



Reflections on reflection: A critical appraisal of reflective practices in L2 teacher education

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Abstract

In the literature dealing with L2 teacher training and education numerous references are made to the concept of reflective teaching and teachers and teacher educators are encouraged to engage in reflective practices. The present paper, however, argues that in our attempt to empower teachers to become more efficient practitioners, we have lost sight of some important practical as well as theoretical considerations. Historically and theoretically, reflection has been influenced by many trends and philosophies which make the term reflection open to different interpretations. In addition, current reflective views lack a critical dimension since the emphasis has mostly been on rational aspects of the term. From a practical viewpoint, most of the stress has been on retrospective accounts of reflection, not on the prospective, creative aspects of the concept. Moreover, there is no evidence to show improved teacher or student performance resulting from reflective techniques and almost no acknowledgement of teachers' personality in such discussions. Finally, too much emphasis on reflective practices and teachers' practical knowledge might result in isolation from the language teaching discourse community.

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Education is too important to be left to the classroom teacher, the school board, the central ministry... or any other single person or group. Decisions about education are, in the final analysis, decisions about goals and values; those are properly made by the larger, informed community and not by any privileged sector. Howard Gardner (1999, p. 61).

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1. Introduction

In the literature dealing with language teacher education, one comes across numerous references to the concept of reflective teaching (Richards and Lockhart, 1994; Freeman and Richards, 1996; Stanley, 1998; Richards, 1998; Shrum and Glisan, 2000). Language teachers are encouraged to engage in reflective practices through the use of journals, diaries, and discussion of their daily classroom achievements and failures. Those who support such an approach argue that reflective teaching will make teachers question clichés they have learned during their early formative years and will enable them to “develop more informed practice, [make] tacit beliefs and practical knowledge explicit ... leading to new ways of knowing and articulating” (Crandall, 2000, p. 40). Those who do not reflect upon their practices “will be likely to teach as they were taught and, thus, ineffective teaching strategies ... will be replicated” (Braun and Crumpler, 2004, p. 61).

The rise of reflective teaching in ELT can be regarded as one of the consequences of the post method debate (Prabhu, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In the method era, teachers were required to implement the dictates of language teaching methods without having much influence on the way methods were formulated in academic circles; the relationship between theoreticians and practitioners was (and to some extent still is) of a top down nature in which teachers were assigned little critical voice. The only legitimate form of knowledge was viewed to be the one which was of a public, theoretical nature, what Kessels and Korthagen (1996) call “conceptual” type, and teacher knowledge, which was usually in the form of narratives, was dismissed as “practitioner lore” (Crandall, 2000, p. 40). Theoretical knowledge was viewed as more valid and superior to procedural or practical knowledge, and those who could use the discourse of theory were assigned more esteem (Johnson, 1996).

There is no doubt that language teacher education was in a state of crisis, and a change of orientation in teacher qualifications and competencies was badly needed. The views of theoreticians were met with the eclectic approach (or, in fact, resistance) of practitioners, and there was almost no real dialog between the two camps. In this context of imposition and resistance, in which knowledge was of a highly interested, political nature (Pennycook, 1989), the concept of reflective teaching could look like a fair solution to the crisis. In the words of Halliday (1998) “it is understandable that the notion of reflective practice has been eagerly seized upon by the beleaguered teacher educators seeking to do something emancipatory and authentic in the act of hostility towards theory, moral deliberation and contextuality in teaching practices” (p. 598).

However, it seems that in its eagerness to give more voice and value to teachers and their knowledge, language teacher education has moved to the other extreme of the continuum, and has embraced the concept of reflective teaching without adequate reflection. A careful reading of the literature shows that there are some major theoretical and practical flaws in the concept of reflective teaching as it is practiced today. From a historical/theoretical viewpoint, there is no common, agreed upon definition of reflection since reflection has been influenced by many trends and philosophies; reflection, as it is promoted by teacher educators in L2 settings, is of a retrospective nature, not paving the way toward creativity; moreover, current reflective models in L2 teacher education lack the necessary critical dimension. From a practical viewpoint, there is no published evidence to show improved teacher or student performance resulting from reflective techniques; the personality of teachers is a missing variable in almost all discussions of reflection and finally, too much

emphasis on reflective practices and teachers' practical knowledge might result in isolation from the language teaching discourse community.

The present paper tries to highlight the flaws in the reflective teaching argument, calling for a less prejudiced, more balanced approach to the use of reflection in foreign language teacher education schemes.

