

Review of “Reflective Writing for Language Teachers”

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Reviewed by Stephanie Lo-Philip

“Reflective writing for language teachers” is an easy-to-read book designed for language teachers, teachers in training and individuals who work with teachers. The seven chapters are organized as a practical how-to guide, outlining different approaches and modes of reflection and writing practices. Each chapter includes the author’s personal reflections and experiences on the main topics, brief overviews of basic theories and approaches, discussion of the rationale for reflection, the benefits of reflective practice and detailing of specific practices that educators can engage in. The book also provides frequent opportunities to reflect on the content through different questions and/or case studies for the reader to discuss and/or write about.

Chapter One begins by considering whether teaching is a job or a profession. Farrell invites the reader to reflect on the role of professional development and how reflection is a critical part of the process. He briefly compares top-down to bottom-up approaches in professional development and argues that, while both can be effectively drawn upon, sustainable professional development must ultimately be meaningful, valuable and applicable to the language teacher. He concludes by listing five stages or areas that teachers can reflect upon in sustaining his/her professional development.

Chapter Two defines what reflective practice is and how teachers can self-assess their current practices. According to Farrell, reflective practice is “the process of critical examination or experiences, a process that can lead to a better understanding of one’s practices and routines.” It entails becoming conscious of and responsible for one’s decisions, active inquiry into students’ learning needs and identifying effective strategies that optimize the learning experience and outcomes. After describing the theory and attributes of reflectivity, he succinctly outlines an extensive range of reflective practice activities such as action research, classroom observation, and teacher journals. Finally, he encourages the reader to reflect on his/her conceptions of teaching and teaching values, and to write a teaching philosophy.

Chapter Three focuses on writing as a type of reflective practice. The author defines writing, explains the process, its purposes, ways to write and how it can aid teachers in conducting personal reflection, and deepen their understanding of themselves and their profession. Chapters Four and Five then narrow down to the specific practices of keeping a reflective teaching journal and narrative reflective writing, respectively. In addition to describing what and how teachers can use each type of writing for personal reflection and professional development, Farrell also provides case studies and sample writing excerpts for the reader to refer to and reflect upon.

The last two chapters discuss why and how teachers can maintain reflective practice throughout their entire career. Chapter Six presents different stages of novice teacher development. The author then offers suggestions on what kinds of support novice teachers need in the first years of teaching and includes a case study on mid-career English language teachers in Singapore to illustrate how educators can continue to benefit from reflective practice. Farrell takes advantage of his position as the series editor of TESOL’s Language Teacher Research Series in Chapter Seven by providing a number of examples of existing research conducted and published by language teachers around the world. He compares and contrasts different research trends and encourages teachers to formally engage in language teacher research by writing and sharing their findings and insights in TESOL’s and other similar publications.

As a former language teacher and current educational linguist, I found Farrell’s style of writing accessible and practical for both classroom teachers and teacher trainers.

The author has had years of experience as a classroom teacher and I thought that this helped produce a book that is sensitive and appropriate for its specified target audiences. In every chapter, the author spends a considerable amount of space systematically illustrating and explaining why reflective practice is necessary, beneficial and rewarding to the educator. I felt that this is important, because the challenges that educators face will cause teachers to think twice about investing personal time in reflective practice and professional development. I also thought that the numerous questions included in the reflection journal are particularly applicable, as they provide a grounded, immediate guide for educators to think through the issues raised in the book. The case studies and writing excerpts are also useful in providing models of what educators have written about.

Overall, the book is well written and has a number of strengths in terms of its accessibility, practicality and applicability. Nevertheless, I felt that there is one main drawback to this book. Although there are many examples and ideas for how to reflect, there are barely any tools given to guide the teacher in a systematic analysis of their entries. There are no frameworks or examples provided to illustrate how the educator can analyze their writing. For instance, Chapter One is sprinkled with a series of questions on the educator’s professional training and development paths. They are clearly designed to get teachers to begin reflecting on who and what has shaped them as an educator and to seriously consider their identity and role in language education. However, what is missing are structured ways to make sense of those answers. Analytical techniques such as memoing, indexing, categorizing and creating visual presentations of written data would be highly beneficial in thinking systematically and critically about what one has written. It would not only provide direction for how to work with written data, but also provide much needed scaffolding for developing critical reflective practice. Given that the author argues that analysis of one’s writings is key to professional development, it seems odd that barely any space was devoted to this. Explanations of useful qualitative analytical techniques and some sample analyses of written entries would have brilliantly addressed this missing aspect and provided educators a clearer pathway to optimize their understanding and develop reflective practice.