

Does Writing Promote Reflective Practice?

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Abstract Reflective practice is now a major component of most language teacher education and development programs worldwide. One other popular method that has been suggested as to how English language teachers could reflect on their work is by writing regularly in a teaching journal. This chapter asks a very important question about reflecting on practice: does writing promote reflective practice? I use a case study as a backdrop for discussing the use of teaching journals of how three EFL teachers in Korea met for 16 weeks to reflect on their work. This reflection included the use of regular journal writing. This chapter focuses on the contents of the teaching journals, the extent to which journal writing promoted reflection and the reasons why some teachers may not like writing a journal as a tool for reflection. Thus, the chapter offers suggestions, and some cautions, for language teachers, especially for non-native speaker ESL/EFL teachers, when using writing as a form of reflective practice.

Keywords Reflective practice • Journal writing • EFL teachers • Teacher beliefs • Teacher cognition

1 Introduction

Reflective practice is now a major component of most language teacher education and development programs worldwide (Farrell 2007, 2015). It occurs when teachers consciously take on the role of reflective practitioner and subject their own beliefs about teaching and learning to critical analysis, take full responsibility for their actions in the classroom, and continue to improve their teaching practice (Farrell 2007, 2015). The use of reflective practice in teacher professional development is based on the belief that teachers can improve their own teaching by consciously and systematically reflecting on their teaching experiences. For example, teachers can self-reflect by recording their classes on audio and/or video; they can have a

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colleague or colleagues observe them and provide some feedback; they can discuss their teaching with a critical friend or a group of teachers; or they can use a combination of all of these (Farrell 2015). One other popular method that has been suggested as to how English language teachers could reflect on their work is by writing regularly in a teaching journal writing (Farrell 2007, 2013). This chapter asks a very important question about reflecting on practice: does writing promote reflective practice? I use a case study as a backdrop for discussing the use of teaching journals of how three EFL teachers in Korea—I was the fourth member of the group and acted in the capacity of critical friend to all the group members (explained below)—met for 16 weeks to reflect on their work. This reflection included the use of regular journal writing. This chapter focuses on the contents of the teaching journals, the extent to which journal writing promoted reflection and the reasons why some teachers may not like writing a journal as a tool for reflection. Thus, the chapter offers suggestions, and some cautions, for language teachers, especially for non-native speaker ESL/EFL teachers, when using writing as a form of reflective practice. Thus the main purpose and focus of this chapter is to explore the impact of such a reflective mode (ie. regular reflective journal writing) as a reflective tool for experienced EFL teachers.

2 What Is Reflective Practice?

Some teachers may wonder why they should reflect on practice and ask what reflecting on practice really mean. Teachers may ask such questions because most think that they already reflect on what they do each day. Yes, they do think about what they do but how do they know that these thoughts are a true reflection of what actually occurred in their lessons? In other words, what teachers think they do, and what they actually do is not always the same as perceptions and reality are not always the same. For example, if a teacher *thinks* his or her class has gone well or not so well, how do they really know? Do teachers look at their students' facial expressions and if they are smiling, then they perceive that the class has gone well; if they are frowning, then the class has not gone so well. This type of thinking is not real reflection as the teacher has no real evidence either way that the class has gone well or not. So one way to better investigate this issue would be to ask the students what they think about the class. In addition, teachers can record their lesson on audio and/or video so that they have retrievable data to use again when examining aspects of their lessons because our memory of events can be very selective. Yes, all teachers think about their practice before, during and even after class while on the way home but such thoughts may not be very productive in terms of providing optimum opportunities for our students to learn.

The main point here is that reflective practice involves collecting evidence about our practice so that we can make informed decisions about such practices (Farrell 2015). Teachers have many means of collecting such evidence about their practice

such as surveys, questionnaires, classroom observations with or without peers, discussions with other teachers in teacher groups face-to-face and/or using technology (e.g., blogs, forums and/or chats) so that they can better inform themselves about their and others' practices. Although there are many different modes of reflection to choose from as indicated above, reflective writing (usually in a teaching journal or diary) seems to have become a popular form of reflection (Mann and Walsh 2013) for many in the field of TESOL. Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 68) describe a teaching diary or journal as "an ongoing written account of observations, reflections, and other thoughts about teaching, usually in the form of a notebook, book, or electronic mode, which serves as a source of discussion, reflection, or evaluation." Bailey (1990) suggests that when language teachers write about various facets of their work over a period of time, and then read over their entries looking for patterns, they may discover aspects of their teaching that they had not realized before writing the journal.