2. What is reflection?

In most of the articles and books dealing with reflective teaching, the roots of the term reflection are traced back to John Dewey (1933/1993) and his influential book *How we think: a re-statement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educational process* and to Schon (1983), Schon (1987), Schon (1991). Dewey defines reflection as action based on “the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it” (p. 9). Reflective action is contrasted with impulsive and routine actions. Impulsive action is based on trial and error, drawing on biological/instinctive principles, while routine action is “based largely on authority and tradition ... undertaken in a passive, largely unthinking way” (Griffiths, 2000, p. 540). A reflective teacher, according to this definition, is one who critically examines his practices, comes up with some ideas as to how to improve his performance to enhance students' learning, and puts those ideas into practice, what Schon (1983) calls the cycle of appreciation, action, and re-appreciation.

Schon makes a distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action is the real life, online reflection that teachers get engaged in as they confront a problem in the classroom *while* teaching. It happens when “professionals are faced with a situation which they experience as unique or containing an element of surprise. Rather than applying theory or past experience in a direct way, professionals draw on their repertoire of examples to reframe the situation and find new solutions” (Griffiths, 2000, p. 542). Reflection-on-action, on the other hand, is the type of reflection that teachers get involved in *posteriori* of the event. It is the most common type of reflection which is encouraged and practiced in universities or centers of higher education, and unlike reflection-in-action, which is an individual activity, reflection-on-action is normally exercised collectively and in groups. Both reflection-on-action and in-action, however, start with a problem, or what Munby and Russell (1990) call *puzzles of practice*. “There is some puzzling or troubling or interesting phenomenon with which the individual is trying to deal. As he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action” (Schon, 1983, p. 50).

Reflection, however, seems to be much older than Dewey's formulation and that of Schon. Fendler (2003), in addition to Dewey and Schon, refers to the term *reflection* as having a Cartesian basis, which views knowing about the self or self-knowledge as a valid means of knowledge generation. From this viewpoint, any reflection is a positive activity, since it will result in self-understanding and knowledge of the self (the same idea is also echoed by Socrates and Freud). In the realms of teaching and education, “when teachers are asked to reflect on their practices, the Cartesian assumption is that self-awareness will provide knowledge and understanding about the self” (Fendler, 2003, p. 17). This knowledge will result in the development of what Inchausti (1991) has called the *second self*, which can be viewed as a kind of intrapersonal knowledge contributing to the self-actual-

ization of the individual, helping him/her to live a rich, full life. Most of the techniques resorted to in training reflective teachers indirectly draw upon this Cartesian view of reflection; when teachers are encouraged to write reflective journals or autobiographical notes, the idea is “to encourage pre-service teachers to value their own lives and experiences as a source of knowledge about what they may expect to encounter in their own classrooms and lives of children they will teach” (Braun and Crumpler, 2004, p. 61; also see Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Carter, 1993;). The use of autobiography will justify teachers’ personal knowledge and will enable them to move beyond “the normalizing constraints that objective knowledge claims impose” (Davis and Adams, 2000, p. 18).

Another trend, according to Fendler, which has contributed to the reflective movement is feminism. The basic assumption here is that expert knowledge is usually generated and controlled by masculine mechanisms, and this masculine nature of knowledge has put women in a subordinate role (p.19). Reflection on knowledge generation mechanisms and subverting those mechanisms to give more voice to women, or more feminine approaches, can be viewed as a force behind the rise of the reflective movement in education. The fact that in language teaching, and also in mainstream education in general, most of the academics are males and most of the practitioners are females (Pennycook, 1989) is a good piece of evidence supporting the validity of this claim. By assigning value to the knowledge generated by practitioners, feminists hope to tilt the balance in favor of women.

Different attempts have been made to define the concept of reflective practice by means of its components. van Manen (1977), for example, viewed reflection as comprised of three elements of technical rationality, practical reflection, and critical reflection, while Korthagen (2001) regards reflection as consisting of organized, rational, language-based decision making processes that also include non-rational, gestalt type operations. A useful typology for investigation of reflective teaching, however, is that of Jay and Johnson (2002). They regard reflective practice as consisting of three crucial steps of description, comparison, and criticism. The descriptive stage is the problem-setting stage during which the teacher determines which aspect of the classroom or her practice should form the core of her reflective attention. The second stage, i.e., comparison, is the phase during which the teacher starts “thinking about the matter for reflection from a number of different frameworks” (p. 78). It is during the comparative stage that the practitioner tries to make sense of other people’s viewpoints, or develops a new frame of reference (Schon, 1983) which will enable her to comprehend viewpoints which may run counter to the ones she holds. This ability to detach oneself from the limits of one’s experience will enable us to “discover meanings we might otherwise miss” (Jay and Johnson, 2002, p. 78). The ultimate result will be a more comprehensive understanding of the teaching context and its complexity. The last stage of reflection is what is termed as the critical stage. At this stage, the reflective practitioner evaluates different choices and alternatives and integrates the newly-acquired information with what she already knows. It is, in fact, the decision making stage resulting from careful analysis of the situation and deliberation. This last stage will form the basis for the formulation of alternative ways of teaching or approaching the problem on the part of the teacher.

