KEY CONCEPTS IN ELT

Reflection

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Although discussion of reflective thought in education dates back at least to Dewey (e.g. Dewey 1933), it is only since the 1980s that the term 'reflection' has become prominent in discussion of practitioner, including teacher, development. Within English language teacher education, reflection is often promoted as an important feature of effective practice (e.g. British Council 2015). Yet, while 'reflection' is frequently invoked, use of the term often lacks conceptual clarity (van Beveren et al., 2018), and we still understand relatively little about the role of reflection in (language) teacher development (Mann and Walsh 2017).

Defining reflection is difficult. In one sense, reflection is simply 'thought' (van Manen 1991), but definitions in the teacher education literature (e.g. Zeichner 1981; van Manen 1991; Mann and Walsh 2017; Fendler 2003) tend to be more specific, involving a number of elements that often suggest a formative outcome. Such definitions can be synthesized as follows: reflection is conscious, experientially informed thought, at times involving aspects of evaluation, criticality,[1] and problem-solving, and leading to insight, increased awareness, and/or new understanding. As such, reflection can be contrasted with 'impulsive' or 'routine' decision-making that reinforces and embeds current perceptions or practices (Dewey 1933: 17).

Two traditions can be identified in the literature on teacher reflection: a Deweyan one (Dewey ibid.) that draws on a relatively scientific approach to encourage us to engage in 'active, persistent, and careful consideration' of our beliefs and knowledge (Dewey ibid.: 9), and a Schönian one (Schön 1983, 1987), involving more intuitive (albeit conscious) reflection that rejects academic knowledge as 'technical rationality', and encourages us to draw on our experiential knowledge as the primary source of learning (Anderson 2019). As Fendler (2003: 19) notes, 'the meaning of professional reflection is riddled with tensions between Schön's notion of practitioner-based intuition, on the one hand, and Dewey's notion of rational and scientific thinking, on the other'. However, despite differences between these traditions, both see experientially informed uncertainty or doubt leading to perplexity or puzzlement as the initial stages of reflection. Within the Deweyan tradition, this may involve us

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observing a phenomenon (e.g. a perceived problem in the classroom), developing a hypothesis (e.g. regarding the possible cause of the problem), and then testing this hypothesis (e.g. trying out a potential solution to the problem), anticipating the stages of Action Research. Within the Schönian tradition, reflection happens primarily through 'reflection-in-action', in which an unfamiliar phenomenon causes our current understanding of something to 'surface' (i.e. to come into our conscious awareness) and undergo critical evaluation and potential restructuring as a result, all during what Schön called the 'action-present' (Schön 1983: 62–63). He also occasionally discussed 'reflection on action', occurring after the action-present (e.g. Schön 1987: 26), although it was not central to his theory of practitioner learning (Anderson 2019). Despite this, the two terms are often given equal weight by writers on teacher reflection, and interpreted as reflection during and after the lesson event, respectively (e.g. Mann and Walsh 2017). 'Reflection for action'—seen as 'the desired outcome' of Schön's two types of reflection—has also been proposed (Killion and Todnem 1991: 15).

Interest in reflective models of teacher education developed gradually through the 1980s, entering language teacher education soon after. For example, Wallace (1991) proposed a 'reflective model' based on Schön's, and contrasted it with a 'craft model' within which trainees learn by imitating the techniques of experts (ibid.: 6), and an 'applied science model' within which trainees are expected to implement the findings of scientific research (ibid.: 9). In his reflective model, both 'received knowledge' and experience inform a continuing cycle of practice and reflection that leads to professional competence (ibid.: 15). Since the 1990s, the term 'reflective practice'—borrowed from Schön—has become common in teacher education programmes to refer to a relatively systematic use of reflection for professional development (e.g. Farrell 2015). It is sometimes seen to be at one end of a continuum of teacher development/research, with Action Research, as a more formalized framework, at the other end, and, for example, Exploratory Practice in the middle (e.g. Allwright 2001). Some of the most frequently used tools of reflective practice today, both pre-service and in-service, include post-lesson discussions with mentors or critical friends, video self-observation, longitudinal journal or blog writing, and participation in face-to-face or online discussion groups (see Farrell 2016 for discussion of a range of reflective tools).

Despite being widely promoted, the impact of reflection on teacher effectiveness has sometimes been questioned. Akbari (2007: 192), for example, notes 'there is no evidence to show improved teacher or student performance resulting from reflective techniques'. It has, though, been demonstrated both directly (e.g. Giovanelli 2003) and through more extensive reviews of research. For example, Stronge (2007) finds reflection to be an important part of the cognition of effective teachers, and Farrell's (2016) review of reflection in TESOL reports a generally positive impact of reflection on language teacher cognition and practice, including greater understanding of self and awareness of own beliefs. There is very little research on 'interactive reflection' (i.e. reflection that occurs while

teaching) in TESOL, although Anderson's (2019) study draws on Schön's notion of 'reflection-in-action' to explore real-time teacher reflection.

Finally, a number of frameworks for developing practitioner reflection have been proposed since the 1980s. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, involving four stages from *problem finding*, to *question asking*, *answer seeking* and then *active experimentation* (ibid.: 33), has been influential in a number of fields, including teacher education. In language teacher education, Akbari, Behzadpoor, and Dadvand (2010) propose five elements to practitioner reflection: *practical* (our use of tools to help us reflect), *cognitive* (reflecting on our professional development), *affective* (reflecting on our learners and their progress), *meta-cognitive* (reflecting on our beliefs, personality, and identity), and *critical* (consideration of wider sociopolitical issues). Farrell's (2015) framework suggests that we can develop through reflecting on our *philosophy* of practice, the *principles* that guide our teaching, the *theories* we draw on to put these principles into practice, what actually happens in our *practice*, and finally, going *beyond practice* to reflect critically on moral issues impacting our work and identities. Anderson (2019) proposes several tools for teachers to develop their interactive *reflection literacy*, particularly concerning how they respond to specific affordances during the lesson. Hayden, Rundell, and Smyntek-Gworek (2013) use the acronym SOAR to facilitate trainee reflection on teaching practice in written form, beginning with a *subjective* retelling of lesson events, then considering progress towards lesson *objectives*, and *analysis* of the lesson itself, leading to deeper *reflection* on what they have learnt as a result.

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Note

1. 'Criticality' in the sources mentioned includes reflexivity (self-questioning), critical thinking and the wider sociopolitical concerns of critical pedagogy (see Banegas and Villacañas de Castro 2016).

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