3 Teaching Journals

A teaching journal is a place where a teacher writes regularly about his or her teaching experiences. Reflective journal writing can give teachers time to think about their work, for as Holly (1989) suggests, "long enough to reflect on it and to begin to understand and direct" (p. 78). For example, teaching journals can act as a way to explore the origins and implication of a teacher's beliefs about language teaching (and learning) and as a way of documenting a teacher's classroom practices. Teachers can then compare their stated (written) beliefs with their recorded (as written in their teaching journals) classroom practices in order to monitor for any inconsistencies. Bailey (1990) suggests that a teaching journal can be a place for teachers "to experiment, criticize, doubt, express frustration, and raise questions" (p. 218). McDonough (1994) maintains that teachers who write regularly about their teaching can become more aware of "day-to-day behaviors and underlying attitudes, alongside outcomes and the decisions that all teachers need to take" (pp. 64–65). Jarvis (1996) analyzed the content of journals written by teachers in an INSET course that were intended to promote reflection and found that they benefited teachers in the following ways: as a problem-solving device, for seeing new teaching ideas, and as a means of legitimizing their own practice. So if writing a teaching journal, has a positive outcome in the developmental process for beginning language teachers (Hyatt and Beigy 1999) and for teachers in an in-service training course (Jarvis 1996; Shin 2003), I wondered what issues experienced language teachers, especially EFL teachers, would write about and also what type of reflection is promoted when experienced language teachers write a teaching journal for their own professional development.

4 The Study

The study took place in Seoul, South Korea. Three EFL teachers met weekly to reflect on their work in a self-initiated teacher reflection group. The process included meeting weekly for one semester, and writing regular journal entries about their work. All the participants in the study were experienced EFL teachers in Korea. The two female Asian teachers (T1 & T3) had 5 years of teaching experience. In addition, T1 had a Master of Arts degree in Translation Studies, and T3 had a Master of Science degree in Education with a specialization in English teaching. T2 was a male Caucasian teacher and had a certificate in TESOL. Both of the Asian teachers seemed fluent in English. T1 was teaching part-time at a university in Seoul. T2 was teaching an English class at a private company in Seoul. T3 was teaching full-time at a university in Seoul. This author was the fourth member of the group and acted as a critical friend to each member and as an overall group facilitator. By critical friend, I mean a trusted listener who can act as a sounding board (Stenhouse 1975) as I facilitated the teachers' reflections in the group. My gain in the process would be to learn more about how to promote reflective practice with experienced EFL language teachers. Therefore, I report and write about the other three participants' reflections and my own reflections as a researcher.

5 Procedures

Initially, all three teachers agreed that each participant would keep an ongoing journal account of their experiences during the period of their group's existence. They agreed at the beginning that they could write about anything, whenever they wanted, but they also agreed to write at least one entry after an 'event' was experienced; an 'event' was to include a class observation and/or discussion, and a group meeting. The teachers gave me access to all their journal entries. All the journals were coded and the following five general categories or themes emerged. Category one includes theories of teaching; category two includes approaches and methods used in the teachers' classes; category three includes evaluating teaching; category four concerns teachers' self-awareness of their teaching; and category five includes questions about teaching and asking for advice.

6 Findings

Table 1 outlines the categories of topics that the teachers wrote about in their journals.

Generally, the evidence presented in Table 1 suggests that the most frequent topic the teachers (T1, T2, and T3) wrote about in their journals focused on their

Table 1 Topics the teachers wrote about in their journals

Topic	Number			Number	Teachers		
Category	Sub-category		[Total]	[Average]	T1	T2	T3
Theories of teaching	Theory	37	39	12.3	8	27*	2
	Application	2		0.6	0	2*	0
Approaches and methods	Methods	19	56	6.3	6	11*	2
	Content	15		5.0	5	8*	2
	Teacher’s Knowledge	11		3.6	5*	3	3
	Learners	6		2.0	2	2	2
	School context	5		1.6	3*	1	1
	Evaluating teaching	Evaluating		15	49	5.0	8*
Problems	27	9.0	20*	6			
Solutions	7	2.3	4*	3*		0	
Self-awareness	Perception of self as						
	Teacher	10	15	3.3	6*	3	1
	Personal growth	2		0.6	1*	1*	0
	Personal goals	3		1.0	2*	0	1
Questions on teaching	Asking for reasons	1		5	0.6	0	1*
Asking for advice	4	1.3	1		3*	0	

Asterisk (*) indicates number of comments greater than the average

approaches and methods to teaching, followed by *evaluating their teaching* and then their *theories of teaching*. However, an inspection of each teacher’s individual journal entries showed a different choice of topic that reflected that teacher’s personal interests. I now present details and examples of the topics each teacher wrote about.

