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## Book Reviews

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### **Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice**

*Thomas S.C. Farrell*

London: Continuum, 2007, 202 pages

Reviewed by: *Caroline Payant and Joseph J. Lee*

Recently it has become evident that teachers are multifaceted professionals who do not merely reproduce officially sanctioned practices, but actively think about and reflect on their own practices. Based on this reconceptualized view of teaching as a thinking activity, reflective practice has become an important dimension of language teacher education programs.

Continuing in this line of thinking, *Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice* makes an invaluable contribution to promoting reflective practice among language teachers by raising their self-awareness so that they can make informed pedagogical decisions.

The introductory chapter traces the origins of reflective teaching and discusses its inclusion in teacher education programs. Although Farrell acknowledges the existence of concurrent definitions of reflective language teaching, he promotes the adoption of the strong version of reflective teaching, which emphasizes a bottom-up approach to systematic reflective practice. He explains how teachers' practices become the source of the very knowledge that will inform their grounded theory of teaching. Following the introductory chapter, each subsequent chapter includes recurring structures or sections that teachers will appreciate. Each chapter begins with a summary of current empirical findings about the focal topic, including a bullet section highlighting research findings for busy teachers. Findings are then supported by case studies stemming from Farrell's 15 years of research in this area. This is followed by a series of reflective questions designed to invite readers to begin making connections with their own personal experiences. Next, practical ideas and reflective prompts are provided to help teachers imagine how to incorporate new knowledge into their existing practices. Each chapter concludes with a brief summary and an end-of-chapter scenario that together exemplify the benefits and/or challenges of the topic.

Due to the breadth of topics for reflection and reflective tools covered in this book, we provide here only an outline of the range of issues explored. After the introductory chapter, the next six chapters illustrate how teachers can reflect on various dimensions of their work, including self-reflection (Chapter 2), teachers' beliefs and practices (Chapter 3), teachers' narratives (Chapter 4), teachers' language proficiency (Chapter 5), teachers' metaphors

and maxims (Chapter 6), and classroom communication (Chapter 7). Readers will benefit from the inclusion of these topics, which provide them with compelling starting points for their personal reflective journeys.

The following six chapters present a variety of reflective tools: action research (Chapter 8), teaching journals (Chapter 9), teacher development groups (Chapter 10), critical friendships (Chapter 11), and concept mapping (Chapter 13). Although experienced teachers may already be familiar with some of these tools, Farrell presents interesting ways of using them individually, and more importantly, in collaboration. According to Farrell, the creation of small, trusting, collaborative, reflective communities may help busy teachers persist steadily in their reflective practices. Chapter 14 concludes the book with an attempt to interlink earlier chapters by illustrating a framework for reflective language teaching and by emphasizing the need for ongoing professional development through reflective practice.

Although the book does an admirable job in offering language teachers various avenues for stimulating professional growth, it is not without some limitations. According to Farrell, the book is intended to reach a wide audience including preservice, novice, and experienced teachers, teacher educators, and program administrators. The underlying theme is promotion of systematic reflection, but some individuals' needs may not always be met. Some readers, particularly preservice teachers with limited classroom experience, might find certain topics/reflective prompts less meaningful at this point in their careers. Similarly, program administrators may benefit from the chapters on workshop development, but not necessarily from the practical classroom-based ideas. The group that may benefit the most from this resource is experienced teachers, as many of the reflective exercises require teachers to make connections to earlier teaching experiences.

In addition, the contents of some chapters tend either to overlap or to provide brief coverage of an extensive topic. For example, Farrell dedicates two chapters to the benefits of self-reflection (Chapter 2) and of teacher narratives (Chapter 4). According to him, self-reflection can make personal beliefs explicit through the exploration of personal trajectories and critical incidents, whereas narratives are described as the study of disparate practices including critical incidents and case studies. Because the former focuses on macro-events and the latter on micro-events with similar concerns, readers might have benefited from a joint chapter or from reading these chapters sequentially. In other cases Farrell introduces his readers to a broad topic, but focuses on only one aspect. For example, the chapter on classroom communication primarily addresses teachers' use of questions. The inclusion of more diverse issues such as teacher feedback, delivery rate, and learner-learner interaction might have contributed positively to the chapter.

