

TAKING UP THE GAUNTLET: REFLECTIVE TEACHING IN PRACTICE

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There is no teaching until the pupil is brought into the same state or principle in which you are; a transfusion takes place; he is you and you are he. Then is a teaching, and by no unfriendly chance or bad company can he ever quite lose the benefit.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Who has thrown down the gauntlet? First, there were many good teachers who influenced and challenged me on my way through the public school system, on into college. Second, there are the popular ESL teachers/thinkers whose material I have seen, heard, and read; Wilga Rivers, whose large book on foreign language teaching provided many ideas to me as a new teacher; H. Douglas Brown, whose work in motivation informed my intuition during my first period of teaching abroad, and now whose passionate interest in environmental issues has led him to speak more clearly and convincingly than ever about intrinsically motivating and relevant task-based instruction; Stephen Krashen, whose “natural approach” appealed to my mind and reinforced certain preconceptions I had as I got into teaching; Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman, whose major grammar text has been my constant companion; Caleb Gattegno, whose influence can be seen in many of the best people I have encountered in the profession, and who, along with Charles Curran, voiced some of the earliest concerns for what is now called the learner-centered curriculum; John Fanselow, with his clear message of introspection and self-awareness; Robert O'Neill, and his insistence on logically sequenced activities for language learning; and, in the 1990 JALT opening plenary, David Nunan, who expressed his preference for teachers being “lost in thought rather than missing in action”.

In first considering how to phrase this paper, I wrote down several questions, some of which I later forgot and others which I eventually came back to. What is reflective teaching? (What is/isn't teaching? What is/isn't reflective?) Which should

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be the objects of reflection? (for students? for teachers?) How does one object of reflection give way to another in the learning process? (sequencing as a correlate of reflection) What is the value of spiraling reflection which returns to previously pondered objects? What are the key ingredients of the reflective teaching/learning approach?

When I was in Tokyo this past September, saying farewell to an English teacher who was returning to the U.S.A., I mentioned that I was going to be giving this paper, on reflective teaching. He suggested that I start by giving illustrations of non-reflective teaching in order to arrive closer to an understanding of what reflective teaching itself might be. I am going to take his advice, and begin by considering a few non-examples of the reflective teaching/learning concept.

Please imagine the following scene. You are in the teachers lounge during a reprieve, that is, a break, between classes. The door to the lounge is shut, implying that interruptions are not welcome from rambunctious students with nothing better to do than pester their teachers with requests for clarification phrased in broken English. The lounge is a fortress, a bower of bliss, a moment of tranquil cigarette smoking or coffee swigging in the midst of a three-hour teaching shift.

Inside the fort, teachers are busy helping each other rationalize over the general lack of enthusiasm among their students. There is a dull monotony in their voices as they speak, between slurps of coffee and puffs of smoke.

"Did you have what's-his-name last semester? He's really out of it. I think he must be staying out late at night, or maybe he has a part-time job. He just does not seem to really want to learn."

"Oh, yeah, you mean the guy with long, dirty hair and the pimples all over his face. He gives me the creeps, I couldn't get him to pay attention at all in my class. Then, finally, he stopped coming. I thought maybe he had dropped out. I gave him an F. He's not going to learn anything until he changes that lazy attitude of his. I think he's hopeless. The administration should be counseling him out of this program because he will never be able to handle academic work."

The first teacher rolls her eyes and nods her head in grave agreement. "Well, what are we supposed to do when they let students like that into this school? Why, I remember at another place I worked, there was a strict entrance policy and the teacher's authority was never questioned. It was easy to teach in that school, and the students were ideal. Here, with all the excuses the administration accepts from students, and the way the grades we give don't really make any difference, it is no

wonder that so many of our students are sleeping in class. I heard that in someone's class a student even brought a sleeping bag. At least the situation is not that bad in my room."

Another teacher, silent up to that moment, looks at his watch, blows out a puff of smoke slowly and calmly, and says, "Well, it's about that time again. Time to continue jousting with windmills. At least, we can take heart in the fact that it's not our fault. Let's just try to survive another day. We cannot change the passive educational system in Japan, especially at the college level. By this time, the students have already become too hardened to accept our attempts to teach them anything new. It's all just a hopeless waste of time, but at least we get paid for it." The others laugh self-consciously as they gather up books and papers, and head out the door, into the harsh reality of the hallway and their classrooms.

