How Teachers' Reflective Inquiries Help them Facilitate Transfer Skills Achievement in Students' Academic and Non-academic Pathways?

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Abstract
In education, the transfer of skills refers to learning in one context and being able to apply the acquired knowledge and skills to other new situations. Many studies show that college/university students do not easily transfer skills from English courses to other courses or writing situations (Wardle, 2016; Lindemann, 2016; Beaufort, 2007). To name a few of causes contributing to this we can refer to three of them as: students' general attitude, course content, and instructors' perceptions and expectations. Even when instructors agree on the two categories of general writing skills and academic writing skills, students believe that knowing the conventions of writing and possessing the content competency in their fields do not help them create a piece of coherent written discourse. This reveals to us that the problem lies in another level of teaching and learning practice which is developing a metacognitive awareness in both sides of learning cycle: teachers and students. The purpose of this paper is to present strategies that enhance first, teachers' awareness of what they are planning to do by developing more contextual-based tasks and second, students' awareness towards gaining a true sense of procedural real-life achievements. The presence of experienced and reflective instructors would guarantee the success of this approach by providing students with ample opportunities of practicing and going beyond surface acquisition of knowledge to deeper levels of learning as discovery procedure, critical thinking, and reflective empowerment on how to apply this acquired expertise to further authentic contexts in both academic and non-academic life styles.

Key words: Contextual learning, learning strategies, Metacognitive awareness, Reflective teaching

Introduction

As Farrell (2004) states: "A teacher's day never really ends" (p. 1). This not only implies our primary responsibility of teaching but also a fixed time to sit and reflect on what we do both inside and outside our classrooms. What we do in real world is to tie our students' success to what can be more or less immediately observed and measured through a "product approach" rather than a "process approach" to what we teach and expect our students to achieve progressively throughout the term. This limited vision to teaching practice automatically affects the nature of knowledge transfer as well as the strategies for facilitating it in real teaching contexts. An ideal learning context is the one in which students acquire the fundamental abstract knowledge and skills and are able to apply it into other near or far contexts by taking a "diving in" or "bridging" approach rather than "gate-keeping" or "hugging" one (Anson, 2014).

What we observe in our classrooms as English instructors teaching writing intensive courses is disheartening when we notice that mostly teachers claiming that students cannot write in its real sense and each generation identifying various culprits and offering different solutions not lasting permanently. This has been a motivation for researchers in the last three decades to investigate these claims and shift from traditional literary analysis approach to rhetorical genre-based approach. This has led to change the vision from product to process of writing and enabling students to transfer their acquired skills to write across their discipline and later in their professions.

One of these approaches which can facilitate achieving the desired goal, in my opinion, can be the "Reflection approach." According to Jay and Johnson (2002), "Reflection is a process, both individual and collaborative, involving experience and uncertainty. It is comprised of identifying questions and key elements of a matter that has emerged as significant, then taking one's thoughts into dialogue with oneself and with others" (p. 75).

This approach can be reflected in our teaching methodology as well. This is exactly what Korthagen (1993) has defined as reflective teaching which requires teachers examine their values and beliefs about teaching and learning so that they can take more responsibility for their actions in the classroom.

The Four Main Principles in Reflective Practice

Reflective practice in Farrell's opinion (2013) has four main principles: It is "**evidence-based**" because it requires a systematic information gathering approach and using them in informed decisions. Principle two discusses the inclusion of "**dialogue**" both internal (dialogue with the self) and external (dialogue with other teachers in team teaching and group discussions) to bolster reflection as one of the explicit outcomes of collaborative process of dialoguing. This teaching methodology underlies the third principle which "**links beliefs and practices**" when teachers examine what happens in their practice (theories-in-use) and compare it with their own beliefs about learning and teaching (their philosophy of teaching). And, the fourth principle emphasizes on the role of this type of practice as "**a way of life.**" This implies the dynamic nature and presence of reflection which is present not only inside

but also outside the classroom because teachers implement it in constructing and reconstructing their own theories of practice throughout their careers.

Reflective Practice: Worth it or Not?

Freeman (2016) states his concern over the persistent issue of how teachers can implement or operationalize this reflective practice to their programs. To some extent, I agree with this opinion especially when we see some of our colleagues show attitudes and resistance towards this approach by taking reflective practice as an extra time and effort that they do not have to spare and some others consider it as another "job" they have to complete. Others, talk about institutional constraints which limit teachers' hours in the day to reflect on their work and point out to curriculum coverage pressure, stressful existence, and burnout at the end. In contrast, there is another group of educators who think motivated teachers strive to create opportunities to reflect, become more aware of what happens in their classrooms, monitor accurately both their own behavior and that of their students, and function more effectively in and out of their classrooms.