6.1 T1’s Written Reflections

T1, out of a total of 22 entries, was most concerned with evaluating her teaching rather than any other aspect of her work. She frequently cited problems, both personal and teaching-related, which influenced her teaching. For instance, she wrote about a personal problem in her journal: “I have not been feeling well these days and today I have a weak fever and dizziness. That means I did not fully prepare for the class. That made me a little upset.” Later on during the semester this bad feeling would get worse: “October is a cruel month. I have lost appetite for teaching;” and, “Today I hardly could concentrate on the class. These days everything went wrong. I have too many things to handle right now. I experienced blackout in my mind...I felt as if I were a basket case.”

T1 also reflected on the events that gave rise to difficulties in her teaching and tried to generate her own solutions. One such difficulty she had concerned the issue of how and when to correct her students’ language errors. In an early journal entry,

September tenth, she addressed this issue when she was considering how to correct a pronunciation class:

One of my weakest points is voiced sounds like [z] in zoo or museum. But I'm not an English native speaker, too. My English is not perfect. I always feel sorry about that to my students. Nevertheless, I try to correct their pronunciation but the result is not good. I know it takes some time and requires a lot of practice. Besides, I'm afraid my too often correction will make them silent and cause negative effect. So I refrain from correction too often. This is my dilemma.

A later entry notes that while she had not solved her dilemma, she had become more comfortable with it. She was teaching a speech class in which one student would lead the class in a discussion of a topic. She wrote about her method of correction:

In fact, I meant to comment on his grammatical problems but I changed my mind. Because I, as teacher, made many mistakes, too. I felt whenever I opened my mouth I was making a mistake. Nevertheless our communication worked. Isn't that our aim to learn a language? Besides, I don't want to dampen cold water on his enthusiasm to practice English.

T1 also wrote a lot about her teaching procedures, which suggested that her experience is mostly from the classroom and previous experiences as a student. This seems to be consistent with her autobiographical interview results, in which she mentioned that she has no TESOL qualifications and only entered EFL teaching at her professor's strong suggestion.

6.2 T2's Written Reflections

In contrast, T2, the most prolific of the three writers with 28 entries, focused almost exclusively on reflecting on his theories of teaching, both his own and those of some expert opinions he said he read about. For example, he wrote about the topic of how he as a teacher made decisions in class:

We must extend the wait time before we make a decision as long as we can stand the uncertainty, as we extend it waiting for a student response. The teacher as passive, I wonder? I'm not talking here about action. When we know what to do, we should do it straight away. But when we don't know what to do we should wait and savor the uncertainty. This is what makes teaching a buzz anyway, the uncertainty. This is what Lortie was writing about in his book *The Schoolteacher*, which I'm reading now.

He wondered about the place of training for language teachers too in that he saw little place for special training of teachers in language instruction; he wrote:

The classroom is not the best place to learn a language because the teachers cop out as a result of the emotional demands and the intellectual demands placed on them. Learning from a partner in a familiar relationship who is prepared to talk about, answer questions about language is better. This partner does not require any special training. Special training cannot really help this person teach better. But in the classroom the intellectual and emotional stress can prevent the teacher acting as a partner would.

T2 reflected in his journal writing that he was not concerned with the application of specific theories to classroom practice. Also, his entries revealed that his knowledge of teaching came mostly from classroom practice and experience, and not specific training as an EFL teacher. In fact, his personal beliefs about teaching seem to override any theoretical reference. For example, he wrote: “I want to make the students more active in class even if I have to embarrass them.” On occasion, though he wrote that he asks for advice and suggestions about his teaching from other teachers, and he also wrote about his classroom procedures.

6.3 T3’s Written Reflections

T3 was the least active in her journal writing with only six entries during the whole period of reflection. She wrote exclusively about her classroom procedures and her worries about reflecting on her practice. In fact, she was somewhat ambivalent about exploring her teaching from the very beginning of the project, but she did not drop out although she knew she could at any time. For example, in her first journal entry she wrote: “What do I think about my teaching method? Do the students learn something from my teaching? I don’t want to answer these questions. Actually I don’t know.” In her next journal entry 1 month later, she wrote that she may not be happy using journal writing as a means of reflecting on her teaching; she remarked: “I’m happy when we (our group) talk about our classes, even though I am sometimes wondering whether I’m heading for the right direction to find myself as a teacher. I’m also afraid of knowing myself in some ways.” It is quite possible that writing in English may have been a burden for her, and as such, maybe it would have been better if she had written in her native language, Korean. Additionally, she could have recorded her entries if English and time were her main problems. Although she never stated that English was problematic for her writing, she did mention in one group meeting that it was time consuming to sit and think about what to write. In fact, because T3’s journal entries were so few and short, I began to wonder if her unease with journal writing was related to the writing process or the reflective process or both. I now expand on this issue of writing a journal as reflective practice using T3’s experiences with this reflective group as a backdrop.

