

Criticizing Ourselves as Teachers through Observation: From Reflective to Effective Teaching

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Abstract

Teaching and learning process embodies theoretical and practical requirements for teachers in the class. To reflect on his professional development, the teacher applies the theory in regards to his field in classroom practice, observes and evaluates the results, and adapts the theory. In this sense, the classroom becomes a kind of laboratory where the teacher can relate teaching theory to teaching practice. Therefore, classroom observation and reflection enable the teacher 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 (Chamot, A., Keatley, C., Meloni C., Gonglewski, M., & Bartoszesky, A. (n.d.)). The aim of this article is to reveal how reflective teaching works for teachers and present some suggestions on evaluating teachers themselves.

Key words: Reflection, teaching, professional development, observation

1. Introduction

Teaching is essentially an interactive process among a group of people learning in a social setting usually described as "the classroom." Leichner and Liston (1987:87) point out that teaching takes place when someone (a teacher) teaches someone (a student) about something (a curriculum) at some place and some time (a milieu). The term "teacher" indicated as "someone" in teaching process can be defined as someone who engages learners, who seeks to engage each person wholly-mind, sense of self, range of interests and interactions with other people in learning. Teachers who are involved in teaching need to reflect on their teaching styles, considering the fact that teaching is an art and not a science, and this art can best be developed by a reflective view (Cosh, 1999). In order to criticize from the perspective of reflective view awareness is the first step.

2. Are We Aware of Ourselves?

Admittedly, most teachers claim that they are the best in the class, and they are doing their best in order to teach the target point. No one accepts that he or she has some shortcomings in the class and students have difficulty in coping up with the techniques, methods or approaches he uses or trying to use to teach. From learners' perspective, it

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can be observed that most of the teachers, particularly foreign language teachers, do not always meet their needs either educationally or pedagogically. I have been teaching for about twenty years and I believe that every year I learn new things, which might be called as experience. Being aware of our shortcoming and or positive attitudes cannot always be possible through just self criticism, but other ways that lead us to criticize our teaching are also available. Therefore, we can state that the whole evaluation of one's teaching can be studied under the term of "reflective teaching" through which he can realize his professional growth.

3. What is Reflection?

Reflection is to be aware of what we are doing. According to Rowntree (1988) reflection is studying one's own study methods as seriously as one studies the subject and thinking about a learning task after you have done it. He adds that unless you do this, the task will almost certainly be wasted. In any learning situation, he says, you should prepare for it beforehand, participate actively during it, and reflect on it afterwards. To Dewey (1933) reflection is an 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 conclusion to which it tends. Reid (1993:3) in her definition also noted reflection as an active process rather than passive thinking. She states: "Reflection is a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and so inform learning about practice."

Reflection means to move beyond a primary concern with instructional techniques and "how to" questions and asking "what" and "why" questions that regard instructions and managerial techniques not as ends in themselves, but as part of broader educational purposes (Bartlett, 1990:267). In other words, to be able to ask the questions of "what and why" gives us a certain power over our teaching. Professionally speaking, it can be claimed 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.

4. What is Reflective Teaching?

Reflective teaching is the teacher's thinking about what happens in classroom lessons, and thinking about alternative means of achieving goals or aims. It is concerned as a means to provide students with an opportunity to consider the teaching events thoughtfully, analytically and objectively (Richards, J.C. 2006:19). According to Richards, J.C. (n.d.) critical reflection refers to an activity or process in which experience is recalled, considered and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to a past experience and involves conscious recall and examinations of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action. As Bartlett (1990) suggests, we can be assisted in the process of becoming critically reflective by asking ourselves a number of general "what" and "why" questions. Critical reflection is the process of information gained through innovation in relation to the teacher's existing schema for teaching (Pennington 1995:106). Pennington (1992:47) adds that it is deliberating on experience, and mirroring experience, and she adds that reflection is the input for development as well as being the output of development.

According to the advocates of reflective teaching, experience alone is insufficient for professional growth, and that experience coupled with reflection is a much more powerful impetus for development. Improvement of teaching can be achieved from "reconstruction of experience" Dewey (1933:87). Moreover, it can be stated that reflection of thinking and focusing on the day-to-day classroom teaching of the individual teacher may not be sufficient for one's professional development. It needs to be fostered through the institutional structures in which teacher and students work. .

