

## REFLECTION: A TOOL FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how reflection helps teachers to grow professionally. The common held belief among teachers is that they are growing when they get experience. Although experience is very important for the teacher development, it will not help teachers to grow unless they learn from their teaching. In order to grow teachers should never allow them to be fixed with ideas, approaches and strategies, but need to keep open to the possibilities of going wrong by questioning their teaching and reflecting on their practice. Since reflection is not a spontaneous activity, it requires time, effort and personal investment from teachers. Teachers believe that their teaching automatically help learners learn; furthermore, they often feel that they understand exactly what they are doing in the class, what impact their teaching has on the learners and know their learners' needs and feeling. How is it possible if teachers never stop for a moment to analyze their teaching activities or critically examine their actions, intentions, motives and attitudes towards learning and learners? In fact, teachers keep on planning and teaching without reflecting on them because, they feel it is too difficult to reflect on their teaching. This paper argues that reflection is neither difficult nor impossible. On the contrary, teachers can reflect if they really want to do it. As reflection is regarded as a tool for professional development, different ways of doing teacher reflection are discussed in terms of both theoretical and practical terms.

**Keywords:** reflection question critically examine professional development.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Teachers usually feel that they are growing professionally when they are acquiring experience. Experience is very important for professional development; however, it cannot alone develop teachers' professionalism. In fact, it takes the quality of experience away where working and teaching is not growing experience, but repeating the same thing or mistakes again and again. Experience should help us to grow, but it should not fossilize us in a particular pattern of behavior. If we want to grow professionally and help our learners to learn, we need to introspect ourselves, critically examine the course we teach and our teaching and retrospect our teaching activities. Experience can either be a growing experience or a mere repetition of years without adding to it or changing it. Teachers who view experience as a growing experience reflect on their own teaching in some way, which ranges from anecdotal variety to classroom data analysis. Furthermore, they question their teaching, try out new ideas and strategies and look for alternatives to do it differently next time by using intuition and experience.

While most of the teachers involve in other activities as soon as they have done their lessons, very few teachers think about their recently taught lessons by questioning the events of the class and trying to find the reason or justification of the classroom activities, their decisions and actions. Those who review their lesson may feel happy and satisfied, sad, annoyed or troubled by the way it went. At times, the teachers may find something very pertinent so that they can record somewhere because it will be helpful sometime in the future.

## **WHAT IS REFLECTION?**

As it is widely known, reflection is a conscious, active process of focused and structured thinking which is distinct from free floating thoughts, as in general thinking or day dreaming. Reflection is an important factor in the process of teaching and learning (Cruickshank, 1987; Grimmitt & Erickson, 1988; Pollard & Tann, 1987; Russell & Munby, 1992). Although it improves learning and teaching, reflection is not spontaneous activity that happens naturally in our professions or everyday life. However, it needs actively dedicated time and effort from teachers to do reflections. In other words, reflection is not an everyday professional behavior. The only spontaneous reflection we do is when something has gone wrong, when we fear failure or after a major life crisis.

According to Pennington (1992), reflective teaching started as "a movement in teacher education in which ... teachers analyze their own practice and their underlying basis and then consider alternative means of achieving their ends" (p. 48). Richards and Lockhart (1994) adds a critical component to reflection to view it as "one in which teachers and student teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching" (p.1). Minott (2009) relates reflection with the past, present and future actions and decisions when he defines it as a balanced judgment about the past actions, events or decisions from the present for the future. Here reflection acts as a bridge between past, present and future. Cruickshank (1987) has stated that the common feature of reflection is questioning self, i.e. interrogating not only our beliefs, values, contexts and goals of teaching activities, but also the classroom events and decisions. Brookfield (1995) provides a balanced view of reflection by adding teachers' reflection, learners' reflection, colleagues' reflection and reflection of current theories and literature to it.

Reflection refers to an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, for specific purpose. It is a response to past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action. To become reflective teachers we need to go beyond the usual teaching activities and techniques and ask what and why questions as Bartlett (1990) has argued:

Asking "what and why" questions give us a certain power over our teaching. We could claim 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 (p. 267).

In short, reflection involves doing something, noticing, recognizing, realizing, investigating and pondering over it to improve it. In reflection teachers respond to the everyday learning situations with an aim to improve them. The above discussion shows that critical reflection of teaching helps teachers to understand their teaching in depth, and develop their professionalism. Furthermore, critical reflection on teaching deepens the knowledge of teaching and learning process since much of the learning teaching happens only through self reflection.