It seems that all the teachers realized that although writing about their teaching may have been tedious at times it also allowed them to ‘step back’ for a moment that they would not normally have been able to do in the busy day-to-day teaching. T2 seemed especially interested in continued writing and in an almost ‘stream of consciousness’ fashion where he was writing to himself. T1, although reluctant at first to write, soon realized that by writing her thoughts she was able to ‘see’ them and they became real for her to consider and reflect on how complex teaching really is. In fact, she then became so comfortable writing about various dilemmas she encountered that she was able to solve some of them through writing about them. It was only T3 who did not seem to take to writing as a reflective mode of professional development, and this could have been a simple fear of making mistakes in English

or as complex as a real fear to reflect on her practice regardless of the mode of reflection. I will address the real issue of some teachers feeling unease when it comes to writing in any language about their practice.

7 Reflecting and Writing a Teaching Journal: Unease?

In a survey of 32 teachers evaluations of their experiences of writing a teaching journal, Ho and Richards (1993) discovered, that although most of the teachers found the writing process useful as a reflective tool, some did not enjoy the writing process at all. They suggested that the most common reasons for not liking writing or not wanting to write a teaching journal was that it was time consuming, it became tedious after some time, and more importantly, some teachers just did not enjoy writing for any reason but especially as a form of reflection. It is this latter point that I was interested in pursuing with regards to the findings of the case study outlined in this chapter that indicated T3 did not enjoy writing a teaching journal. So, I revisited the transcripts of the group meetings, and any transcribed individual meetings I had with T3 to look for instances where T3 commented on her reflections and writing a teaching journal (Farrell 1998).

Two striking and related patterns emerged from my revisit to the transcripts: the first was T3's reluctance (and fear) to reflect in general and the second was her fear about using teaching journals as a means of reflection. Regarding her reluctance and unease with reflection, this was present as early as the second group meeting when T3 commented about having to reveal details about her classes to the other participants in the group; T3 stated: "Nobody can get into my class. I know what is going on, so I and we can check ourselves." Also, in a discussion I had with T3 when we were just getting the details of the reflective cycle for the group under way (week 3 of the reflective process), she said that she was very uncomfortable "thinking" about her teaching; she said, "I hate looking at myself while I'm teaching." Later, in a group meeting when the other participants were exchanging information and views about what they were doing in their classes, and sharing their teaching journals (usually orally at the start of each meeting, although sometimes participants exchanged journals), T3 said that she was not comfortable talking about her teaching and in fact, did not bring her teaching journal from that point onwards. She commented:

I know one way of teaching. I want to talk about teaching in the group but I think that [talking about our teaching] together in a group and talking about specific aspects of teaching are dangerous because the group can be judgmental.

After this meeting, and at most of the group meetings from then, T3 rarely commented on her teaching techniques or methods, focusing almost exclusively on her teaching context, and problems associated with this context. From my perspective as a critical friend, it seems that T3 had exhibited a pattern of avoidance to reflect on teaching early on in the reflective process, and this was exacerbated by a

requirement (made by the group in the first meeting) that she would have to write a journal about her reflections that would be read by other group participants. Thus, for T3, having to write a journal may have heightened the already increasing levels of unease she was experiencing about her work. For example, she said she stopped writing in her journal after a few weeks because she did not want the other participants to judge her teaching; she reflected:

I don't want to go inside of that specific matter [writing about her teaching in detail]...I mean everybody got a different point of view, so how can I judge other peoples' opinion. We have a different point of view...about teaching, we disagree with each other, right?

Additionally, at the last group meeting T3 said that for her, writing was painful “because writing gave me stress.” She noted that she felt the stress each week while reflecting because the other two teachers always wrote something and she said: “I always felt that I had to write something down even if I didn't have anything to write about.” She then noted that she did not like writing as reflection but did not elaborate fully. Of course, having to write in a second language may also have been a contributing factor to increase her stress levels of writing and reflecting, although she did not mention this to me or others in the group.