In addition, although this may have been unintentional, we noticed that the case studies and end-of-chapter scenarios are mostly male-dominant.

Although the case studies and scenarios are, of course, based specifically on Farrell's research and teaching experiences, we suggest that a larger number of female scenarios would have complemented the book well, particularly because most language teachers we know are female. Last, Farrell contends that critical reflection requires considering the broader sociocultural and sociopolitical nature of teaching and indicates that this book will stimulate teachers to reflect on whether their practices are "equitable, just, and respectful" (p. 9). Unfortunately, specific references or case scenarios related to this topic are not included in the book. However, we strongly believe that encouraging teachers to reflect critically on these macro-structural dimensions of their profession will benefit not only them, but also their learners and working environments.

Despite these limitations, Farrell offers language teachers not only an evidence-based rationale for becoming reflective practitioners, but also helpful and valuable tools for reflective practice that will promote professional growth; facilitate reflection on one's beliefs, values, and practices; and stimulate change. The bottom-up approach to reflective language teaching that Farrell advocates encourages teachers to take responsibility and ownership of their individual knowledge construction, leading to their own grounded theory of teaching. For these reasons, we highly recommend this book for all language teachers who are serious about better understanding and improving the quality of classroom life for themselves, their students, and their communities.

### *The Reviewers*

Caroline Payant is a doctoral student in the Department of Applied Linguistics and ESL at Georgia State University, where she teaches ESL classes and works with preservice teachers. Her research interests include L2 teacher training, learner-learner interaction, sociocultural theory, and L2 learning.

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## **Teaching the World's Children. ESL for Ages Three to Seven**

*Mary Ashworth and H. Patricia Wakefield*

Toronto, ON: Pippin Publishing Corporation, 2004, 2nd edition, 101 pages

Reviewed by: *Jennifer St. John*

The role of being a child's first teacher is a great responsibility; a child's first experiences with school often set the tone for how he or she views formal learning environments. Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) engage in this role enthusiastically; however, they are often met with special challenges when working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and for whom English is not a first language. Through this publica-

tion, Ashworth and Wakefield accomplish their primary goal of guiding such teachers toward becoming “attuned to the similarities and differences between first and second language acquisition, aware of cross-cultural practices and beliefs in child-rearing, and sensitive to the importance of culture and linguistic identity in developing and maintaining self-esteem” (p. 59). This guide provides practical techniques and strategies, with corresponding briefly described theoretical principles, to equip ECEs with the tools appropriate to the cognitive and linguistic developmental needs of young ESL learners.

Throughout this five-chapter book, the authors intermingle theory with practice. In Chapter One, “Who Are the Children?” the importance of valuing the children’s first language and culture is underlined, along with the necessary step of obtaining background information about the children in order to develop a comprehensive picture of their home, family, and culture. The teacher’s role is to understand and mediate between home and school and to assist in the transition where the two languages and cultures meet. This chapter provides examples of how the child’s home life, cultural customs, and parental expectations can be detailed. Furthermore, themes for classroom activities are suggested to encourage exchanges between students’ cultures. The range of effective classroom practices include examples such as setting up a buddy system, having school tours, and using effective behavior management strategies, along with cautionary notes about watching for signs of stress and ensuring that all students are considerate and treated with respect.

Chapter Two, “How Children Acquire and Use Language,” provides a description of the sequence of significant linguistic events in the acquisition of the first and subsequent languages as they progress in tandem with physical and cognitive development. This description assists ECE workers by situating the ESL child’s development in a context of realistic developmental expectations. Consequently, the workers are informed of how to create a secure and respectful learning environment where children can express what they experience and can have their voices reflect what they know. The authors emphasize that valuing language and ensuring that the learner feels secure and not ridiculed will foster an atmosphere in which learning through language can take place and skills in creative thinking and problem-solving can develop. This chapter also provides a variety of effective classroom applications that are based on principles of second-language teaching. In addition, Appendix A, which is related to this chapter, provides an introduction to a skeletal description of language and language systems.