3. Problematising reflection

Reflective teaching, however, in spite of its appeal and rationale, is not without its flaws, and blind adherence to this view of teacher education and classroom management may

lead to severe negative theoretical and practical consequences. The rest of the paper deals with the problems which arise from the application of a reflective paradigm to L2 teacher preparation.

4. Conceptual problems of reflective teaching

A major problem with the concept of reflective teaching is its historical origin, which has resulted in at times contradictory interpretations of the term. In fact, the term is traceable to so many influences that it has lost its real, core meaning and it means whatever academics want it to mean. There are “tensions in the discourse of reflection, for example, between reflection as expert knowledge and reflection as anti-expert knowledge” (Fendler, 2003, p. 17). Teachers are encouraged to develop their personal theories, theorize what they practice and practice what they theorize (Kumaravadivelu, 2001), while at the same time being able to reflect on one’s practice is an academic initiative which requires knowing the rules of reflective practice laid down by academia. In other words, (and ironically), the roots of reflection, as it is promoted in ELT teacher education circles, are found in academic circles, not in real contexts of practice.

From a historical viewpoint, there are big differences between reflection as it is formulated by Dewey, and the type of reflection promoted by Schon. In fact, most of the papers and books which attribute the genesis and growth of the idea to these two thinkers intentionally or inadvertently distort this difference. For Dewey reflection is a practice which will result in the professionalization of the field and is a means to control “action that is merely repetitive, blind, and impulsive” (Dewey, 1933, p. 17, quoted in Fendler, 2003, p. 18). Reflection is the practice by means of which one can replace personal, impulsive actions with rational, scientifically approved alternatives. Engaging in reflection is viewed to be a social mission for all the citizens of a society, since through reflection citizens, as well as teachers, develop self discipline, leading to the creation of a better society. Reflection, from Dewey’s point of view, is equal to professionalism, and “professionalism [is] associated with science and scientific methods as a means to raise social status” (Fendler, 2003, p. 19).

For Schon, however, reflection is an intuitive, personal, non-rational activity. The kind of definition Schon presents of reflection is of an artistic nature, in which practitioners get involved in the process of making “new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness” of the teaching experience (Schon, 1983, p. 61). In other words, when Schon uses the term reflection, what he has in mind is knowledge which is the direct result of practice, not the type of knowledge which has been based on scientific approaches advocated by Dewey. As Fendler sums it up “these days the meaning of professional reflection is riddled with tensions between Schon’s notion of practitioner-based intuition, on the one hand, and Dewey’s notion of rational and scientific thinking, on the other” (p. 19). An ahistorical reading of the term *reflection* has resulted in a state of confusion as to what exactly the term means:

Today’s discourse of reflection incorporates an array of meanings: a demonstration of self consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one’s authentic inner voice, a means to become a more reflective teacher, and a strategy to redress injustices in society. Reflective teaching has become a catchall term for competing programs of teacher education reforms (Fendler, 2003, p. 20).

Another conceptual problem related to the term reflection goes back to what Conway (2001) calls a *temporally truncated* aspect. Conway argues that whenever reflection is used in the professional literature dealing with teacher education, the kind of reflection which is viewed or evoked is of a retrospective type, i.e., one which values practitioners' past experiences. He regards the use of techniques such as autobiography and life history as examples of preoccupation with the past (p. 90). In other words, most of the emphasis has been on retrospective reflection-on-action, or the ability to analyze one's memories of the classroom events. The focus on the retrospective views of reflection, or analytical remembering, with its emphasis on what has gone before (not what will come in the future, what Freese (2006) calls anticipatory reflection), means that "teacher education currently concentrates on memory with the result that little attention is paid to imagination" (Conway, 2001, p. 104). However, it is by means of imagination, or a sense of creativity, that "teachers [will be]... able mentally to produce and compare possibilities for the future as they consider the different ends that may be achieved in their teaching" (Birmingham, 2004, p. 315), enabling them to secure better learning outcomes. This unintentional disregard for teachers' imagination and creativity seems ironic, since one of the main goals of reflective teaching is making teachers independent and autonomous in their classroom decisions, and this autonomy needs the foresight to get prepared to try other alternative solutions to the problems they confront in their day-to-day struggles.