Apparently, reflection involves the relationship between an individual teacher and his or her membership in a larger collective called society. To be clear, it is not just an individual, psychological process, but an action oriented, social and political frame, to locate oneself in the history of a situation, to participate in a social activity, and to take sides on issues.

5. How to Reflect on through Observation?

There are basically two ways of observation and reflecting on a teacher's performance in teaching in the classroom: *peer observation* and *self observation*. Most of the teachers

believe that being observed disturbs them no matter what technique is used. To exemplify this fact, one of my students attending School Practice programme stated that the teacher she was observing was annoyed because the student took notes about her teaching techniques methods during the class as a requirement of the course. This anecdote can be regarded as simple when compared it with the professional observations to be conducted by a colleague, inspector, camera etc. However, in either situation, feelings that teachers possess need to be taken into consideration and they undoubtedly deserve to be overcome one by one by working together in pairs or groups and discussing related issues and suggesting new or better ideas for language teaching.

Generally speaking, when we put observation into practice in foreign language teaching three stages, according to Richards (ibid), need to be taken into consideration: *observing the event itself, recollection of the event and review and response to the event*. In the first stage the focus is on the teacher's own teaching through self or peer observation. During the recollection of the event process, some data are gathered with the help of the written descriptions, audio or video recording, checklist ...etc. Finally, the data collected is reviewed to analyze the reflection process. Thus, it would be possible for language teachers to reach a satisfactory result that could lead them to evolve, refresh and revive themselves in their professions.

5.1. Peer Observation

To reflect on teachers' performance in the classroom there are some techniques that lead to a reasonable reflection. Cosh (1999) states that widespread implementation of various models of observation has recently been carried out. Peer observation is one of the models in question and has widely been criticised due to its judgmental and threatening nature. It is hard to say that through peer observation genuine teacher development can be realised as it has some drawbacks in terms of both objectivity and psychology. To be clear, while being observed the teacher's role is passive, and the emphasis is on teachers being observed, and being told what is wrong with their teaching, but there is no a process of active self-development through reflection. It is also true that the peers may not be competent or qualified enough to assess and present valuable and constructive feedback right after the observation. However, most teachers believe that the best evaluation of teachers and their performance can be done by the teachers themselves.

On the other hand, it is generally believed that traditional evaluations by school administrators and peers are highly piecemeal and subjective.

According to Cosh (1999) while assessing or judging on the performance of the teacher the following points should be taken into account. First of all, the feedback should be as nice as possible, so that you don't offend people. Secondly, as it is obvious, when friends watch each other they can be uncritical, which influences the objectivity of the observation. Finally, people should be watched by at least two others. Furthermore, the other shortcoming of peer observation is that the teachers being observed and commented upon would present a model lesson in order to receive positive feedback. To avoid these drawbacks to some extent some other techniques can be applied such as pair mentoring, audio or video recording of the lessons, group discussions and so forth.

In *pair mentoring* two teachers work together and observe each other's lessons, discuss areas of mutual interest and plan future strategies (Whisker, 1996). This is less threatening, but limits awareness of other teaching styles just one other teacher. Teachers can see their own teaching in the teaching of others, and when teachers observe others to gain self-knowledge, they have the chance to construct and reconstruct their own knowledge.

The other observation technique that is commonly used by many teachers is *video recording* of the lessons and discussing of the extracts from lessons either in group or in pairs and propose future developments also help the teachers develop and be aware of themselves (Claydon and McDowellx, 1993). These activities usually stress the importance of trust, supportiveness, and the recognition and development of good practice. Needless to say, people improve and develop best through the comments and knowledge of others unless they are offensive and insulting. Simply put, through peer observation teachers can obtain new insights into aspects of their teaching. In this way, they can

- obtain more detailed information on students performance during specific aspects of the lesson that teacher concentrated on.
- be revealed unexpected information about interaction between students during a lesson.
- get useful information on the group dynamics that occur during group work.