In the third chapter, the authors discuss the role of language in learning. According to them, ESL children, like all children, develop new concepts through their experiences and apply these concepts to new contexts. Unique about ESL students is the potential lack of adequate language resources to do

this. The authors outline nine principles of concept development and how language plays a role in this process. These broad statements about cognitive development are then applied to classroom contexts with accompanying clarifying notes on how these principles and concepts might be culturally bound, thus presenting possible conflicts for the learning process. The authors provide a wealth of concrete ideas that are realistic and easy to implement, with explanations about the corresponding theoretical foundations.

Underlying the techniques above is the belief that early literacy is critical to ensuring cognitive growth and development. In Chapter Four, the authors present insights into using literature to foster the process of literacy development. The narrative genre is highlighted as an important source when creating techniques to engage children with literature and literacy activities. Tapping into narratives from various cultures opens up an opportunity for the ECEs to acknowledge and value the children's heritage. At the end of this volume, the authors provide an annotated bibliography of children's books from around the world: valuable resources to accomplish the objective of valuing all cultures.

Creating a strong positive relationship between the ESL student and the new learning environment is a task that Ashworth and Wakefield describe as building bridges: the topic of Chapter Five. These bridges are numerous and include fostering relationships between the students' needs and the curriculum, the home, the community at large, the school community and other teachers. Critically, the first bridge to build relies on the skillful insights of the ECE, whose classroom ideally welcomes children with a wide range of needs, skills, abilities, first languages, and learning styles. The ECE also facilitates bridge-building between school and home, which necessitates realistic expectations of outcomes and involvement. The final bridge described is the bridge to tomorrow, which ensures that programming will exist to meet the needs of all children.

As a textbook, this volume would prove useful in an introductory course on ESL learners for an ECE training program, because it assumes limited knowledge of language as a system, as well as limited exposure to multicultural learning contexts. The authors have created a practical, jargon-free reference book for ECEs, with a wide range of insightful suggestions on how to approach their critical role of establishing a secure, sensitive, caring program for the "world's children." All suggestions are contextualized in easily understood theoretical explanations. Finally, the guidance that the authors provide for ECEs working in a multicultural context can easily be applied to all multicultural classrooms. Teaching in any multicultural context requires an awareness of culture, of language, of the process of learning through language, and of how to structure classroom activities that enrich and benefit the ESL learner.

Overall, the tone of this book is positive, but at times it may seem to present an unrealistic set of expectations for what the ECE can accomplish. First, if an interpreter for the family is not available, interacting with the child's parents can be difficult if not impossible. Second, it is possible that the parents' perceptions, attitudes, and/or experiences with formal learning environments might be in direct conflict with those of the school. Third, ESL students are often mainstreamed in regular classrooms; the ECE may find this arrangement extremely time-consuming and not always possible if the group is large. Finally, any group of young learners can present special challenges for the ECE in terms of behavior management, and thus although linguistic needs are critical to learning, the physical safety of all students is paramount and often overrides other programming initiatives. The authors' insights into these situations would be welcomed.

#### *The Reviewer*

Jennifer St.John is the Assistant Director of the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute at the University of Ottawa, where she teaches ESL courses that include English pronunciation, oral communication skills, and public speaking for advanced learners. In addition, Ms. St.John has a formal training in primary education.

### **English Language Teaching in Action (5-disk DVD set)**

BridgeTEFL: Denver, CO, 2009.

ISBN: 978-0-9821786-0-7

US\$99.95

Reviewed by: *David Catterick*

As a preservice teacher trainer, I feel I am generally well served by the number and quality of TESOL textbooks at my disposal. Where I (and no doubt many of my TESL Canada colleagues) feel there is a distinct lack of resources is in the area of multimedia: in particular, quality video clips showing qualified ESL teachers in action. When I heard that a Colorado company, BridgeTEFL, had produced a new DVD resource, I was understandably eager to try it.