So while writing a teaching journal may facilitate the reflective process for the majority of language teachers, for some other teachers (granted, a minority) writing a reflective journal may lead to increased levels of anxiety that may be associated with reflecting in general and with the act of writing itself. For example, in the case study reported in this chapter writing a teaching journal required that all three teachers spend a lot of time for this type of self-analysis. One can also speculate that for the two non-English speaking native teachers (T1 and T3) who had to write in a second language, this writing process was even longer. These two teachers not only had to write reflectively about their teaching, they also had to deliberate over what they have written; they had to consider their word choice, grammar and organization. Be that as it may, for many language teachers journal writing enhances their level of awareness about their teaching and about how their students learn (Farrell 2013). The following section gives language teachers ideas about how to get started with their teaching journals and when started, how to continue writing so that they can begin to analyze the assumptions, values, and beliefs that influence their practice over time.

8 Using Teaching Journals Effectively

It is always difficult to start writing a teaching journal because there are so many topics that language teachers can choose to focus on from micro type topics such as: *group work in class, giving of instructions, the use of questions, giving feedback/correction of errors*, to more macro concerns such as: *lesson planning, textbook selection, curriculum development, administration influences*. Both micro and macro lists of issues that concern teachers are endless, and teachers can and

should reflect on both equally (Farrell 2015). With that in mind, I suggest that teachers start reflecting through journal writing by starting on a general topic first rather than jumping into their teaching with too critical a view. I have found over the years that language teachers can be their own worst critics and for the most part only focus on the negative and completely forget what they do well and what goes well in their classrooms. So it may be more beneficial just to begin a teaching journal and make regular entries whenever possible. Teachers can decide if they want to write this (word processing, with a pen on paper), or if they want to record their journal entry with an audio recorder. After some time, teachers can look for any patterns they see emerge in the entries and then focus on that finding for a period of time either by engaging in an action research project that critically explores whatever theme or pattern that has emerged.

Alternatively, some teachers may already have issues that they consider important to them and they explore these issues by writing about them in their journal. However, sometimes these issues may remain at the tacit level of reflection and I have found that attempting to answer the following question useful in raising the tacit reflections to the level of conscious awareness: *reflect on a recent teaching practice or experience in the classroom, positive or negative, that caused you to stop and think about your teaching.* In attempting to answer such a question, language teachers must reflect (through journal writing) on their assumptions and beliefs about the experience they have recalled, thus becoming more critical reflective practitioners. Additionally, I suggest that teachers continue to write about the focused topic for at least a month while reviewing their entries each week. At the end of the month, it may be a good idea to write a summary of some of the important events that arose and what has been learned as a result of the reflection process.

Additionally, teachers should consider whether they want to share their journals with other teachers or keep it private. Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest that teachers should decide on who their audience will be as this may change the way they write and the amount they are willing to reveal. If teachers have written a journal to share with their peers, they should decide on what text they want their peer(s) to read; teachers can block text by stapling pages together that they do not want to be made public, or they can write a different version (a summary perhaps) for others to read. For example, in the case study outlined in this chapter, T3 could have omitted the entries she did not want the other participants to read, thus continuing her writing, rather than stopping altogether in fear of revealing her reflections.

One further important issue associated with journal writing that teachers should be aware of is that starting a teaching journal may not be enough for critical reflection as there is a real danger that it can fizzle out if there is no real purpose to the writing. In other words, language teachers should engage in systematic reflections when using teaching journals as a means for that reflection. For example, Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest that teachers should first set attainable goals for their writing, the most important one being why they want to write the teaching journal. For example, are they going to focus on a specific problem in their teaching or are they going to write generally and look for patterns in their teaching over time, such as every month. Additionally, teachers should make sure they have enough time

(when to write the journal and the number of entries to write). Richards and Farrell (2005) also suggest that teachers review their journal content regularly in order to learn from it and to see if they have achieved what they had intended when they had started their journal writing.

9 Conclusion

The idea of reflection encompassed in this chapter goes beyond the fleeting thought after class. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, there are many different modes of reflection that teachers can choose from such as classroom observations, discussions with other teachers (with or without technology), reading and of course writing, which was the main focus of this chapter. Because reflective writing has gained much attention in the recent literature I was interested in exploring if this reflective mode promoted reflection and was useful for language teachers. The results of the case study presented in this chapter seem to support writing as an effective mode of reflection for the majority of language teachers and it was the very process of writing itself that seemed to help the teachers gain more insight into their practice (Farrell 2013). The writing process has a built in reflective mechanism where teachers must (a) stop and think about what they write and then (b) can ‘see’ what they have written and further reflect on their thoughts and look for patterns that can provide more insight into who they are as teachers and what they reflect on. For many teachers then writing can be seen as a valuable way to reflect and it has an added advantage in that it can be done alone, or it can be shared with other teachers; if teachers share their reflection, they can attain different perspectives about their work.

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