Although I agree with both groups, confronting or applying "reflective practice" to their teaching practice, I strongly believe that educators can have a greater impact on the education system of their own countries and the entire world more than what they think. This can be institutionalized if and only if we take the role of "transformative intellectuals" (Nieto et al., 2002, p. 345) who attempt to reflect on and influence their work. Teachers can proactively start to take control of their working lives in different ways. They can become more empowered decision makers and engaged in systematic reflections of their work by thinking, writing, and talking about their teaching; observing the acts of their own and others' teaching; and gauging the impact of their teaching on their students' learning.

Dewey (1933/1958) has proposed teachers to possess these three features to act as reflective practitioners. He believes that this group of educators must be open-minded, responsible, and wholehearted. He defines the first feature of being "open-minded" as to be willing to listen to more than one side of an issue and to give attention to alternative views. By the term "responsible," he means to carefully consider the consequences of our actions since they can personally, intellectually, and socially affect our students' lives in an implicit or explicit way. The last characteristic, the term "wholehearted" to him means to be so committed to an idea or persistent in a belief that helps us overcome our fears and uncertainties in an effort to make meaningful personal and professional change.

These are all constraints and boundaries imposed on us, as teachers all around the world, by executives in higher levels of education systems—who without getting any input from us—just force us to fully implement their prescribed pre-packaged programs without providing us with minimum academic freedom to be able to apply minor changes or modifications to make it better. We have to think of some other practical ways to get rid of this not that much pleasant situation. You may say that this is an unquestionable scenario but how we can get through this phase of our work life to fulfill our long-term mission.

Reflection-as-Action: A Holistic Approach

According to Farrell (2004), it is difficult to talk about the place where reflective practice for teachers originated, but he believes John Dewey's work (1933/1958) has greatly influenced its popularity in America which further developed by other scholars. Argyris and Schon (1974), Cruickshank and Applegate (1981), Gore (1987), Smyth (1987), Barlett (1990), Van Manen (1991), Zeichner and Liston (1996), and Jay and Johnson (2002) are among the ones to name here (cited in Farrell, 2004). Each model carries a set of specific values which makes it different from another.

One of these models which has taken a more pedagogical approach to education is the one proposed by Farrell in 2015 and adapted in his 2019 ELT Development Series in which he discusses how teachers can implement reflection through a five-stage framework (Figure 1). The framework has been illustrated as a circle which can be navigated in three different ways: theory into practice, practice into theory, or single stage application. This framework as Farrell (2019) emphasizes on is descriptive rather than prescriptive and teachers can take a deductive approach to reflecting on practice by moving from stage 1, philosophy, to stage 5, beyond practice, or from theory-into-practice.
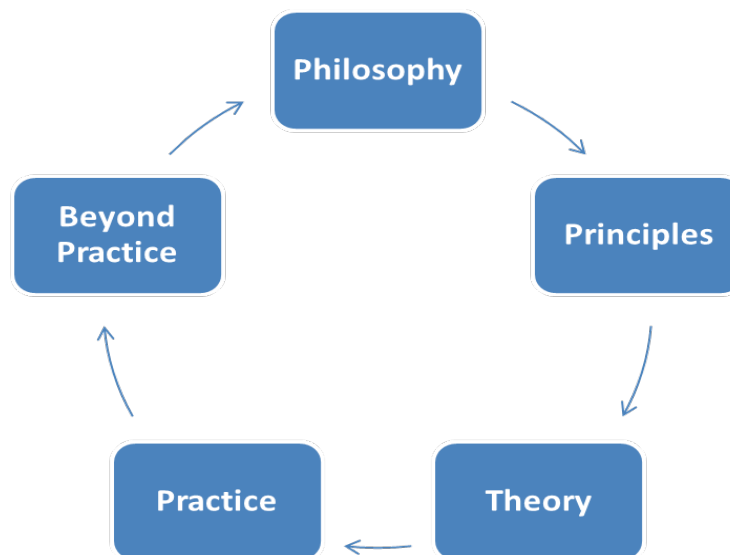
Figure 1. Framework for Reflecting on Practice (adapted from Farrell, 2015)

Operationalizing the reflective practice through this model can be accomplished by going through the five stages of: philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and beyond practice. Viewing reflection as a process in this model strengthens the teacher's role as a whole person and also the multidimensional aspects of reflection. This model not only focuses on the intellectual, cognitive, and metacognitive aspects of reflection but also includes reflection on the spiritual, moral, and emotional non-cognitive aspects of reflection.