- revise their teaching strategies they use.
- give students more to time to complete some of the activities.
- revise and develop better time management strategies.
- develop a better working relationship with a colleague.
- come up with new ideas during post observation discussions

Adapted from *Towards Reflective teaching* <http://www.tttjournal.co.uk>

5.2. Self Observation

The other way of observation and reflecting on a teacher's performance in teaching is self observation which is an approach to awareness of teaching. Like observation of other teachers, it is possible for teachers to video or audiotape their own teaching, and review the tape while taking descriptive notes or making short transcripts of the classroom interaction to study. The focus here is on teacher's own development, rather than on developing the ability of a peer's or a colleague's. It stimulates awareness, reflection, and a questioning approach, and it encourages experiment. Cosh (1999) propounds that many teachers may still feel nervous about being observed although the emphasis is on self development. So, teachers should be reassured, consulted and allowed to feel that they retain an element of control and ownership of the process. Furthermore, she adds that in order for insights to be clarified, and development to be effective and shared there needs to be some dialogue or written response. This could take various forms, including seminars, *discussion groups, feedback forms, and pre-and post-discussion* with the teacher observed, as long as the emphasis is always on what the observer has learnt, or decided to think about. Consequently, this will lead to action research.

6. Using a Checklist for Observation

Preparing a self-observation checklist will be a practical instrument for helping the teacher become more aware of the elusive aspects of teaching (Prodromou, 1991). This checklist can be filled by either the teacher himself at the end of the lesson or a colleague accompanying observation during teaching. This checklist contains the following items to check whether the teacher:

- stresses mostly on testing or teaching,
- asks the comprehension questions adequately and appropriately,
- answers the students' questions reasonably and accurately,
- reacts to the students' errors in an encouraging or discouraging way,
- is sarcastic,
- is friendly,
- creates a humorous atmosphere in the class,
- helps the students be relaxed,
- keeps eye contact with the teacher,
- walks around the students,
- addresses students with their names,
- pays attention for timing for each activity,
- adopts different roles where and when necessary,
- speaks differently to weak and good students
- draws students' attention for a specific topics using his or her voice,
- uses the board well and writes eligibly,
- helps the students talk during the lesson,
- gives assignments for the related subject at the end of the lesson,
- uses audio-visual materials to make the lesson more enjoyable and effective.

Unquestionably, this checklist can be prepared in various ways adding or extracting some items. The use of such kind of observation checklist is quite beneficial for the teachers even for the experienced ones who mostly and usually refuse to apply it claiming that they know all of them and can't change their own teaching styles. The detailed peer observation checklist designed by Christison, M.A. and Bassano, S. (1983) for foreign language teachers to evaluate themselves in class is given in Appendix 1.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

It should be born in mind that teaching is more than what goes on in one class, and that there is a need for staff development in such areas as *assessment, course development, learner training and preparation of materials*. Reflective view includes *reflection on action* -the ability to reflect before and after on our own practice, *reflection in action*-the ability to make decisions and adapt during the process (Schon,1983), and *creative reflection*- the examining and assessing of our own values and beliefs in the light of the theories and practice of others.

Farrel (1998) claims that, with the help of reflective teaching, teachers leave routine behaviours and begin to act in a deliberate, intentional manner. However, it is sad to say that in Turkey, most probably in many schools all around the world, most of the experienced teachers resist changing their routine behaviours claiming that they don't need any professional development because they are experienced enough. Needless to say, teachers should be the first people to keep up with the new developments in the field in order to apply them adequately in classes.

While implementing reflective teaching approach to teaching it should be known that the outcomes obtained need to be evaluated appropriately. Teachers should be able to change their attitudes they have when they are found useless. Particularly, as is known, there is a rapid development in teaching techniques, methods, and most importantly in educational technology. Therefore, teachers need to update themselves day by day in order to teach effectively.

Last but not least, during this process, as Barlett (1990) asserts, reflection without action is verbalism: action without reflection is activism- doing things for their own sake. To be brief, the effective practice of reflective teaching helps teachers to examine their work and reevaluate their current positions in the class. A final word, reflective teaching actually makes the work more rewarding. It should be kept in mind that teaching is process of becoming and it is a never-ending process.

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APPENDIX 1

SELF-OBSERVATION CHECKLIST FOR ESL TEACHERS

Thoughtfully consider each statement. Rate yourself in the following way:

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Excellent | 3 |
| Good | 2 |
| Needs improvement | 1 |
| Not applicable | 0 |

Write your rating in the blanks provided. When you have finished, give overall consideration to the various areas.