#### **LEVELS OF REFLECTION:**

Reflection can be done at different levels varying from simple ongoing automatic reflection to a systematic empirical research reflection. Zeichner and Liston (1996) classify reflection into five levels. The first level is rapid reflection where the reflection is immediate and automatic while teaching is going on. The second level of reflection is repair reflection, which is used to change learning or teaching behavior. The third level is somewhat less formal where the teacher discusses an issue with a colleague. The fourth level is a type of action research, which is done over a period of time focusing on specific issues and collecting data. The fifth, the last level of reflection is more abstract and more rigorous, where the practicing teachers analyze their teaching critically in terms of academic theories. Reflection is acyclic process in which first of all teachers and learners do things in the class, and then they recall them. Next, they reflect on these and analyze. After that, they draw conclusions from their reflection. Finally, they prepare future action plan. Evaluation takes place after implementing changes and continues the process again. The process of reflection may start by responding to a particular problem that has emerged in the class, or simply as a way of finding out more about teaching practice. Systematic reflection involves collecting, recording, analyzing and evaluating teachers' thoughts and classroom practices, observing teaching and learning in the classroom and using them to make changes.

#### **NEED FOR REFLECTION:**

The most troubling question that teachers face in their initial years of teaching is how to survive in the profession because it is a trying period of becoming a competent teacher. Many times the class doesn't go according to teachers' plan and wish. Additionally, some learners or a class do not like what teachers do in the class. As a result, teaching is not as exciting as teachers imagine and visualize; on the contrary, it is stressful, tiring and difficult to manage the classroom activities and move. Consequently, teachers have either to give it up or struggle to get through. To overcome this initial struggle teachers try to master the subject, be good at using techniques and approaches, to maintain classroom discipline and to understand the internal politics of the institution.

As the years pass teachers get experience and confidence because they have a bag of proved lessons that can be repeated endlessly. Consequently, they teach and teach without reading the writings on the wall of the classroom and continue unilaterally without considering the feedback that they get. A latent danger of experienced teaching is that teaching becomes less excited and less engaging though every year brings new students with challenging personalities and group dynamics. Furthermore, mere repetition of the same classroom activities makes teaching boring and stale. In other words, initial enthusiasm and excitement of teaching fade away because most of the teachers stop learning from their teaching. Here comes the difference between the teachers "with twenty years experience and those with one year's experience repeated twenty times" (Ur, 1996, p. 317). Twenty years of teaching can become only one year repeated twenty times not twenty years of learning. Mere repetition of the same behavior over many years will lead to boredom; as a result, teachers will become fossilized, which increases their defensive mechanism so that they will try to defend themselves and their action. Furthermore, they will be afraid of changes eventually. In order to avoid this fossilized automatic and routine behavior and move forward to the developed teacher, teachers have to think how they can become the best teacher and need to reflect on their teaching.

#### **PURPOSE OF REFLECTION:**

Teachers reflect on their teaching for various reasons depending on their personality, experience, beliefs on teaching and learning and their attitudes towards the teaching- learning process and the learners. For

instance, a teacher trainer reflects on their lesson as a part of their training, whereas an experienced teacher does it as a daily routine, or to solve a problem and a research teacher reflects on a particular issue to improve it by finding the reasons and solutions. According to Murphy (2001) reflection is done “(1) to find out understanding of the teaching- learning process; (2) to expand one’s repertoire of strategic options as a language teacher; and (3) to enhance the quality of learning opportunities one is able to provide in language classrooms” (p. 499-500). It is to deepen teachers’ understanding of teaching and learning behaviors and to improve teaching abilities and learning. For Gebhard and Oprandy (1999) teachers’ reflection is to understand their own teaching practices and to know different teaching situations. Although this is true, practically classroom teacher reflection takes place in order to take decision in response to students’ feedback to improve learning. In other words, reflective teaching is to explore innovative teaching methods or techniques, try an alternative and move away from daily teaching routines.

#### **WAYS OF DOING REFLECTION / TOOLS FOR REFLECTION:**

Reflection is used as one of the best tools for exploring teaching-learning process. There are several different ways of collecting information about teaching and learning process. Different tools are used for different kinds of information. Tools depend on the types of information that teachers need to gather. Reflection can be done either externally or internally.

#### **EXTERNAL REFLECTION:**

External reflection means the feedback that comes from an outsider such as a colleague or a student. External reflection can remove the subjectivity of the reflection which always clouds the issues and offer reflection objectively.

#### **PEER OBSERVATION:**

Although observation is done as a part of teacher training to assess, evaluate and identify trainees’ current level, it can be used as a tool for teacher reflection specifying the item on which the teachers receive feedback. Observations help us to open our mind. If there is a mutual trust and understanding between the teachers there will be great opportunity to learn, share and express because it can function as an outsider eye. A colleague can tell us what we cannot see and notice or what we ignore during teaching. We can invite our colleague to visit our class or we can do it as a part of peer observation. It is to be done not to judge the lesson but to describe the lesson objectively. “For purposes of reflective teaching, such visits should be planned to be different from the kind of observation carried out by supervisors’ (Murphy, 2001, p. 507). According to Scrivener (2005):

Peer observation is when a colleague comes in to watch your lesson (a part of a lesson). The aim is for both participants to learn something. You are not expecting your colleague to give you 'trainer-type' feedback, but there can probably be an exciting exchange of ideas, discussion about different ways of working, comparison of views , etc. (p. 374)

According to Fanselow (1988) peer observation is done to describe the classroom events truthfully. The observer needs to record the activities going on in the class so that they can have fruitful discussion and provide unbiased opinion. It can be reciprocal and have a collaborative and cooperative teacher learning development. At any circumstances there shouldn’t be any prescription from the observer to the teacher to follow.

