

Trials of a Reflective Teaching Journal

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Abstract

The following paper presents the author's initial attempts to develop an understanding of reflective teaching practices through a reflective journal and action research. Two accounts of reflective practicing are depicted. While one attempt was deemed successful and the other initially less successful, both proved to be invaluable in developing a personal interpretation of reflective-teaching, and verifying its effectiveness as a method of self-improvement.

Introduction

Any language teacher will soon discover that second language teaching is a highly variable task. Pedagogical techniques and teaching activities that once worked in the past may not necessarily work in the present, nor future. Teachers are no longer able to use generic or generalized approaches to language teaching and classroom problem solving. There is a need for language teaching solutions and strategies to become more and more tailored to individual contexts. Schon's work, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), calls for teachers to use theoretical, procedural, and reflective knowledge to address the problems of today's classrooms.

Reflective practice involves teachers analyzing a teaching context that they have lived through in order to explore their handling of the situation. But they may also reflect on practice while they are in the midst of it. This is known as

reflection-in-action, in which actions taken by the teacher can still make a difference to the situation (Schon,1983 ; 1987). Reflection-in-action seems to be the norm in language teaching as it is difficult to separate individual events that do not have future repercussions for either the teacher or learners.

The initial section of this paper involves the whole teaching process being examined, and analyzed, known as reflection-on-action. The second part of the reflective practice, occurring months later, involved the analysis of, and changes made to, teaching conditions as they happened, a process known as reflection-in-action.

The action research analysis conducted for this paper was based on Schon's conceptual definition of reflective practice. The process of reflective practice could be described as problem setting, action taking, and the analysis of action results. It is worthwhile to stress the cyclical nature of the process, where a re-evaluation of the problem can lead to further action and analysis. Schon asserts that this cycle of reflection is central to professional development (1987).

Instructional Setting

The reflective practice reviewed in this paper was completed with 1st year non-English Majors at Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University, a women's University in Fukuoka prefecture Japan. Within the institutional context, the fact that I was a part-time lecturer without strict formal responsibilities towards the institution, gave me the opportunity to design my own lessons and course evaluation. The freedom afforded to me to make my own decisions about the course and in the classroom was offset by a lack of guidance and feedback.

For many teachers, classroom visits by supervisors are the main source of feedback on their teaching, but need not be. While comments from a supervisor or observer can be a useful source of information about teaching, teachers

themselves are in the best position to examine their own teaching. Reflective researchers agree that rather than drawing on experts' opinions, or external sources of knowledge as an impetus for development, a language teacher should collect information about teaching, either individually or collaboratively, and make personal decisions about their teaching development (McLaughlin, 1999 ; Richards & Lockhart, 1994 ; Schon, 1983 ; 1987).

Placed in this teaching context I started thinking about ways of diversifying and improving my teaching skills. Based on the ideas proposed by Schon I decided to initiate a reflective journal in which I would be able to explore and improve upon my teaching.

The *Un*Reflective Practitioner

As no one would admit to being an unreflective practitioner, essentially every teacher could be seen as being reflective. Differences between teachers would only amount to the extent and degree of reflection. Therefore, the distinction between an active and passive reflective teacher should be made. A passive reflective teacher is one who, at the end of a lesson, merely concludes that it either went well or didn't. This may include plans to repeat the lesson or not, along with some minor changes. A passive reflective teacher does not analyze lesson choices, actions, or student reactions to better understand the reasons *why* a lesson may have been successful or unsuccessful. Passive reflection tends to focus on immediate rather than underlying problems.

In contrast, an active reflective teacher undertakes the steps proposed by Schon to better understand and improve upon teaching methodology. Truly reflective practice involves exploring the problem from the learners' perspective, and evaluating the classroom as it relates to the learner.

While I wouldn't classify myself as an unreflective practitioner I did discover

that my initial attempt at reflective practicing was regrettably passive in nature.

Journal of Reflective Teaching- Initial Trial- June 2004

My initial attempt at a reflective teaching journal began in June of 2004. The outline involved writing in a reflective journal after each lesson of a bi-weekly advanced English class. Journal entries continued as scheduled for eight weeks.

● *Reflection One*

After several months passed and the course finished, the journal entries were read and analyzed. What was found seemed at once full of omissions and wholly uncritical in nature. At first glance, due to the uncritical nature of the journal I was unable to discover anything substantial about the classroom. However, it was the questionable quality of the journal itself that led to an important revelation about a key element in teaching and the reflective process ; the need to be honest and critical of oneself. Dedicating oneself to the reflective process requires a high commitment to being honest, in criticizing yourself and accepting criticism from others, as a source of continuous development.

● *Reflection Two*

Shortly after the completion of my initial reflective journal, I had an experience with a student in my class that again prompted me to re-evaluate the quality, and accuracy of the contents of my journal. As part of their weekly assignments, students in my class engaged in fluency building free writing activities. Every lesson for about five minutes students wrote as much as they could about any topic they wished. At the end of the week I collected their writing to note their progress. Some students chose to write about me. One student wrote ; "...*You seem very shy. We don't know much about you. I want*

to know more...”

In my own journal writing I made notes of how well classes went, about which activities were good, or needed to be improved, but at no time did I realize that I came off as being ‘*shy*,’ or in any way reserved. Those few sentences written in the students journal led me to another crucial reminder ; the importance of setting positive teacher examples in the classroom.