*English Language Teaching in Action* comes packaged in a sturdy plastic ring-binder box with full-color inlay, which immediately gives one the sense that this is a quality product even before one places a disk in the DVD player. The production quality of the video content both in terms of picture and sound does not disappoint. Despite occasional background noise from traffic, the audio quality is high, with the voices of the learners, even in group work, sounding crisp and clear. On the picture side, the camera work can seem a little jerky at first, but I found myself noticing this less as I watched.

The classrooms in the videos depict a well-resourced EFL context in a North American private language school. Classes consist of between six and 12 young adults who come from a variety of countries and seem to be mostly

around the intermediate level. Although the teaching context is quite specific, I do not believe this detracts from the usefulness of this product in preparing trainees to teach in other teaching contexts.

The disks contain 70 videos organized into 10 categories spread over five DVDs:

Disc 1: Games and Activities

Disc 2: Productive Skills: Writing and Speaking

Disc 3: Receptive Skills: Listening and Reading

Disc 4: Teaching Grammar and Vocabulary

Disc 5: Pronunciation and Teaching Techniques

Video segments vary in length, with the longest running just under eight minutes. The average length of around five and a half minutes is just right for display in a methodology or skills class. Navigation of the content is easy. A full menu is displayed at the beginning, and a simple press of the DVD remote's skip-forward button while viewing takes one straight to the next video segment. Noticeably absent, however, is a printed list of video content for each DVD.

Each of the 70 videos follows a set sequence of stages. The first stage is the "Game Plan," in which the classroom teacher introduces the viewer to a common problem or difficulty, with an explanation of why it is difficult for the learner. Although this stage can seem somewhat overscripted and a little stilted in delivery, the quality of the content certainly makes up for this. In the next stage, "In Action," the viewer observes the teacher in the classroom context demonstrating a technique or activity with a group of learners. The classroom teachers throughout these videos clearly are trained and experienced professionals, although not so professional that preservice trainees cannot imagine themselves in their shoes. Certainly trainers will find they have opportunities to ask the all-important question, What could the teacher have done instead here? The learners, who in some videos have to take on various roles such as a new or disruptive student, also give strong performances. In the final "Take it Further" stage, the teacher gives suggestions for adapting the task for various uses or levels of learners. During all these stages, pop-ups and text appear on the screen to call the viewer's attention to something important happening in the classroom or to offer helpful tips and advice. The pop-ups vary between a useful and largely unobtrusive check mark or short texts such as *Don't forget to check for understanding*, to the highly intrusive and (to me at least) slightly bothersome *Rejected* stamp mark, which appears frequently in the final DVD to identify poor classroom management.

The videos offer such rich source material that the trainer will invariably wish to draw the trainee's attention to more than the specific focus of the lesson. For example, on Disc 1: *Games and Activities*, the Describing and Drawing Pictures activity does not just show how a picture dictation task works; it also effectively demonstrates:

- how to set up pairs
- how to use gesture in giving instructions
- asking questions to verify whether learners have understood the instructions
- using reformulation to introduce target structures

It would be good if BridgeTEFL could also provide a comprehensive guide to this additional type of indirect training content so that such opportunities might easily be found and used in the training classroom.

*English Language Teaching in Action* is a quality, versatile product that can be used both in classroom training contexts and for self-access purposes. It is a long-awaited resource that has the right combination of quality, extensiveness, and price. Although the product is ideally suited for preservice training contexts, I can see how it would also be valuable for less experienced inservice teachers who have not benefited from TESOL-specific training. At this cost and with a market so lacking in quality video resources, there is every reason to believe that this product may become a key tool for institutions not just in Canada, but around the world.

#### *The Reviewer*

David Catterick is an assistant professor at Briercrest College and Seminary in Saskatchewan. He has worked for the past 20 years as a teacher and teacher trainer on a number of undergraduate and postgraduate programs. His current role is as program coordinator for the BA in Global Studies: TESOL degree.