Now let's follow one of these individuals into the classroom. The class we enter is a buzz with excitement. Students are chattering away, laughing, and enjoying themselves thoroughly. There seems to be no problem with enthusiasm here. But look again. We got here before the teacher. The students are still on break. They are speaking to each other in *nihongo*. Now suddenly the teacher enters the room, slamming the door shut behind him. "O.K., you guys. Let's get to work!"

Students scatter to their respective seats, and take out books, paper, and pencils. The teacher confidently strides up to the front of the room, spins around, and inquires, "Did you do your homework?" The students recognize this sound pattern, and exhibit their normal responses: slight gestures of surprise, then busily rifling through their books and papers, desperately searching for something which might look similar enough to whatever was assigned for them to hand it in as if it were the homework. A few papers trickle up to the front of the class, and the teacher holds them up in the air for a while, before slamming them down and raising his voice, "What is wrong with you guys? Don't you want to learn? What do you do at home? If you cannot finish your assignments, how do you expect to succeed in life? I know these exercises are boring, but that is part of the learning process. Not everything can be fun. Don't you realize that yet? Life is a serious matter."

He stops his tirade for a second, takes a deep breath, and delivers the *coup de grace*: "O.K., you asked for it. I'm going to give you another tough quiz to prove to you that you need to do your homework. This quiz will be counted as 10% of your final grade and, after the quiz, we will have silent reading as punishment. I hope you finally realize one day the importance of what we are doing in here." The students

stare blankly back at him, the few who have comprehended the gist of his message glaring coldly towards the teacher's averted eyes.

What do these non-examples have in common that discourages us from categorizing them as reflective? There is an assumption throughout that the teacher's actions are beyond scrutiny. Teachers in these situations consider themselves and their motives to be "professional" in the vacuous sense of the word, i.e., degree-holder, special knowledge-possessor, and salary-receiver. This concept of ourselves as professionals in this sense of the word is a widespread phenomenon, particularly where there are strong markets for English learning. On a regular basis, in the press and in our journals, professional English teachers bemoan the fact that there is no strict policing of the profession, no licensing bureau, no concrete standards, and so we are forced to compete with few real advantages against rookies, novices, untrained English speakers who are obviously only in it for the money, not for higher purposes like the rest of us.

One danger in this attitude is the tendency for such professionals to become lax in their actual behavior: instead of coming up with interesting ideas to engage the attention of their students, they depend on textbooks, popular methodology, or anything else prepared by someone equally as or even more professional than they are, creating a vacuum of highly stylized yet irrelevant instruction, perpetuated through constant checking against the established store of educational concepts, which of course in most cases reinforce the teacher's sense of appropriateness and respectability, thereby justifying lesson plans and activities which lack spirit and promote conformity. When students resist this instruction, the unreflective teaching professional naturally assumes that some behavioral characteristic intrinsic to each student or to the group as a whole is causing them to fail to grasp the obvious importance of the lesson at hand.

In any group situation, there is going to be a negotiated agenda or set of guiding principles: What is the purpose of getting together on a regular basis? What are the necessary channels of communication? Who is responsible for doing what? What are the consequences of being irresponsible? How will the results be evaluated? To what extent is individual satisfaction important to the smooth functioning of the group? How will the members of the group know when a project is completed? Will the group continue to exist beyond the completion of the project? What is the procedure for joining and leaving the group, temporarily or permanently? Since every teaching situation involves a group, there is a strong implication that concerns such as these of group dynamics must be addressed in curriculum design.

In approaching the task of teaching English or another language to a group of

people, then, being reflective will entail preparing a tentative set of answers to these key questions of group dynamics, taking into account prior teaching experiences, knowledge of current theory, the availability of information on student needs and interests, and awareness of institutional guidelines for a given course. Furthermore, this tentative set, or teaching agenda, must be flexible if it is eventually supposed to reflect the interests of not only the teacher and the institution, but also the learners themselves, at the beginning and at various stages in their development during the course. Reflective teaching, then, does not necessarily mean being "lost in thought" so much as being tolerant and flexible enough to adjust the teaching agenda in response to ones perceptions of learner interests, needs, and capabilities. The extent to which a teacher goes in analyzing the relevance of what is happening in class, and updating the main principles or agenda, demonstrates the degree of reflection involved in his or her teaching.

Let's take a closer look at some different ways in which these matters of classroom agenda can be handled. First, what is the purpose of getting together on a regular basis? This appears at face value to be a rather straightforward question. Most people who end up in such groups do so for specific purposes, and these various goals converge or overlap enough to bring the group together for a guaranteed length of time on a regular basis. But this initial purpose for establishing a class is extremely general and vague, and the reflective teacher is one who insists on creating a clearer, more concrete, more intrinsically justified rationale for regular class meetings. The extent to which students are aware of this sense of purpose, and have contributed to it themselves through communication with the teacher, will have a profound effect on their learning behaviors and general orientation towards class projects.

