theories against them.

Through reflection EFL professionals can react, examine and evaluate their teaching to make decisions on necessary changes to improve attitudes, beliefs and teaching practices. Reflective practice requires a commitment, a commitment towards change, towards understanding, and most importantly, a commitment towards continuous self-development. If instructors are willing to invest time, effort and resources in this type of training, reflective practice can indeed be an effective means for professional growth. Teaching within the rationale of what responsible professional practice is, requires constant renovation. If teachers remain at a stage where practice is mechanical, without learning from their experiences in class and relating them to theory, their practice will never be considered professional.

A reflective approach to teaching involves changes in the way we usually perceive teaching and our role in the process of teaching. Teachers who explore their own teaching through reflection develop changes in attitudes and awareness which can benefit their professional growth. Reflective teaching suggests that experience alone is insufficient for professional growth, but that experience together with reflection can be an effective path for EFL teacher's professional development.

5. CONCLUSION

This article deals with the impact of reflective teaching on the EFL field and reflective thinking is seen as a key on the road to professional growth. There is a need to reflect on our actions and classroom practices in English teaching in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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