

Self-Reflection for Teacher Autonomy: What's in It for Us and Why Do We Give Valuable Time?

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Abstract

Although teacher development courses ask teachers to self-reflect in order to improve conditions for the learner, teachers are not often asked to reflect on our own beliefs and development. Consequently, in a previous study we asked in-service teachers who engage in self-reflection to describe their practices. After its publication some of our reading audience became curious about our research choice and asked for feedback. Therefore, in this paper we reconsider what value self-reflection activities in fact hold for us and what motivates us to make the autonomous choice to voluntarily engage in them. By doing so, we argue for more focus on the personal interests of the teacher in language education.

Introduction: Self-reflection as a Medium for Teacher Autonomy

In the teacher development context, educators advocate that teachers regularly engage in some form of reflection to improve their teaching skills and to gain a deeper understanding of learning from the learner's perspective (Gebhard, 1999; Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001; Pinter, 2007). Although these avenues for reflection should be available in the teacher's workplace, this is not always a reality, and therefore finding alternative ways to work on teacher development becomes necessary (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001). Nevertheless, without downgrading the importance of professional growth as it pertains to the practice of teaching itself, we feel it is also beneficial to explore whether limiting research to the improvement of teaching skills as the main focus of self-reflection will necessarily access a critical level of intrinsic motivation that can sustain self-inquiry on a regular basis to bring about lasting personal change. Rather than be pursued as a work-related undertaking, the inspiration to develop as a person is generally seen as most influential when it comes with some assurance that the effort involved will benefit oneself in a personally meaningful way.

Not surprisingly, therefore, discussions about the meaning of teacher autonomy have evolved beyond gaining expertise in the development of learner autonomy and have become incorporated as part of a broader definition of the teacher's own need for professional freedom and reflection (Benson, 2001). The following definition of teacher autonomy by Barfield Ashwell, Carroll, Collins, Cowie, Critchley et al. (2002) is thus closely related to our argument: 'Teacher autonomy is driven by a need for personal and professional improvement, so that an autonomous teacher may seek out opportunities over the course of his or her career to develop further' (p. 220). We also find Smith's (2003) definition of autonomy meaningful because it describes the teacher as a learner going through a learning and reflective process, termed *teacher-learner autonomy*, where teachers, in order to gain a greater capacity and willingness to learn for themselves, develop expertise through their own the practice of reflection, which is deemed essential. Even more pertinent, however, is Jersild's take on the purpose of teacher self-reflection:

A teacher's understanding of others can be only as deep as the wisdom he possesses when he looks inward upon himself. The more genuinely he seeks to

face the problems of his own life, the more he will be able to realise his kinship with others, whether they are younger or older, like him or unlike him in education, wealth, religion or professional rank. (1955, p. 83)

Drawing on our beliefs as well as the voices of others, we have come to consider it valuable for teachers to view themselves first as learners who, for their own sake, need to explore ways to improve their instructional abilities at different stages of their careers, as this acknowledges that self-reflection practices have a natural place in their own continuous learner development throughout their lifetimes. In particular, given that international research has indicated that ‘the highest quality teaching and learning comes when we have the greatest autonomy for the teacher and the learner’ (Professor Patricia Broadfoot, quoted in Baker, 2008, para. 24), it would behove faculties to have a better understanding of how to facilitate teacher autonomy, and thus it also warrants a more central place in teacher education courses. Towards that end, given further, as Myhill, reported, that ‘the crucial ingredient [is] a teacher’s ability to reflect on his or her own performance and then to change it’ (Baker, 2008, para. 30), the desirability of encouraging the utilisation of self-reflection activities that forward our own progress in autonomous behaviour both inside and outside the classroom seems well worth additional exploration. In this regard, the process is not exclusively a matter of self-interest, since if teachers have experienced efficacious results from self-reflection activities, it is more likely that they will also be better able to explain to students and colleagues how to get the greatest value from their use. The purpose of this paper is therefore to report on what value we believe self-reflection activities in fact hold for us and what motivates us to make the autonomous choice to voluntarily engage in them.

Nanci’s Self-reflections

Over the years, I have never managed to stifle my awareness that a considerable number of the most serious obstacles that teachers commonly encounter do not occur exclusively, or even predominately, in the classroom. Rather, it is when challenges arise in the staffroom and beyond that they may face the darkest periods and experience the greatest stress of their working lives. In order to become the kind of person that can successfully maintain a calm and welcoming face with students in the short term as well as sustain the motivation to pursue a personally meaningful career in teaching in the long term, a self-reflection practice that helps us develop the same qualities in ourselves that we hope to develop in learners – courage, resilience and equilibrium, among others – now strikes me as a matter of self-defense. Additionally, given that the characteristic aspects of self-directed instruction fortuitously converge so closely with the development of such qualities, it is possible to suggest that the emphasis on the study of autonomy within the ELT field offers a perfect opportunity for teachers to come to grips with metacognitive issues in ways that would benefit them on a personal level while simultaneously supporting them on a professional level. It was largely because Stacey and I share these views that we were curious to find out more about what kinds of reflective practices teachers actually find helpful to them not only ‘at the chalk face’ but also in their face-to-face struggles with the problems of everyday life.