How can a teacher establish good communication and rapport with students, so that the general purpose of the class can be understood in greater detail and the learning agenda can be negotiated effectively? What are the best channels of communication? One idea which has been implemented with positive results is the use of native language diaries, in which students report on their in class and outside activities related to English language learning, such as listening to English programs on the radio, watching a video, reading, or doing an assignment (Imamura, 1991). Of course, this channel of communication is only an option when a speaker of the students' native language is available for the interpretation of their reflections on their learning experiences, for example in team-teaching situations where Japanese English teachers work in tandem with native English speakers. These diaries seem to provide a direct view of student attitudes regarding different kinds of activities and the quality of their

classroom experiences; if this kind of assignment is feasible in an institution, it perhaps deserves serious consideration.

Other ways of establishing lines of communication within the group are also possible. For example, using a desktop publishing program on a computer, and a printer and xerox machine, students can be helped to put together their own class newspaper, filled with whatever they want to write in English. Although the main purpose of this activity is to set up a forum for student expression, there are many side-benefits, such as the experience it gives them with leadership, responsibility, and organizing, composing, keyboarding, and editing skills.

Another way to establish a line of communication is to simply survey the class, asking them to provide the guiding principles or learning agenda themselves. Even in a seemingly low-level, unmotivated group, such as the ones who are pooled together as failures, troublemakers, and misfits, if a survey is done early enough in the term, the class experience can be much better than expected. Here are the suggestions from one such group.

1. The teacher must not discriminate on the basis of ability.
2. The students should not speak Japanese.
3. The students have to talk all the time.
4. If students don't understand, they can ask the teacher for help.
5. The teacher must be bright.
6. The students must be polite to the teacher.
7. The teacher should tell one joke each day.
8. The teacher should not become nervous.
9. The students should not be absent from class.
10. The teacher can refuse to work if the students are not polite.
11. The students can refuse to work if the teacher is not active in class.
12. The teacher cannot control the students' minds.
13. The students cannot sleep in the class.
14. The students must speak English whenever they can.
15. The teacher must answer all questions completely.
16. The teacher must give homework, but it should be just a little.
17. The teacher must make an enjoyable class.
18. The teacher should be friendly towards the students all the time.
19. The teacher can hold class outdoors several times.

20. The students should have their own purposes for studying.
21. The teacher shouldn't be like a machine.
22. The students shouldn't give up.
23. The students should have communication with the teacher.

I have compared this list with Earl Stevick's nine conclusions in his book, *Humanism in Language Teaching*, and have found that all the principles suggested by these students fit nicely into eight of Stevick's conclusions.

1. Kindness is more effective than coercion.
 2. Firmness is more effective than permissiveness.
 3. When students feel good about the course and about themselves, they will learn better than when they do not.
 4. Any method that does not require serious and occasionally onerous effort from, learners will be ineffective.
 5. Within us (or within our grasp) we have undreamed of possibilities.
 6. Concentrated, intuitive introspection, together with courage and patience, will make possible unlimited growth in constructive and socially desirable directions.
 7. Skilled and sensitive understanding of another person can release that other person's whole self so that it can deal adequately with whatever needs to be dealt with, whether cognitive or otherwise.
 8. Rational, critical inquiry can deal adequately with everything that really needs to be dealt with.
- (Stevick, p. 143)

However, I can find no support in the student-generated agenda or in my own experience for Stevick's ninth conclusion: "A model of teaching (or thinking) which makes full use of one's own personal strengths is superior to models which demand strengths of other kinds, and the corollary (a model which demands strength in an area where one is weak is misguided)" (Stevick, p. 143). I believe this notion should be resisted consciously and continually by any teacher who hopes to develop and expand his or her ability to deal with new challenges. If we keep in mind the concept of a class as a group, and the teacher as facilitator, member, and also as another active learner in that group, it is impossible to employ a strategy of avoiding areas of weakness. Stevick's ninth conclusion is, in my opinion, an invitation to continued

rationalization among teaching professionals regarding the outcomes of their interventions in the learning experiences of their students. Perhaps, instead, his fourth principle should be restated as: Any method that does not require serious and occasionally onerous effort from *teachers and* learners will be ineffective. The ongoing consideration of group dynamics in language teaching will be difficult and discouraging at times, but there is no other choice for the reflective teacher, in his or her attempt to serve the needs of learners. This is the challenge in teaching today.

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