Peer observation provides an outsider view on the class. Teachers cannot see their weaknesses and strengths since they are so involved in teaching. Peer observation provides opportunities for teachers to have different teaching styles and to provide opportunities for critical reflection on their own teaching. The two teachers meet as soon as the lesson is over to report the collected information and discuss it with the teacher.

If teachers don't find an observer, they can find a listener who teachers can describe their lesson to. The role of listeners is crucial because listeners should be non-judgmental, respectful and empathetic. The listeners' job is neither to criticize nor to judge; however, they are to just hear sympathetically and empathetically.

#### **USING STUDENTS' REFLECTION:**

Important teaching skill is to listen to the genuine feedback from learners about the course, teaching, their feeling and classroom activities. Communication, i.e. two way feedback from learners and vice versa will make the classroom rich and more productive. Learners' feedback is very effective and useful for teachers to have critical reflection. Murphy (2001) says that teachers can get students feedback through five minute papers, formative teacher assessment surveys and student focus groups.

#### **FIVE MINUTE PAPERS:**

Teachers get the students to write their reflection on the lesson at the end of the class on a piece of paper, where they can write what they like and dislike in the lesson, what troubles and difficulties they had, and their feeling, thoughts and opinion. When it is done, teachers should make sure that learners' identity is not revealed and their feedback is not used to evaluate or used as assessment tool, but to improve their own teaching and learners' learning. It will be better if teachers include a colleague in the process like asking them to read and comment on learners' writing (Murphy, 2001). It is time consuming and can become monotonous and dull if it is done every day. Therefore, practically it is better do it when teachers feel that their learners' reflection is useful, helpful and important for their teaching.

#### **FORMATIVE TEACHER ASSESSMENT SURVEYS:**

It is one of the most effective tools used to collect learners' reflection on a course. Murphy (2001) suggests doing formative teacher assessment surveys "three times during the span of an entire course" (504) – the first one is on the first day, and the second one sometime in the middle and the third one at the end of the course. This will give teachers a comprehensive learner reflection. The first two will influence their current teaching, whereas the third one can provide information about the future. Teachers can prepare survey sheets and either give to the students in advance mentioning the due dates for returning or give at the time of reflection.

#### **STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS:**

It is more effective than five minute papers and formative teacher assessment surveys since students' involvement in gathering information is greater. Although it is very easy to form and function, it is seldom used in teacher reflection. Murphy (2001) describes the procedure in detail. The entire class or volunteer students can be the members of the group with either the teacher or a peer teacher as the leader of the group. Although the group leader prepares the topics for the discussion, the students choose them. During the discussion the leader takes notes by listening empathetically, and he/she prepares the report. Later on the leader discusses it with the teacher.

#### **INTERNAL REFLECTION (SELF REFLECTION):**

Usually, teachers consider their lesson as either a huge success or an utter failure. They often want to forget the lesson or they may have to brood over it and regret about it. However, they are not going to help teachers any way. On the contrary, they are harmful. The alternative is to try to have a more balanced and objective view of the lesson. First of all teachers have to recall the lesson and look for the good points that could be improved since there will be something good and something that could be worked upon in any lesson and every lesson. Jim Scrivener (2005) suggests two ways to doing this: hot feedback and cold feedback. Hot feedback as the name suggest is teachers' immediate reaction and feeling about the lesson in which teachers sit down and describe some of the things that happened in



the lesson as soon as the lesson finishes. They can include even students feeling too in one or two sentences. In other words, teachers write soon after the class what they understand about their classroom teaching focusing on the classroom related events. It is very effective because memories are fresh. Cold feedback is done when teachers are clear about their lesson after an hour or two, later or may be at night or even next day. Murphy (2001) calls these retrospective field notes where teachers write down personal accounts of experiences. According to Powell (1985) it is increasingly recognized in teacher education. "Reflective teachers using this procedure save their notes over time, review them on a regular basis, and look for what their notes may reveal about recurring patterns" (Murphy, 2001, p. 506). The teachers can give it to a colleague and have a discussion. In short, it is a valuable source of collecting information as it is a document of teachers' thoughts, reactions, responds, feelings, understandings and explanations of the complex teaching learning process; therefore, it is a good idea to spend some time after the class to write down. A number of different approaches can be used.