Reflecting on Philosophy

As Goodson (2000) states, "In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is" (cited in Farrell, 2019, p. 16). Reflecting on philosophy helps teachers gain a holistic self-knowledge by exploring, examining, and reflecting on their entire life from a cultural perspective

including history, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background, and family and personal beliefs and values. Farrell (2018) maintains that a teacher's sense of self and identity that originated at birth and continues to develop throughout life invariably guides professional practice, both inside and outside the classroom.

Such a self-discovery knowledge as Palmer (1998) notes, "Good teaching requires self-knowledge ... whatever self-knowledge we attain as teachers will serve our students and our scholarship well" (p. 3) will allow us as teachers to construct our narratives of the self and close the gap between expected and actual teacher identities. Teachers should become aware of the possibility of shifting identities. Research indicates that context influences identity construction and development which can shift as context changes (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Liu & Xu, 2011; Kong, 2014). This idea becomes even more important for TESOL teachers who change contexts by moving to other countries different from their place of origin. This awareness helps teachers reflect on these possibilities and employ various activities in class indicating this identity shift.

Reflecting on Principles

Farrell (2019) believes that reflecting on your learning and teaching principles will impact both your perceptions and judgements which, in turn, affect your behavior in the classroom. Teachers have to achieve a level of awareness by articulating their thoughts because their beliefs may not always correspond to their practices. This self-reflecting on personal opinions will get them to a deeper understanding of the roots of their beliefs to see if there is any correspondence between their beliefs/values and practices and vice versa.

Kagan (1992) defines teacher beliefs as "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (p. 65). Another study by Abednia et al., (2013) indicates that articulation of such beliefs permits teachers to better identify their teaching strengths and areas that need improvement and to gain the overall freedom to be able to continually modify existing beliefs whenever appropriate.

Teachers' maxims and metaphors are the two means of assessing principles suggested by Farrell (2015) to guide teachers' instructional decisions and best behavior. He has introduced a list of 18 maxims in his book "Reflection-as-Action in ELT" (2019). Some of them are: "Maxim of planning, Maxim of involvement, Maxim of encouragement, Maxim of learner-centered class, Maxim of cultural input, Maxim of motivation, etc., ..." (Farrell, 2019, p. 18). And, some of the metaphors applicable to teaching practice coined by Lin, Shein, and Yang (2012) are: "Nurturer, Cooperative leader, Knowledge provider, Artist, Innovator, Tool provider, and Repairer" (cited in Farrell, 2019, p. 19).

Reflecting on Theory

By reflecting on theory, it is meant to become more aware of the different concepts and theoretical principles that underlie teachers' instructional practices (Farrell, 2019). At this stage, teachers are encouraged to reflect on their theoretical orientation to planning lessons, as well as on critical incidents (personal & teaching).

According to Ashcraft (2014), there are three different lesson plan designs: *forward*, *central*, and *backward*. Each is different from another based on the focus of the lesson plan. There are three basic features that affect the way you plan lessons. Generally, in forward planning the focus is on the lesson content first and then the particular teaching methods and activities. Central planning is when teacher does the reverse, and first chooses specific teaching methods and activities and then considers the content and outcomes of the lesson. And in backward planning, teacher emphasizes on desired lesson outcomes first, as well as the type of evidence to show that the desired outcome has taken place.

Critical incidents, both inside and outside the classroom, include any events to which critical significance can be ascribed (Farrell, 2019). Teachers can analyze these incidents by engaging in reflective activities such as self and peer observations to keep a record of that incident and investigate the reasons which caused that incident in that moment and decide why this incident led to a change in their teaching. This critical analysis leads us to adapt our theory of practice based on our students' needs and situations.

Reflecting on Practice

Reflecting on practice in Farrell's (2019) opinion "... begins with an examination of observable actions while teaching as well as students' reactions (or nonreactions) to what and how teachers teach during lessons" (p. 31). Teachers can take three reflection styles/modes when they are teaching a lesson: **Reflection-in-action**-when they are teaching a lesson; **Reflection-on-action**-after they teach a lesson; and **Reflection-for-action**-what will come next after what went before.

Good and Brophy (1991) outline the following classroom problems that occur due to a teacher's lack of awareness of his/her own behavior in class: teacher domination, lack of emphasis on meaning, overuse of factual questions, few attempts to motivate students, not cognizant of effects of seat location and grouping, and overreliance on repetitive seatwork.