A further problem with reflective teaching, as it is advocated and practiced in ELT teacher education programs, (as well as in mainstream education to some extent) is its disregard for critical aspects of teaching. In other words, the type of reflection advocated and promoted is not of a moral, emancipatory, ethical type (Birmingham, 2004; Griffiths, 2000; Zeichner, 1987). Reflective teaching needs to include a moral dimension, since teachers are asked to constantly think about themselves as practitioners and consider the social, ethical consequences of what they do. That is, "reflective practice tends to suggest that teaching is a moral activity in which it is important to constantly reflect upon the type of people that teachers are" (Halliday, 1998, p. 597). Reflection, in its purely cognitive sense, will not be responsive to the social dilemmas the global community is faced with and can not contribute to the improvement of human society, as envisioned by Dewey. Any type of reflection "should take into consideration the social, moral, and political aspects of teaching" (Jay and Johnson, 2002, p. 75). Taking into account the social limitations within which teachers and students interact is bound to be part of the reflective focus of teachers, since it is here that games of power are played out. In the words of Zeichner and Liston (1996), "if a teacher never questions the goals and the values that guide his or her work, the context in which he or she teaches, or never examines his or her assumptions, then it is our belief that this individual is not engaged in reflective teaching" (p. 1). Teaching is not a neutral activity, and it is inextricably related to broader social issues, issues such as justice, race, gender, poverty, discrimination ... etc. (Zeichner, 1991; Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2001). If teacher education in general, and reflective models in particular, are going to succeed, then training of teachers should "grapple with a theory of knowledge that can analyze social fractures, profound social violence, decisions of disregard, and how from such devastations, psychological significance can be made" (Britzman, 2000). In sum, personal teacher development can not be viewed as the end sought in reflective teaching; teacher development should result in the improvement of society in which the teacher lives.

5. Practical problems with reflective practice

Reflection is promoted by enlightened teacher educators as a way to improve the quality of teacher performance in the classroom; in addition, reflection is supposed to empower teachers and put them in par with their academic counterparts. The main liberating motive behind the reflective paradigm is moving away from theory towards practice due to the fact that “theory often fails to inform practice because the problems that arise in practice are generally neither caused by nor the result of teachers’ lack of knowledge about theory” (Johnson, 1996, p. 766). With such an orientation, one expects to find sound evidence to prove the effectiveness of reflective approaches and neat guidelines as to how the view can result in the professional development of practitioners. However, the problems reflective approaches encounter in actual teacher education contexts cast doubts on some of these claims.

A review of literature related to reflection will make it clear that there is little evidence that engaging teachers in reflection will result in higher student achievement and better teacher performance (Griffiths, 2000). In the words of Thiessen (2000), “While there is an extensive literature relevant to the reflective practice orientation, the conceptual rigor and empirical foundation of this work are uneven and less developed” (p. 521). Research shows that reflective practice can result in an increase in teacher job satisfaction and an improvement in interpersonal relationships with colleagues and students; it can also improve teachers’ sense of self-efficacy (Braun and Crumpler, 2004); however, there is no solid piece of evidence to show that engaging in reflection on the part of teachers will result in better learning outcomes on the part of students (Korthagen and Wubbles, 1995). In the field of language learning the present author could not find any research paper or article to show any real, meaningful improvement in student achievement resulting from reflective models of instruction. It seems that better learning outcomes should be taken as a matter of faith without any real empirical support. However, as a reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper pointed out, it is quite possible that there are pieces of evidence documented by teachers related to improvement of students’ learning resulting from reflective practices which have not found their way to academic journals due to publication policies or the discourse community standards of representation.

And when it comes to teacher performance regardless of what outcomes such a performance will have on students, again serious doubts come up. An interesting point which came out of the review of literature done for the present paper is that there is no evidence, again, to show that reflective models of teacher training will result in teacher creativity and innovation, an observation also made by Korthagen and Wubbles (1995). Not surprisingly, the gap between theory and practice still holds true; for those teachers who have gone through theoretical reflective instruction sessions there is no guarantee that an automatic transfer to their real life teaching will take place. In other words, there is no guarantee that teachers who have gone through reflective schemes will teach in a different way, specially bearing in mind the retrospective orientation of reflective practices and their emphasis on what has already happened in teachers’ professional careers. In most of the cases reflection will be just a repetition of the past or rediscovering what is already known. As Fendler (2003) puts it, “when reflection is understood as a turning back upon the self, the danger is that reflection will reveal no more than what is already known” (p. 20). Reflection will turn into a tool or a shield against outside influences and an instrument for the validation of what Fendler terms teachers’ “inner voice” (p. 20). Instead of looking for new possibilities

and solutions, teachers will try to rationalize their practices and justify the way they teach (Loughran, 2002).

