Reflective Practice for Early Career Language Teachers

Thomas S. C. Farrell

Cambridge University Press, 2024, 223 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781009423236 (publisher's list price: C$39.95)

The critical role that second language educators play in learners' development, and the problems they face, are often overlooked. With nearly 40 percent of teachers leaving the profession within their first five years (Kutsyuruba et al., 2022, p. 3), it becomes essential to understand why educators leave and the factors that contribute to their decision. Thomas S. C. Farrell argues that leaving the profession is rarely the result of a rash decision but rather a gradual process shaped by emotional, institutional, and pedagogical pressures. In his book *Reflective Practice for Early Career Language Teachers*, Farrell offers insights into the many challenges TESL teachers encounter in their first years and provides a five-stage reflective framework that encourages educators to critically examine their teaching philosophy, classroom practices, and broader professional identities. Drawing on case studies of five early-career ESL teachers and two more experienced colleagues, the book provides both practical guidance and theoretical depth, offering a valuable resource for teachers, policymakers, and school administrators committed to improving teacher retention and professional well-being.

Following a brief overview of the book in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 lays the foundation for the case studies by outlining the book's qualitative methodology and reflective framework. Farrell describes the difficulty many early career teachers face when transitioning from teacher education programs to real-world classrooms, where school values often conflict with their training. As teacher attrition reaches what he terms "epidemic proportions," Farrell emphasizes the OECD's call for teachers to become reflective professionals capable of understanding the nature of their challenges. Over a five-week period, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, written reflections, and classroom observations, including three recorded lessons and follow-up interviews for each teacher. This qualitative reflective project is grounded in Farrell's five-stage framework: philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and critical reflection, which encourages teachers to explore not only their pedagogy but also their identities as moral, emotional, and spiritual beings. Through this lens, Farrell invites the reader to engage with each teacher's lived experience. The first of these is Teresa, a first-year teacher whose reflections highlight both the learning curve and emotional labour of entering the profession amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

While each chapter follows the same reflective structure, this consistency across cases allows Farrell to highlight both shared struggles and evolving perspectives, particularly when comparing early-career teachers like Teresa with more experienced colleagues such as Sarah. The book's five-stage framework offers a scaffold through which each teacher reflects on their motivations, methods, and challenges. Teresa, in her first year of teaching, enters the profession during the pandemic and is immediately thrust into online instruction with little preparation or institutional support. Her reflections reveal a strong desire to support immigrant learners and build meaningful connections, but they also expose a sense of Teresa being overwhelmed, isolated, and uncertain about her long-term place in the field. In contrast, Sarah, teaching in her tenth year, brings a more confident and culturally grounded approach, drawing from her own family's immigration experience to foster empathy and inclusion in the classroom. She consistently emphasizes student trust, emotional sensitivity, and flexibility, even when it means deviating from lesson plans. The juxtaposition of these two educators shows how Farrell's framework not only supports professional growth but also captures the emotional and ethical dimensions of teaching across different stages of a teacher's career. These contrasting cases, along with the five others in the book, come together in Chapter 10, where Farrell shifts focus from individual narratives to thematic synthesis.

Chapter 10 revisits the five reflective stages—not to introduce new voices but to trace patterns across the diverse experiences of the seven teachers. Farrell highlights a shared moral commitment to student well-being, especially among early-career teachers, whose motivations are often tied to personal or familial histories of migration. Differences emerge with respect to pedagogical approaches, with newer teachers relying more on formal training and structured guidance and experienced educators prioritizing flexibility and learner autonomy. Core values such as humour, trust, and responsiveness to students are shared across all cases. Institutional shortcomings, especially the lack of administrative support, remain a consistent source of dissatisfaction. Notably, Farrell includes a "reflection on reflection," inviting each teacher to respond to their own case chapter, adding depth to the analysis and reinforcing the power of reflection as a pedagogical tool and as a means of self-discovery and professional resilience.

Chapter 11 extends the conversation by shifting from reflection *on* practice to reflection *for* action. Building on the themes drawn together in the previous chapter, Farrell presents a model for early-career language-teacher development grounded in four interrelated components: reflection, support, resilience, and well-being. Drawing on the lived experiences of the seven ESL teachers, the chapter argues that reflection alone is not enough; teachers also need structured support systems, time for self-care, and opportunities to develop professional resilience. Farrell emphasizes the importance of embedding reflective habits early in teacher education programs and sustaining them through the critical early-career years. He advocates for mentorship models, peer coaching, and reflective communities of practice to combat the isolation that so many of his participants faced. By integrating theory with actionable guidance, this chapter bridges the gap between personal insight and institutional change, offering concrete ways forward for teacher educators, school leaders, and policymakers invested in teacher retention.

Reflective Practice for Early Career Language Teachers succeeds in giving voice to the emotional, ethical, and professional realities of teaching English as a second language. Through rich case studies and a grounded, holistic framework, Farrell not only offers tools for reflection but also outlines institutional reforms that could help retain passionate, capable educators. While the book focuses on the Canadian context, particularly language teaching in EAP and LINC programs, its implications are global. It is a valuable read for the entire teaching profession, from novice educators to those engaged in teacher education policy, and for classroom practice, and it presents a compelling argument for reflection being central to the profession's future.

The Reviewer

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Reference

Kutsyuruba, B., Walker, K. D., Matheson, I. A., & Bosica, J. (2021). Early career teaching progression: Examining Canadian teachers' experiences during their first five years in the profession. *The New Educator*, *18*(1–2), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2021.1940406