One of the major questions that we continue to wish to explore is the extent to which teacher education courses and other developmental events could incorporate a wider and deeper range of self-reflection activities to facilitate teacher autonomy beyond the classroom while ensuring respect for individual choice and privacy. Our belief that further support options are needed is evidenced by our discussions with fellow teachers from a variety of backgrounds, age groups and teaching contexts, as well as by such factors as the rather telling statistic that half of new teachers in the U.S. leave the profession to seek other career options within the first five years of their appointment (Cummins, 2008). As the following description from Cummins (2008)

illustrates, it can be extremely difficult to remain idealistic when we feel isolated in the kind of non-facilitating circumstances not unfamiliar to the experience of many language teachers:

Mostly, [their reasons for leaving] have to do with external forces which prevent them from doing what they were hired to do and what deep down they wish to do: to teach, to educate and maybe even inspire their students. Most teachers do not enter the field for money and certainly not for a comfortable, secure work environment. No, they become teachers out of a dream of making a difference, of communicating their passion for their subject matter to emerging young minds and spirits. At the most fundamental level, teachers are idealists who dream of improving society. Gradually, however, and sometimes rapidly, they are confronted with a host of problems few citizens truly understand...It takes, in many cases, real courage just to keep battling these odds day after day, and, of course, after a while, frustration leads to depression and heartbreak. You, the teacher, begin to feel impotent, hopeless and helpless. So, finally, in despair, you leave the field. (para. 3)

Certainly, there seems little doubt that the type of self-reflection activities undertaken during action research studies and careful on-going classroom observation can contribute to the development of teacher autonomy through increasing an individual's teaching skills and analytical decision-making abilities. Nonetheless, to what extent these activities will yield residual benefits that spill over into facilitating an individual's sense of confidence and control outside the classroom – such as engaging in cooperative work with other teachers, advocating for educational reform with institutional administrators or managing a personally appropriate work-life balance – appears more open to question. Given that long-term satisfaction with a teaching career is contingent upon one's ability to manage effectively in all these areas, it is our belief that teacher education should be doing more to illuminate the darker corners of our field and offering a more well-rounded 'curriculum' of self-reflection practices that explicitly promote personal autonomy for the purpose of preparing new teachers for what might lie ahead and renewing those who encounter difficulties along the way. Reflective activities that draw on such therapeutic practices, such as insight meditation, art therapy and philosophical counselling, if encountered early in teacher education experiences, may provide a grounding in beneficial techniques, which can be independently pursued and offer guidance even when support is absent from a teacher's surrounding environment.

It is our perception that, as it stands now, language teaching tends to be overly-dominated by a relentlessly optimistic attitude, which, as Hari (2007) says of the self-help industry in general, can result in a 'cult of positive thinking...[that] instinctively blames all the people who falter or fail in life for their own misfortune'. Rather than attempting to maintain 'a sit-up-and-smile-right culture that is, in fact, making us...more miserable' (Hari, 2007), it seems to us essential to openly acknowledge the inherent frustrations and heartbreaks that may be encountered during a teacher's life from the start. If we do, we believe that we will then be more likely to engage in self-reflection activities to more effectively arm ourselves to cope with the realities of a career in education, based on the recognition that, when it comes to increasing our overall sense of wellbeing, attainment of a higher degree of personal autonomy has a value as significant to us as attaining a higher academic degree.

Stacey's Self-reflections

Nanci and I became interested in researching EFL teachers who practice self-reflection so that we could gain a more critical knowledge about the process and share this information with other teachers in Japan who work in various contexts and who have experienced inner-turmoil in their lives. A recurring theme we noticed was that

these teachers articulated a sense of feeling marginalised and not appreciated or valued by colleagues or administrators for the work they did. What appeared to be the most damaging result was that some teachers revealed that being criticised professionally seemed to influence how they felt about themselves personally. Then while launching our project, it was encouraging to learn of an open-ended life history study by Simon-Maeda (2004) of native, foreign and Japanese female EFL instructors teaching in Japan that suggested these educators faced a myriad of oppressive ideologies and that called for TESOL professionals to look at how marginalisation and discrimination work in Japan. She also suggested the phenomenon is not exclusively gender-based and instead showed how teachers interact within the constraints they face in their contexts by constructing unique identities and attempting to change the ideological status quo by introducing their students to alternative perspectives on global and local social concerns. Since the phenomenon of feeling marginalised was not only documented in the EFL teaching context in Japan but also not gender specific, the news was a breath of fresh air, since the teachers we aim to provide support for are both male and female teachers of English.