This simplistic assumption is also manifest in some of the techniques used for promoting reflection among teachers. When teachers are asked to keep journals of what has happened in the classroom, the view is that by looking back at their own practices, teachers will be able to develop a sense of what works and what does not. It is as if just talking and thinking about your practice is enough to set teachers free, as if teaching is a self-corrective process which just requires reflection. This idea is very close to the confession traditions observed in some Christian sects, where by mere talking about your mistakes you can feel light and purged from your sins. Teachers, by noting down what they have done in the class, can go home with the clear conscience that they have been honest in what they have done and there is nothing more they can do. Fendler (2003) borrowing from Foucault, refers to this confessional aspect of journal writing and states that “the boundaries of public and private become available to critical scrutiny”, (p. 22) which in turn, make the disciplinary nature of journal writing of a questionable kind, since defense mechanisms to protect the ego might come into play. There is no objection to teachers feeling better about themselves and their own practices, but regarding such confessions of high professional value is an issue which must be revisited from time to time.

Another related issue to the journal technique is problem identification. The identification of teaching problems is not an automatic process, and there are many instances when teachers are not able to see what is wrong with their classroom performance. As Schon (1983) states, “professional practice has at least as much to do with finding the problem as with solving the problem found” (p. 18). Problem identification needs trained eyes, which many teachers, specially novice ones, lack. As was already mentioned, many teachers use their reflection for justifying what they do since they are incapable of finding what is wrong with their performance. Again, citing Schon, teacher educators should not lose sight of the fact that “real-world practice problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as given. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations, which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain” (p. 40). It will be very difficult for many teachers to break with the past and what they are used to and look at their journals as a defamiliarization process where known events are viewed from novel perspectives.

Even if teachers can identify what the problem is, there are many instances when they are incapable of taking any action. Here reference can be made to Fuller (1970) and her stages of teacher development. According to Fuller, teachers go through three stages in their professional growth, each stage being characterized by a shift of emphasis as to what is regarded as important. The emphasis of stage one is on the self; during this stage teachers want to present an ideal image of themselves as practitioners and they want to be liked by their students. Their practice at this stage is highly influenced by images of an ideal teacher they have had in the past. Stage two deals with teachers becoming concerned with classroom control and management. At this stage the ideal teacher image will be challenged by the reality of the classroom, and teachers become concerned with survival and integration into the professional context (i.e., school) they are in. Stages one and two could take a sizeable portion of a teacher’s professional development during his/her career. It is only in stage three that teachers develop the required confidence to dispense with classroom popularity issues and can concentrate on ways to improve students’ learning outcomes. Teachers at this stage are capable of developing their own teaching strategies and moving towards formulating their own teaching/learning views and philosophies. In other words,

teachers' development is a journey outwards during which they are basically concerned about the self (stage one), then move to a concern with the task (stage two) and end up with a concern about students and teaching outcomes (stage three) (Conway and Clark, 2003).

Turning back to reflective approaches to teaching, it becomes clear, based on Fuller's model, that reflection can not be introduced at all the stages of teacher development, since at early stages of their professional career many teachers are concerned with some self-image, approval problems. This means that if reflective teaching and classroom experiences are introduced too early they "could be counter-productive because survival strategies [are] uppermost" (Korthagen and Lagerwerf, 1996, p. 548) for many teachers. In any language teacher education/training scheme, room should be made for concentration on routines, since these are the routines that form the basis for future practice and reflection for many teachers (Atkinson, 2000); in other words, teachers need to practice their trade based on authority and accepted practice (or routines) for a while to feel secure and to be able to move to the next stages of development and professional growth; if reflection and demand for creativity and problem solving are introduced at an inappropriate early stage, the result might be low self confidence on the part of teachers and consequently low learning attainment on the part of students. In other words, since novice teachers are basically preoccupied with "making it", then they would be incapable of any real, meaningful creativity or innovation aimed at improved classroom performance.

A related implication of reflective emphasis in teacher education is the assumption that teachers have not been reflective and they should be taught, using academic models, as to how they can reflect. The first assumption is wrong, while the second one is problematic in principle.

