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A Special Talk with Associate Professor Thomas Sylvester Charles Farrell Department of Applied Language Studies (DALs)

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INTERVIEW: A SPECIAL TALK WITH
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While you have an impressive publication list which covers a number of issues in ELT, your most recent focus, in the last couple of years, seems to have been reflective practice. Could you briefly share with our readers just what 'reflective practice' means to you?

☛ Many teachers may not be aware that they are practically on automatic pilot in their classrooms, as they never take time to look closely at their teaching practices. One way of identifying routine, and of counteracting burnout, is by engaging in reflective teaching. Reflective practice basically means that language teachers examine their values and beliefs about teaching and learning language so that they can take more responsibility for their actions in the classroom. This type of practice allows teachers to make informed (rather than impulsive) decisions about their teaching.

Why do you think achieving reflective practice is important?

☛ Language classrooms are busy places with many things happening at each moment of each class. For example, a teacher can engage in as many as 1,000 interpersonal interchanges each

day during their classes. If a lesson is a dynamic event during which many things occur simultaneously, how can teachers hope to be aware of, and be able to control, everything that happens in their classrooms? A teacher's inability to recognize and attend to all classroom issues can result in self-defeating behavior. Additionally, teachers who do not bother to reflect on their work can become slaves to routine and powerless to influence their future careers. It is much easier for teachers to complain about how bad educational systems are (and many teachers believe that this kind of venting is an act of reflective practice—it is not) than to reflect on their own behaviors, both inside and outside of the classroom. Reflective teachers make a point of becoming aware of the factors that affect their practice so they can improve their teaching and, thereby, positively influence the educational systems in which they work.

Is talk of 'reflective practice' in Asia just rhetoric?

➤ Some teachers in Asia may wonder why they should invest time and effort into reflective practice, especially if they feel it is time they do not have to spare. Even worse, they may view reflective practice as another "job" they have to complete. In this sense I do not think the Asian classroom setting is any different for teachers when it comes to professional development. I have lived and worked in Asian settings for 25 years before I recently moved to Canada and I have seen teachers in the same stages of burnout in Asia as in other, say Western settings. If teachers do not take time to reflect on their work, they may become prone to burnout *regardless* of the setting. Reflective practitioners celebrate their professional ups and downs, for both propel them toward professional growth. Reflection is a dynamic way of being in the classroom. However, it takes time and effort to be able to reflect systematically on teaching.

What obstacles do you see to achieving reflective practice in Asia?

➤ Even though I think Thai people are very reflective by nature I see two main obstacles with the teaching profession: the individual teacher and the institution. Again, these two are not unique to Asia. Some individual teachers may not want to reflect because they consider language teaching a job that they do not want to invest any time in. Some teachers may be afraid to reflect because they may worry about what they may discover. And other teachers may not know how to reflect. Institutions may not want to encourage reflection because they may think it is a waste of time when the teachers could be preparing or teaching. Institutions may also worry that the teachers may become too empowered with their new knowledge about who and why a particular textbook was chosen for use.

How do you feel these obstacles might be best overcome?

➤ For individual teachers who are worried about what they may find when they explore their teaching, I think the words of John Dewey, the great American educator, may go a long way. Dewey has suggested that teachers who want to be reflective practitioners must possess three characteristics (or attitudes). They must be open-minded, responsible, and wholehearted. To be open-minded is to be willing to listen to more than one side of an issue and to give attention to alternative views. To be responsible is to carefully consider the consequences of our actions, especially as they impact our students personally, intellectually, and socially. To be wholehearted is to be so committed to an idea or project that we can overcome fears and uncertainties in an effort to make meaningful personal and professional change. I think institutions can only benefit if their teachers are reflective practitioners because they will be more aware of what they are doing in their classrooms, more confident about their classes and activities, and as a consequence, their students will be happier in the knowledge that they have caring and professional teachers.

How might reflective practice influence the way a teacher provides students with, for example, grammar instruction?

➤ This question poses an interesting dilemma for me—should I just stick to answering about teaching grammar or also get into why teach grammar in the first place? You see, reflection also involves critical reflection where teachers look at what influences their work outside their classrooms. For example, if teachers want to reflect on student performance in their grammar classes, they should not only consider the perspectives of the obvious main players - the teacher, the student, and sometimes the parents depending on the students' ages, but they should also consider school culture to include wider socio-historical and politico-cultural contexts—who made the decision for the institution to teach grammar, etc. I will go with inside the classroom for now because of time, but teachers should be aware that we cannot divorce what we do inside the classroom from events outside it. A reflective grammar teacher will look at his/her students and their grammar needs and decide how best they should be instructed in grammar, deductively or inductively for example. The teacher can then engage in some form of action research to see which method has the best results for his/her students. The teacher can record his/her class that emphasizes deductive instruction (or inductive), transcribe sections of the class, and make interpretations about whatever patterns he/she sees emerging. The next time the teacher is teaching the grammar class, he/she can make a more informed decision about what approach/method to use based on the data he/she has collected and not on an impression or opinion by some other administrator in the school. The main point is that a reflective teacher will systematically reflect on his/her class.

To what extent can reflective practice have individual, group, and institutional dimensions?

I propose a model of reflection that includes individuals, pairs, and groups engaging in reflective practice (Farrell, 2004a).

The first, and main, component of the model suggests that teachers can engage in a range of activities that facilitate reflection. These activities include group discussions, classroom observations, journal writing, and creating teaching portfolios. The institution can encourage these activities as part of its teachers' professional development by providing release time and/or funding.

What developments do you expect to see in reflective practice over the next few years?

Unfortunately, it is still common that experienced teachers, regardless of the setting, do not readily talk about their teaching outside of official staff meetings. As a result, individual experiences are not often shared. However, it is important that veteran teachers share their stories and knowledge with novices, who would certainly benefit from such discussions. So I can only answer this question with what I hope develops in reflective practice. I hope many more teachers will engage in reflective practice so that they can become more confident and informed teachers. I hope more teachers will engage in generating their own research so that they can investigate what they think important for their practice. I hope language teacher education programs better equip their graduates with the means of investigating and reflecting on their practice once they start teaching. In Asia, I hope language teachers will become more curious about what is happening in their classrooms by reflecting on the communication patterns they have established in their classes and how this provides opportunities (or not) for learning (Farrell, 2004b).

References

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