Steps must be taken to develop a supportive group and classroom atmosphere. Important to the development of supportive atmosphere is the role and attitude of the teacher. Teacher enthusiasm or lack thereof, towards the students and subject matter will greatly influence the responses of the classroom (Dornyei, 1997). Teachers who are enthusiastic and supportive tend to pass on their interest to the students. English language textbooks and lessons often tend to be very personal in nature. Many lessons ask questions about home life, interests, dreams, etc. If a language teacher is unwilling to open up and talk about these topics, it is highly unlikely that students will.

Journal of Reflective Teaching- Action Research- November 2004

A second attempt at a reflective teaching journal began in November of 2004. The initial outline involved writing in a reflective journal after each lesson of a bi-weekly advanced English class. Along with writing a teaching journal, a minor action research project was attempted.

Collaborative Reflection

While it was hoped to involve another teacher in the reflective process by having lessons observed by a colleague, scheduling conflicts did not allow for it. Instead, informal meetings were set-up with a co-worker allowing for classroom

explanations and questions. Possible causes for the incident involving the student journal from the previous semester and my beliefs about teacher roles were often discussed.

I have always been a bit nervous of 'down-time' in my lessons. I usually plan for more questions or activities than I have time for in case some go faster than anticipated. I dread the idea of having five or ten minutes of class time with nothing for students to do. I think this is why I may have raced through some of the initial icebreaking/group forming steps. My co-worker suggested that five or ten minutes every week of just 'chatting' with students would not be wasted. While possibly lacking in face value for some, it would be very beneficial in group formation and increasing student willingness to communicate through bond building.

In my second attempt at reflective teaching the insights of my colleague was very beneficial. It was through our conversations that I was able to consciously and explicitly explain my classroom choices and thought processes. It was also beneficial to be presented with alternative perspectives and to be reminded of some student affective issues that I might have been overlooking.

Action Research

Second language teachers today have access to a myriad of different research studies conducted by professionals in learning contexts around the world. However, as previously stated, small differences in the learning environment can make big differences in the success of language learning. As frequently research and task results may vary from one culture or class to another, it is up to teachers to test for themselves what is appropriate for their teaching context. Action research is one method of verifying these results. Action research is a form of practitioner research done by individuals on, and in, their own practice, with the objective of

personal and professional growth (Richards et al., 1994). It is a self-improvement process involving actively trying out new ideas and hypotheses in practice. The process involves an initial purpose or goal, actions taken to cause changes in the teaching environment, and steps taken to interpret and explain classroom reactions and results. Action research tends to involve both factual and subjective descriptions of actions and reactions.

Action research presumes the existence of a research question or problem intrinsically connected to the practice itself. Stemming from the initial journal, the research problem proposed in this paper involves how to improve positive teacher and pair work influence within the classroom.

A great deal of time in the classroom is devoted to both the interaction between the teacher and learners, and to interaction among the students themselves. The quality of this interaction is thought to have a considerable influence on the success of language learning (Dornyei, 1997 ; Richards et al., 1994). It follows that the nature of classroom interaction should be of utmost importance for language teachers.

● *Initial Reflection*

In my classes I have often noticed that some pair groupings are more willing to communicate, and do so longer, than others. I wanted to find some way to improve the students' willingness to communicate in English in the classroom. I believe that using pair work is a good way to motivate students and provides them with opportunities to learn and use new language. In recent years a lot of research has been conducted on mediated learning and learner scaffolding, but I was unsure about whom the less-able students should be paired with in my classes (Dornyei, 1997 ; Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, & Miller, 1985 ; Lantolf, 2002). I thought that if a less able student was partnered with a student of better ability, the more fluent student might be able to help the other one during pair work. On the

other hand, the less able student might feel uncomfortable talking to such a student and as a result become more unwilling to communicate. In order to improve my understanding of mediated learning in my classrooms I decided to explore the effects of various types of pair arrangements.

- *Action*

Along with doing my reflective journal I began to monitor one particular student in my class who seemed to be less confident than others in speaking English. While this student was interested in English I frequently found that her task groups were often quiet and always finished early. I noted when the student spoke in class in relation to different situations and pair partners. I noted when this student spoke when paired with a more fluent student, compared to a student of the same ability. Data collecting for this research was in no way rigorous or empirical, but rather based on casual and subjective observations.

- *Reflection*

After watching the student for several weeks I began to notice some patterns. The student spoke much more often when working with a classmate of similar ability compared to when she had a more fluent partner. My initial conclusions were that this student was motivated to speak English, but perhaps felt intimidated when working with someone of much better ability. She had a tendency to defer to the stronger student to answer questions and volunteer information. I also noted that the stronger students tended to help, but at the same time dominate interactions. In my short action research journal I found that less able students were more willing to use English when they were not pressured with understanding and communicating with more fluent partners. In situations where students were of similar ability they were both much more willing to equally communicate.

Conclusions

Reflective journal writing and conducting my own action research proved to be very useful in guiding an initial analysis of my teaching, making me more conscious of my classroom behaviour and ideas.

I found that starting the reflective practice journal, and being objective in it, was much more difficult than I had anticipated. However, once engaged in the process, my capacity to perceive the process became stronger. I seemed to be much more attuned to my actions and more aware of results. The process of reflecting is a more expanding than cyclical process as insights from reflection-on-action carryover into an improved ability to reflect-in-action.

While neither of the two reflective journals outlined in this paper could be considered ideal, lacking in both depth and scale, both however did lead to insights into my own teaching practices. And in the end, growth through personal inquiry is the ultimate goal of the reflective process. The experiences recounted in this paper depict that the process of becoming a truly reflective teacher is not an easy one. However, it does become easier with time and experience.

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