Teachers have always been reflecting on what they have been doing in their classes. It would be impossible to imagine a context in which we have human interaction on a cognitive level and no reflection going on. In fact, it is an indispensable part of any classroom experience for both teachers and students to have either reflection-in-action or reflection-on-action when the actual teaching is going on or when the teaching is over. Any teaching situation is a problem solving context in which a practitioner makes numerous decisions requiring contemplation. The problem here arises from what is regarded as reflection by theoreticians and promoters of the concept. It seems that when the term "reflection" is used in the professional literature, only academic reflection or academically sanctioned reflection is approved of and promoted; teachers' voices are not heard at all in texts that promote reflective practice. As Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1991) put it:

Conspicuous by their absence from the literature of research on teaching are the voices of teachers, the questions and problems they pose, the frameworks they use to interpret and improve their practice, and the ways they define and understand their work lives (p. 83).

One comes across a paradox here; while teachers are supposed to become empowered and liberated from restrictions imposed by abstract theories through engagement in reflection and finding solutions to their classroom problems themselves, they are required to reflect the way researchers and academics have specified, and any other mental activity directed at performance improvement not sanctioned by the academia is doomed to oblivion. It seems that the academic world has become so immersed in theoretical discussions

that even practice is discussed and presented within a totally theoretical orientation. Fendler (2003) summarizes the dilemma as follows:

When teacher education research provides elaborate programs for teaching teachers to be reflective practitioners, the implicit assumption is that teachers are not reflective unless they practice the specific techniques promoted by researchers. It is ironic that the rhetoric about reflective practitioners focuses on empowering teachers, but the requirements of learning to be reflective are based on the assumption that teachers are incapable of reflection without direction from expert authorities (p. 23).

There is no doubt that teachers have been reflecting on their own practices, but this reflection has not been of the type approved of by academia, for any academic or political reason. That is why this breaking down and systematization of reflection is being widely discussed in academic journals. The most important downside of this academic orientation is the real loss of reflective spirit, since reflection is reduced to a set of techniques, instead of being a high-order cognitive/affective/socially conscious activity (Jay and Johnson, 2002).

A consequence of reducing reflection to a set of techniques is disregard for teacher personality. A perceptive, careful reading of the literature in the field of second language education will present readers with a puzzle: while L2 teaching/learning literature has become increasingly sensitive to individual differences among learners and the way they process information, it has almost totally turned a blind eye on individual differences among teachers. It is quite normal to talk of learners being introverts/extroverts, impulsive or thinking, and to highlight the ways such traits or personality features affect their performance in the class, and at the same time treat teachers in such a way that they have no personality of their own to influence the way they teach.

Teachers' personality, and more specifically their affective make up, can influence their tendency to get involved in reflection and will affect their reaction to their own image resulting from reflection. An interesting observation one can make is the absence of teacher personality in the literature dealing with teacher education and development. While all educators have become conscious of the role personality and affect play in students' learning outcomes and performance, teacher personality is a missing variable in most of the discussions on professional development. Like students, teachers can be slaves to their personality, responding in emotional terms to events that might appear of a cognitive nature.

An important relevant element in any discussion of teacher development and reflection is that of *self* (Korthagen, 2004). Self, which is a composite of images, beliefs and experiences, can determine the way teachers regard themselves both as human beings and professionals. This self is the result of the presence of events and individuals in the lives of teachers, childhood experiences and significant others who have been part of teachers' lives (Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe, 1994; Knowles, 1988). Our self-image is shaped by the role models we have had as learners; the way teachers teach is also influenced by the positive or negative role models they have had. In the words of Korthagen and Lagerwerf (1996, p. 546) "Student teachers may have only vaguely formulated philosophies of education, but often hold strong images of teachers, influenced by positive or negative experiences". The self is an entrenched, deep image all of us have of who we are and what it means to be a teacher. As Tusin (1999) points out, "behavior is a function of self-concept, which makes self-concept an essential aspect of teaching and learning to teach" (p. 27).

In most of the reflective literature, however, reflection is not directed at this deep level of self, but rather it is limited to techniques of reflection; in other words, what is being taught in most of teacher training and education programs is how to reflect; not what to reflect on (Korthagen, 2004). Any reflective practice which bypasses self and its implications will not result in any meaningful change in the way teachers view their mission as educators and teachers.

This self is closely linked with teachers' affective domain, since the definition we come up with for who we are is largely shaped by our emotional reactions to the environment and the people around us. If we decide to reflect on our profession, we need to learn to emotionally and cognitively reflect on ourselves too, and this self-reflection is the basis of any positive action towards self improvement. As Stanley states, (1999).