In addition, I personally felt self-reflection might be difficult to research, as Aoki (2003) illustrated findings from her narrative study that revealed teacher autonomy complexly involves a person's multiple facets as a whole, which suggests there is an interconnectedness of people themselves with their professional role as teachers. Consequently, it seemed to me that I could not sort through the intricacies of emotions as a researcher without a sound background in psychology. However, more information on teachers' autonomous self-reflection practices is needed and I felt that by researching with Nanci, we could encourage more attention being paid and support being provided to improve the mental health conditions of English teachers working in Japan, particularly for teachers who live in isolated communities, have a small social network and/or have little support in their daily contexts.

As we go forward with our research, I realise I had primarily been concerned about providing information to others in order to 'help' others; however, I was not able to regularly engage in practicing reflection myself until I made a conscious effort to do so. Since self-reflection is closely connected with making sense of and drawing individual meaning from experiences, I finally noticed that I was not managing my time well and therefore had little energy left to make sense of these encounters and therefore 'help' myself. What a relief it was to discover the irony of my situation and that it was up to me to be more mindful about prioritising my time to rejuvenate and reflect rather than feeling resentful about not having enough time to practice what was personally meaningful to me.

Gradually, through practicing self-reflection, I am taking the time to step back by raising my own awareness of my current reality and use the information to set goals, just as I suggest my students also practice for their autonomous language learning and personal development. As a consequence, reflections through note taking, reading and exercise are helping me to feel clearer about what I am learning from my encounters with my teaching and learning so I can make more informed choices. By stating the former, I don't mean that my reflective practices should solely be practiced on a solitary basis, because group reflection has benefits. As Little (2004) reminds us in a keynote speech about an additional aspect of what autonomy does not represent (the five initial factors are defined in Little, 1991, pp. 3-4), autonomy is not a synonym for autism, meaning that learners do not only work on their own, but 'like all other culturally determined human capacities, it develops in interaction with others' (p. 1).

All in all, whether reflection is practiced in solitude or with others if the chance arises, the value of teacher reflection is essential, because the teacher becomes a learner trying to have a greater awareness of the self (Plain, 1991). This is not an easy task, because unfortunately teachers tend to focus their awareness on a learner's development without looking at their own. Correspondingly, according to Plain's assertions and our main argument, Williams and Burden (1997) argue for a *humanistic*

approach in language education that values the thoughts, feelings and emotions of learners and teachers as main concerns for personal growth and development. The rationale is that teachers' views of teaching reflect their own views of themselves, and their behaviour in the classroom can mirror their essence as a person. This *humanistic approach* can be seen as being person-centered rather than exclusively *learner-centered*, which emphasises the importance of remembering that a reflective teacher is vital for the learning process. Therefore we believe teacher development is just as important as the development of our learners. Furthermore, there is hope that autonomy research in language education will focus on language teachers as much as language learners, since both parties are mutually engaged in various forms of reflection.

Conclusion

By revealing what self-reflection activities mean to us and what motivates us to make the autonomous choice to voluntarily engage in them, we are hopeful that other teachers will be encouraged to consider the idea that, along with autonomous language development in the classroom, there are also opportunities for teachers to work on augmenting their own level of autonomous development within themselves. Both learners and teachers can benefit from the facilitation of a personal autonomy that is not limited to an academic capacity but also encompasses individual growth and learning as human beings. It also makes sense that the more teachers gain a fuller sense of control over their own inner development, the more confidence and expertise they will amass to help facilitate language learning for students. However, as stated earlier, while it is important for EFL practitioners to recognise the value of teacher reflection for the sake of their learners, we hope that more attention will be paid to the value of the teacher being better able to consider how various self-reflective practices might contribute to their own personal development.

Finally, although there is an assumption especially with adult learners that the 'person' will develop along with the 'teacher,' personal and professional developmental growth is a life-long undertaking, which must be addressed in an ongoing and balanced way. In teacher education courses, therefore, exposing teachers to a broad range of self-reflection activities and clearly specifying how these practices might fulfil different developmental needs and guiding them through the practices with regular feedback would be beneficial as a core curricular goal. This seems particularly important if we keep in mind that teachers may experience draconian conditions in future contexts in which they may not have the resources to reflect with others to get much needed support. Given that teaching is a kind of work where many aspects lie outside the teacher's control, any self-reflection practice that facilitates a teacher's sense of autonomy and feels comfortable to the practitioner involved can serve as a valuable self-defence strategy to contribute to their personal and professional development.

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