#### **SELF REPORTS:**

Self-reporting involves completing an inventory or check list in which the teacher indicates which teaching practices were used within a lesson or within a specified time period and how often they were employed (Pak, 1985). The inventory may be completed individually or in group sessions. The accuracy of self-reports is found to increase when teachers focus on the teaching of specific skills in a particular classroom context and when the self-report instrument is carefully constructed to reflect a wide range of potential teaching practices and behaviors (Richards, 1990). Self-reporting allows teachers to make a regular assessment of what they are doing in the classroom. They can check to see to what extent their assumptions about their own teaching is reflected in their actual teaching practices. For example, a teacher could use self-reporting to find out the kinds of teaching activities being regularly used, whether all of the learning goals are being addressed, the degree to which personal goals for a class are being met, and the kinds of activities which seem to work well or not to work well.

#### **KEEP A JOURNAL:**

It is a common and very popular method among teachers to keep a journal to record what happens in the classrooms. It helps the participants to record significant learning experiences to express, in a personal and dynamic way and foster a creative interaction (Powell, 1985, Bailey, 1990). It is helpful for teachers to reflect, compare different views and re-evaluate the predictions by collecting information about teaching-learning process only after the completion of the lesson, which is done daily without learners' knowledge about it. The journal or diary writing is more widely acknowledged valuable tool for developing reflection.

#### **RECORDING LESSONS:**

Audio or video recording of lessons provides a basis for reflection because many things happen simultaneously in a classroom, and some aspects of a lesson cannot be recalled. Although dairies and self-reflection can recollect many useful insights of the complexity of the learning- teaching process, they cannot capture the moment to moment events in the class. It is impossible for an observer to observe many significant classroom events and teachers to remember everything that happened in the class; therefore, audio or video recording of actual lessons supplement dairies or peer observation. Pak (1985) recommends recording for a one or two week period and then randomly selecting an item for closer analysis.

Teachers can record their teaching on video using cameras and sophisticated mobile phones. "Recordings sometimes surprise us because they are serving as an *estrangement device*. An estrangement device is any tool we might use to gain an outsider's perspective on what we may be doing in the classroom" (Murphy, 2001, p.510). According to Freeman (1998) recording lessons enable teachers to see what they know. It can be used later to review. Moreover, more than one teacher can be involved in the discussion by collaborating with each other.

### **LEARNING BY LEARNING:**

If we want to understand others, it is better to be in their shoes. Studying a course will help us to understand our students well. “One of the best ways of reflecting upon our teaching practice is to become learners ourselves so that our view of learning – teaching process is not always influenced from one side of that relationship” (Harmer, 1998, p. 350). For example, if we start learning a language we will better understand our students’ plight of learning a language. “It can be an eye opening to find out how important our teachers’ approval is for us, how susceptible we are to teachers’ criticism, or to realize how important it is for the teacher to set us clear goals and guide us in other ways” (Harmer, 1998, p. 351).

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF REFLECTION:**

Learning teaching doesn’t stop with the training course; however, it starts after the training. Just as we start teaching, we start developing as a teacher. Scrivener (2005) has observed that “the first important steps towards becoming a better teacher involve an increased awareness about what you do now and openness to the possibility of change” (p. 376). If we don’t know what we are doing now, we can’t go forward. In order to know what we are doing now we need to analyze our action in the class room, and examine our intention, our motives or our attitudes towards learning and learners. Furthermore, we shouldn’t keep planning lessons without looking back, without recalling what has happened and even without reflecting on it. Above all, it is high time to see whether we are helping learning to happen or preventing it. Thus, we have to teach and learn not teach and teach. Scrivener (2005) calls this “learning teaching” (P. 370). As a result of reflection, teachers learn by teaching and apply their learning in teaching.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Reflection refers to the ongoing process of critically examining and refining practice, taking into careful consideration of the personal, pedagogical, societal and ethical contexts associated with teaching. Reflection is a process of facilitating the development of future action from the contemplation of past and current behavior. Teachers can do reflection both externally and internally. Colleagues and students are useful sources of external reflection if they are used properly. Colleagues can be used for peer observation and students can provide information about teaching-learning process by writing their reflection on a piece of paper at the end of the lesson, completing formative teacher assessment surveys or discussing issues in student focus groups. Teachers can do self-reflection using self reports, keeping a journal or writing a diary. Teachers can record their lessons with a camera or a Smartphone easily nowadays, which will supplement other forms of reflection. If teachers are taking course, it will indeed help them to have an effective reflection by understanding the hurdles of learners that they need to overcome in the process of learning. Reflection can be done in teachers’ preparation book or in a diary or in discussions. If we want to become more effective and useful teacher, we need to become more reflective teacher.

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