Emotions play an important role: they either prevent the implementation of a formal process of reflection or they actually stimulate the process... reflection is a complex cognitive and affective process which takes time and practice to develop and integrate into one's mind, heart and life (p. 111).

However, in second language teacher education one does not come across much reference to how affect can hinder or facilitate the way teachers reflect; in fact, the affective domain is left out of the discussions on reflection based on the assumption, it seems, that all teachers are emotionally the same and respond in the same way to the training provided to them.

This is an incorrect assumption, since "teachers may be fearful of reflecting on their teaching if they experience blame, guilt or anger at themselves for not having taught well or for having adversely affected the students' learning" (Stanley, 1999, p. 112). That is, if teachers' emotional make up is not taken into account, teachers may not get engaged in reflection since it might highlight some features in their selves and profession which are negative (from their own personal viewpoint), and which might prove detrimental to their mental well being.

Reflection, in addition to having implications for the self, will have also implications for the self and its relationship with other people. As was mentioned, we develop a sense of the self based on the influences we have experienced as a result of interaction with others and our day to day interpretation of our lives' events. Part of these others is our colleagues, or the discourse community we are striving to become a member of. The implications that engaging in superficial reflection will have on teachers' membership in their discourse or professional community is the issue I will turn to now.

6. Reflection and discourse community

The rise of reflective philosophy is largely due to its empowering aspect, that is, reflective teaching is supposed to empower teachers to take care of their own classroom problems and to be less dependent on outside, academic help for guidance. It does not mean, however, that teaching is solely a practical activity with no theoretical foundation or orientation. Teaching is both practice and theory, and reflective teaching is supposed to create a fair balance between the two by assigning an equal value to the practical insights of teachers and practitioners. The purpose of reflection, in other words, is not rejection of theory, but promotion of practical knowledge to the level of theory.

What is happening in reality, however, is an undue overemphasis on practical knowledge at the expense of its propositional counterpart. In the words of [Hedgcock \(2002\)](#) “models that prescribe reflective practice may unintentionally underplay the need for novice L2 teachers to study language, learning, and pedagogy explicitly in their preparation courses” (p. 300), causing tension between different interpretations of reflection as expert versus anti-expert knowledge, a contrast highlighted by [Fendler \(2003\)](#) and mentioned earlier in this paper.

At the beginning of the paper, I referred to a distinction made by [Kessels and Korthagen \(1996\)](#) between conceptual and perceptual knowledge. A similar distinction is made by [Thiessen \(2000\)](#) between propositional knowledge and practical knowledge. Propositional knowledge is one which is at an abstract, theoretical level, while practical knowledge refers to insights gained as a result of experience or experimentations. Propositional knowledge is what is mostly found in academic settings, while practical knowledge is found mostly in schools and classrooms.

There are at least four benefits of making teacher trainees familiar with propositional knowledge, according to [Thiessen \(2000\)](#):

Propositional knowledge can serve at least four functions.... The first is to guide what student teachers learn. The second is to offer a lens through which to analyze and reproduce or reconstruct accounts of practice. The third is to act as benchmark for assessing the application of certain approaches in controlled (time, pace, place, form) situations. The fourth is to provide departure points for development of more personalized theories about teaching (p. 530).

It is mainly through mastery of propositional knowledge that novices gain access to and get admitted into their respective discourse communities. Without knowing the language of the community (i.e., propositional or declarative knowledge), one would be left out of any discussion which might result in the development of the self, since “there is no essential unsocialized way of thinking that can be depended upon as the basis for critical reflection” ([Fendler, 2003, p. 20](#)). If novices to the profession are not familiar with the field’s theoretical knowledge, they will lose the chance of developing their full potentials ([Hedgcock, 2002](#)).

According to [Geisler \(1994\)](#) quoted in [Hedgcock \(2002\)](#) becoming a member of a discourse community will require three types of knowledge or worlds, namely the world of domain content, the world of narrative, and the world of abstractions, or abstract world. The world of domain content refers to the basic concepts and corpus of knowledge in a field. The narrative world is the world of practice and day to day experience. The third world is the abstract world, in which we have text production which may confirm or disapprove of a community’s norms (in the form of papers and talk). In other words, for a novice to be integrated into a discourse community, knowledge of content (in the case of language, knowing the language and having adequate mastery in its use), knowledge of techniques and strategies, as well as knowledge of terms, signs and symbols used by the professionals of the field are needed for a full integration to take place. As [Freeman \(1996\)](#) states: “using the jargon makes you part of the group that thinks about and acts upon things in a particular way” (p. 236). If novices do not benefit from the dominant modes of discourse in their community, then they can not participate in that discourse and can not influence it in any positive way. Quoting [Christie \(1985, p. 22\)](#) quoted in [Hedgcock \(2002\)](#), “learning the genres of one’s culture is both part of entering into it with understanding,

and part of developing the necessary ability to change it”. Without knowing about the norms and dominant frames of mind of their discourse community, teachers are doomed to the unappealing position of a practitioner.

