Book Review

Reflecting on Critical Incidents in Language Education: 40 Dilemmas for Novice TESOL Professionals

Thomas S. C. Farrell, Laura Baecher
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Teaching English as a second or other language (TESOL) requires a complex set of skills, and English-language teachers, from novice to expert, continually encounter challenging issues and situations—“critical incidents”—in their daily practice in a wide range of settings. Teachers may find some of these challenges unfamiliar or difficult, depending on the training or preparation they have undergone; these incidents also require consideration and reflection on the teachers’ part to formulate appropriate and principled responses. This book examines a wide variety of these critical incidents and provides some helpful directions for reflection.

Each of the book’s 10 chapters examines a different topic illustrated by four critical incidents drawn from experiences of teachers in real-life classrooms. The topics include creating a positive classroom community, curriculum development, teaching mixed-level/large classes, classroom management, developing students’ speaking skills, developing students’ reading skills, developing students’ listening skills, developing students’ writing skills, addressing workplace challenges, and professional development.

Among the 40 incidents are some that novice teachers commonly experience in settings they may already be familiar with, such as teaching younger learners, working in countries where English is not a dominant language locally, or following curricula that are prescribed to varying degrees. Other incidents may be more particular, but by no means uncommon, such as addressing special needs or poverty, dealing with unfamiliar cultural expectations, or navigating dynamics in the workplace or among colleagues.

The 10 chapters follow a consistent structure, beginning with inquiry questions from teachers about the critical incidents at hand, followed by preview questions put forth by the authors to prime the reader to consider the issues, then a detailed description of the situations and settings accompanied
by the teachers’ response, and finally some follow-up tasks and questions for
the reader to consider the issues further.

As the book is expressly aimed at teachers relatively new to the pro-
fession, it contains plenty of helpful guidance and useful suggestions. For
example, a novice teacher might have a conversation with a mentor teacher
to find out what she or he does to orient new staff members (chap. 10), or a
teacher can mentally prepare questions for an administrator before sitting
down to discuss certain curriculum elements (chap. 2). Other ideas are more
directly related to practical concerns in the classroom, such as how best to
provide corrective feedback for written work (chap. 8), or ways to help stu-
dents develop better understanding of transactional talk in listening lessons
(chap. 7).

More experienced teachers and teacher educators may also be able to
use this book “as a refresher on the various dilemmas that can appear in
any classroom” (p. 6). This is clear from some of the more delicate problems
raised, such as addressing special needs or issues related to poverty among
students. More experienced teachers and teacher educators can also use ques-
tions in the preview section in each chapter to provide further guidance and
direction if newer teachers should find these dilemmas to be beyond their
current experience or insight.

Because of the complex nature and demands of TESOL, not all conceivable
issues could be addressed in one volume. Areas such as practicing language
for communicative purposes in classroom settings, ways to address or na-
vigate the still common notion of native speaker versus non-native speaker
teachers, or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ)-related
issues, to name only a few, might be worthy additions for a future edition.

This is a thoughtfully written book with accessible ideas that cover a wide
range of issues. It should be very helpful for ESOL teachers as they begin their
career, as well as more experienced teachers who may be able to use some of
its theoretical and practical elements to help provide guidance to colleagues
new to a field that is at once exciting and challenging, with potential for great
satisfaction when critical incidents are met with principled responses based
on critical reflection.

Patrick Huang

The Reviewer
Patrick Huang is an English-language teacher and teacher-educator and has
delivered and assessed training courses in a range of international contexts
and settings. Presently pursuing his PhD in Toronto, his research interests
include areas such as teacher education and development, teacher identity,
mentoring, intercultural learning and teaching, and reflective practice.