I. Learning Environment

A. Relationship to students

- I establish good eye contact with my class. I do not talk over their heads, to the blackboard or to just one individual.
- If I tend to teach predominantly to one area of the classroom, I am aware of this.
- I make a conscious effort at all times to pay attention to all students equally.
- I divide my students into small groups in an organized and principled manner.
- I recognize that these groups should differ in size and composition, varying with the objective of the group activity.

B. The Classroom

- I arrange the seating in my class to suit the class activity for the day.
- I consider the physical comfort of the room such as heat and light.
- When I need special materials or equipment, I have them set up before the class begins.

C. Presentation

- My handwriting on the blackboard and charts is legible from all locations in the classroom. It is large enough to accommodate students with vision impairments.
- I speak loudly enough to be heard in all parts of the classroom and I enunciate clearly.
- I vary the exercises in class, alternating rapid and slow paced activities to keep up maximum interest level in the class.
- I am prepared to give a variety of explanations, models or descriptions, understanding that one explanation may not be sufficient for all students.
- I help the students form working principles and generalizations.
- Students use new skills or concepts long enough so that they are retained and thus future application is possible.
- I plan for "thinking time" for my students so they can organize their thoughts and plan what they are going to say or do.

D. Culture and Adjustment

- I am aware that cultural differences affect the learning situation.
- I keep the cultural background(s) of my students in mind when planning daily activities and am aware of culture misunderstandings which might arise from the activities I choose.
- I work for an atmosphere of understanding and mutual respect.

II. The Individuals

A. Physical Health

- I know which students have visual or aural impairments, and have seated them as close to my usual teaching position as possible.
- I am aware that a student's attention span varies from day to day depending on mental and physical health and outside distractions. I pace my class activities to accommodate the strengths. I don't continue with an activity which may exhaust or bore them.

- I begin my class with a simple activity to wake the students up and get them working together.
- I am sensitive to individual students who have bad days. I don't press a student who is incapable of performing at the usual level.
- I try to challenge students who are at their best.
- If I am having a bad day and feel it might affect my normal teaching style, I let my students know so there is no misunderstanding about my feelings for them.

B. Self-concepts

- I treat my students with the same respect that I expect them to show me.
- I plan "one-centred" activities which give all students an opportunity at some point to feel important and accepted.
- I like to teach and have a good time teaching-on most days.

C. Aptitude and Perception

- I am aware that my students learn differently.
- My exercises are varied, some are visual, aural, oral and kinaesthetic. I provide models, examples, and experiences to maximize learning in each of these areas.
- I know basic concepts in the memory process. When applicable, I make use of techniques such as backward build-up and association to aid students in rapid skill acquisition.

D. Reinforcement

- I tell students when they have done well, but I don't let praise become mechanical.
- I finish my class period in a way which will review the new concepts presented during the class period. My students can immediately evaluate their understanding of those concepts.
- My tests are well-planned and produced.
- I make my system of grading clear to my students so that there are no misunderstandings of expectations.

E. Development

- I keep up to date on new techniques in the ESL profession by attending conferences and workshops and by reading pertinent professional articles and books.
- I realize that there is no one right way to present any lesson. I try new ideas where and when they seem appropriate.
- I observe other ESL teachers so that I can get other ideas and compare them to my own teaching style. I want to have several ideas for teaching any one concept.

III. The Activity

A. Interaction

- I minimize my role in *conducting* the activities.
- I organize the activities so they are suitable for *real* interaction among the students.
- The activities maximize student involvement.
- The activities promote spontaneity or experimentation on the part of the learner.
- The activities generally transfer attention away from "self" and outward toward a "task".
- The activities are organized to insure a high success rate, leaving enough room for error to make the activity challenging.
- I am not overly concerned with error correction. I concentrate on what my students are saying (content).

B. Language

- The activity is focused.
- The content or the skill presented will be easily transferrable for use outside the class.
- The activity is geared to the proficiency level of my class or slightly beyond.
- The content of the activity is not too sophisticated for my students.
- I make the content of the activity relevant and meaningful to my students' world.

Christison, M.A. and Bassano, S. 1983. TESOL Convention, Toronto.