Reflective practice, if it excludes theoretical discussions, will limit teacher development to matters of techniques and procedures, blocking any attempt to gain higher recognition and status in the discourse community. Teacher trainees need to become familiar with the metadiscourse of their field (Elbow, 1998) to be able to challenge the existing theories and to construct their own personal views of learning and practice (Hedgcock, 2002). It is then that teachers can claim an equal status with theoreticians and academics and can legitimize their personal theories, since “personal theories need to be revealed (at different levels) so that they can be scrutinized, challenged, compared to public theories, and then confirmed or reconstructed... personal and public theories need to be viewed as living, intertwining tendrils of knowledge which grow from and feed into practice” (Griffiths and Tann, 1992, p. 71).

Effective reflection, then, would be impossible unless a sound grasp of its basic principles is established and a mastery of the discourse norms and features of the community achieved. If proponents of teacher autonomy and reflection do not know the tools (the terms, signs and concepts) for communication with the rest of the teaching community members, then their ideas and practice will become too “local, parochial and personal in foci” (Gomez et al., 2000, p. 746), quoted in Wilson and l’Anson (2006, p. 356) to be of any real recognizable value for the rest of the profession. As the quotation by Gardner at the beginning of this paper indicates, education is not an activity to be assigned to individuals; too much reliance on practice at an individual level without an adequate grasp of the basic shared principles of the profession will reduce teaching to a trial and error activity in which instruction might be limited to some narrow concerns of day to day survival (Gore, 2001).

7. Conclusion

The objective of this paper is not to deny the value of teacher reflection since reflection will give practitioners a stronger sense of autonomy, giving them authority to make decisions in the classroom instead of waiting for academic sanctions as to what can or can not be done. However, care and caution must be exercised in embracing the concept, and as teacher educators, we must be aware of the limitations and misinterpretations of the idea.

From a theoretical perspective, the differences between Schon’s ideas on the one hand, and those of Dewey, on the other, need to be taken on board if a better understanding of the concept of reflection is to be achieved. It must become clear whether reflection will make teachers more professional, and hence more integrated into their discourse community, or it makes them more independent from their fellow practitioners by giving them personal authority in matters of the classroom. Having a clear vision of where teachers are going to end up is one of the priorities for language teacher training communities.

From a practical viewpoint, it must be borne in mind that reflection is not an end, but a means to an end; the end sought here is better student learning and more efficient teacher performance. As long as there is evidence that reflective practice is helping teachers to achieve these goals, there would be no objection to its application. However, in the absence of such evidence, caution should be the order of the day, leaving the door open to other possibilities and models of teacher education.

In training language teachers, realism should take the place of idealism; of course, it does not mean that idealism is bad; idealism will make us search for a better world and do our best to create that world. But too much idealism will make us lose sight of what is real and what constraints we have to deal with if we are to reach our objectives.

Realism tells us that there are limits to what teachers can do in a class. As was pointed out at the beginning of the paper, we are living in the post method era; teachers have shown their resistance to academically tailored methods since such methods could not accommodate their teaching needs. Academics, it appears, have heard these voices of dissent, and enlightened discussions of this no-method situation are one of the outcomes of this change of attitude.

However, the post method era has not done much for practitioners, since as Bell (2003) points out, language teachers have never been concerned with post method; method has been an academic invention of little practical value for people who had to deal with the day to day problems of real teaching. In addition, the reality of the post method era itself can be questioned since in spite of teachers' apparent freedom of action, standard tests designed by education departments and textbooks which require adherence to even the smallest details through their teacher guides mean that, in reality, not much freedom is offered to teachers.

In this context, promoting reflective teaching without properly evaluating its consequences will add to the confusion of our time (Britzman, 2000). At its best, reflective teaching can provide language teachers with a set of techniques to become more conscious of their own actions and feelings in and outside classrooms; at its worse, it can result in isolation from the discourse community.

It is good to reflect, but reflection itself also requires reflection.

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