Our mentors, peers/colleagues, and even our students can be effective sources of providing some guidance and, at the same time, fostering our critical reflection skill. A number of studies confirm the positive impacts of this reflection practice on teachers' influential responsibility and further education and program developments. Farrell (2018) claims that reflecting on practice in combination with theory leads to enhanced awareness of theory and practice connections. Yuan & Lee (2014) believe that this thoughtful awareness not only helps them find the connection between practice and other three stages but also begin to experiment new approaches. Waring (2014) confirms the positive impact of this reflection practice by saying that when feedback is provided, no matter accepting or rejecting , it will guide them to consider alternatives to continue or change their current practicing approaches to teaching.

Reflecting Beyond Practice: Critical Reflection

By Reflecting beyond Practice, Farrell (2019) means reflecting beyond the technical aspects of practice and focusing on more sociocultural and moral dimensions related to TESOL as a profession. This "critical reflection" entails exploring and examining

the contemplative, reflective, cognitive, emotional, ethical, moral, social, and political issues that impact teacher's practice both inside and outside the classroom.

This reflection as Farrell (2019) states—teachers' ability to transform their profession into something they consider equitable for all—transforms reflection from technical to "critical." When teachers are engaged with reflecting beyond classroom practice, this reflection practice enables teachers to not only understand their own assumptions, beliefs, and theories and how to improve them but also connect these to wider social domain in which they are practicing (Farrell, 2018). Deng and Yuen (2011) noted that critical reflection allows teachers to go beyond language instruction and fulfill educationally oriented promises such as helping people become critical thinkers and active citizens.

This practice makes teachers to be more aware of their impact on society and vice versa (the impact of society on their practice). They can understand the power dynamics inherent in education (in & out of class) and to question the beliefs that may have externally imposed on them. Crookes (2009) believes that teachers can even take a leadership role when asking legislatures to help with funding research projects by implementing a set of four actions: "Organizing, Addressing leadership, Fund-raising, Engaging in action" (cited in Farrell, 2019, p. 44).

Have you ever considered your job—teaching—as a type of moral activity? In Farrell's reflective model, yes it is. He believes that one final aspect related to the concept of critical reflection is the consideration of TESOL teaching as a moral activity (Farrell, 2019). This aspect focuses on what morals are present in and absent from our profession, something that we have to ask ourselves. What do you think? Do you think political, social, economic, and religious beliefs and trends should be included while we are practicing our job, i.e. teaching in different places and at various levels?

To me, teaching is a multifaceted profession that requires whoever is involved in such as higher education system executives, school principals, college/university chancellors, deans, chairs, instructors/professors, and students to have some sort of awareness about social forces, political trends, economic interests, and religious diversity to provide a better learning and teaching environment away from any type of discriminations that might be inherent in different educational systems.

How to Engage in Reflective Practice?

According to Dewey (1933/1958), if you want to engage in reflective practice, you have to slow down the interval between thought and action by engaging in a five-stage reflective inquiry process: **1.** Suggestion (a doubtful situation & some vague suggestions); **2.** Intellectualization (deliberate reasoning about the perplexity of the problem); **3.** Guiding idea (collecting factual materials); **4.** Reasoning (deciding to implement actions); and **5.** Hypothesis testing (examining and monitoring this refined hypothesis).

This Reflective Inquiry Cycle is very similar to action research procedures that have been proposed in general education. The Action Research process includes: Planning (identify problem); Researching (review literature); Observing (collect data);

Reflecting (analyze), and, Acting (redefine problem). Then, we can involve in reflective practice by taking an action-research approach that gives us a unique opportunity of thinking and rethinking over all the actions occurring in and out of classroom. We can think of whatever went well and not, and most importantly, ask ourselves "why" it happened and "how" it can be resolved. This is a simple practice of reflection not only applicable to our academic life but also it can be an everyday practice in our daily life (non-academic). The next section tells us how we can give our students the power of utilizing this reflection—practiced by us—in their academic and non-academic practices. There is one answer to this and it is "transfer skills."

Transfer Skills: Conditions and Mechanism

Transfer in Perkins and Salomon (1994) words, occurs when learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with another set of materials. Thorough and diverse practice, explicit abstraction, active self-monitoring, arousing mindfulness, and using metaphors/analogies are among those factors that encourage transfer.

Why do factors of the kind identified above encourage transfer? Answers to this question can best come from an examination of the mechanisms of transfer, the psychological paths by which transfer occurs.

Transfer by *abstraction* is still possible today to grant Thorndike's point (1923) that identical elements underlie the phenomenon of transfer. He maintains that an identity that mediates transfer can sit at a very high level of abstraction which can appear in very different contexts.

Transfer by *affordances* is when the potential transfer situation presents similar affordances and the person recognizes them and may apply the same or a somewhat adapted action schema there (Greeno et al., 1988).

High and low/near and far transfer acknowledges that sometimes transfer is stimulus-driven, occurring more or less automatically as a function of much and diverse practice (the low road), and some other times (in the high road), it involves high levels of abstraction and challenges of initial detection of possible connections (James, 2010).

Teaching for Transfer

The aforementioned points about transfer mechanism clarify why transfer does not occur as often as would be wished in academic contexts. They also provide guidelines for establishing conditions of learning that encourage transfer of acquired knowledge and skills. One of the reasons to this hardship might be simply explained through not being able to make any connection between what we teach to our students and what they are supposed to do in new contexts.

Then, how can we support our students to make this transition easier for them? Beaufort (2007), Bergman and Zepernick (2007), Devitt (2014), and Wardle (2016) believe that the three strategies of encouraging the development of metacognitive awareness among our students, providing ample real-life opportunities to practice and

revise their own work in a meaningful way, and engaging them through more authentic tasks and activities are the most practical ways to facilitate transfer.

By implementing these strategies into our teaching practice, we can create a learning atmosphere in which students are aware of their own learning process and through time, they can improve their general academic skills of critical thinking, innovative ideas, analytical argumentation, creative reasoning, and effective communication to an ideal level of competency to meet their needs and get a satisfying result at the end.

Students' Academic Success: Student/Teacher Interactions

Our definitions of students' success often remain tied to what can be more or less immediately observed. We want our students to be able to apply the transferrable skills learned throughout a semester not only in near contexts but also in far contexts as well. This means that academic success has been achieved when our students can communicate clearly, concisely, and correctly in different contexts; respond to various communication modes in a manner that ensures effective communication; apply a systematic approach to solve problems, and use a variety of thinking skills and strategies. In brief, we want them to be autonomous and responsible learners.

This will only take place when instructors carefully consider the essential aspects of any education program by focusing on what they ask students to do, how ask them to do it, and why; devoting great attention to identifying components and conventions of any course/program they are responsible to deliver; and involve both insider experts (scholars in the same field) and outsider experts (diverse disciplines) into our teaching practice. In other words, being able to articulate the underlying principles of teaching and learning enhance reflections and their appropriateness in various contexts. We can achieve this if we apply and re-apply the three elements of facility transfer to our real teaching contexts by: **1)** informing our students about what they are supposed to do (metacognitive awareness); **2)** creating extensive authentic opportunities for the intended communication mode (context); and **3)** giving them extensive constructive feedback and let them think (revision and reflection).

Students' Non-academic Success

Throughout my twenty-six years of academic life (teaching and researching), what I noticeably recognized and understood about my teaching style has taken place after getting familiar with the concept of reflective teaching and deeply affected by Farrell's Reflective Model. When you, yourself, become a reflective practitioner in your teaching career, then in addition to what you observe as your students' academic success, you will be able to see the followings as well (both short and long-term achievements).

- They never think of their academic success as a one-off performance for a grade but as a life-long learning experience applicable to all aspects of their life.
- They involve the process of discovery method/inquiry to other aspects of their personal life: other courses and professional lives (Far and/or Near Transfer).
- They take more responsibility for their own actions, decisions, and consequences.

- They learn how to respect self and others' values and beliefs.
- They learn how to interact with others in groups/teams.
- They can deal with any unexpected/unanticipated issues in life and at work.
- They can think of the most feasible solutions to solve different types of problems (Critical thinking and Creative actions).
- They can be multi-tasker simultaneously.
- They can make well-informed decisions.
- They can manage their time efficiently.
- They can easily adapt themselves to new situations. And finally,
- They can effectively communicate with people around.

Conclusion

Implementing and operationalizing Farrell's Reflective Practice Model into our teaching practice gives us a lens through which we can view our professional and personal worlds. In this way, we become more aware of our philosophy, principles, theories, and practices and how these impact issues inside and beyond practice. One of the most tangible outcomes of taking this holistic approach to our teaching practice will be generating more integrated teachers' community whose members have high potential of understanding how to interpret, shape, and reshape their practice throughout their careers. This practice helps us with well-designed instructions customized with our students' specific needs which, in turn, will affect their general performance to apply the knowledge and skills learned in one context—academic—to other situations—nonacademic—as well.

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