

The Effect of Teachers' Self-reflection on EFL Learners' Writing Achievement

REALISATION D'ECRITURE SUR L'EFFET DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L' AUTO-REFLEXION POUR LES APPRENANTS D'EFL

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Abstract

The concept of teachers' reflection refers to the extent to which EFL teachers contemplate and reflect on their teaching experience in the classroom in order to improve their teaching skills. This study sought to explore the effect of EFL teacher's reflection on their learners' writing achievement. Participants of the study included 100 EFL teachers teaching in Mashhad language institutes and their 1000 EFL learners. Reflective teaching instrument designed by Akbari and Behzadpour (2007) was administered to the teachers of the study. Also, their EFL learners' Grade Point Averages (GPAs) of their writing scores were calculated. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that teacher's reflection significantly affects EFL learners' writing achievement. This paper concludes with some implications for teaching and directions for further research.

Key words: Teacher; Self-reflection; Learner; Writing achievement

Résumé

Le concept de la réflexion des enseignants se réfère à la mesure dans laquelle les enseignants de l'APL contempler et réfléchir sur leur expérience d'enseignement en classe en vue d'améliorer leurs compétences pédagogiques. Cette étude visait à explorer l'effet de la réflexion EFL enseignant sur la réussite d'écriture de leurs apprenants. Les participants de l'étude comprennent 100 enseignants EFL l'enseignement à Mashhad instituts de langue. Instrument pédagogique réfléchissant conçu par Akbari et Behzadpour (2007) a été administré aux participants de l'étude. Les résultats de l'analyse statistique révèle que la

réflexion de l'enseignant affecte significativement atteinte écrit apprenants EFL.

Mots-clés: Enseignant; Auto-réflexion; L'apprenant; La réalisation d'écriture

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INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Reflection

Post-method pedagogy in the realm of EFL/ESL has been characterized with the motto of theorizing what is practiced and practicing what is theorized. This motto summarizes one of the most important duties of an EFL/ESL teacher that is reflection. Teacher's reflection at the heart of post-method pedagogy refers to teachers' moments of reflecting upon their previous experiences in order to improve their teaching. The objective of this study is to investigate the possible relationship between teachers' reflection and teachers' success using two questionnaires as the main instruments of research.

The post-method era in language teaching is characterized with a movement away from fixed methodological packages for teaching language toward a concern with teachers' professional expertise, growth, wisdom, experience, learners' needs, the context of teaching, and the political conditions of the environment in which teaching takes place (Prabhu, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Richards, 2002).

This is an indication of the importance of teachers'

professional development in recent years (Harmer, 2001, cited in Al-Hashmi, 2004). Also of importance is teachers' ability to go beyond existing norms and taken for granted habits and their ability to practice innovative ideas (Al-Jabri, 2009). One way for teachers to develop professionally is to use reflection as an indispensable part of their practice (Calderhead & Gates, 1993).

B. Review of Literature

Reflection is a purposeful act of thinking which seeks solutions to problems encountered in the process of teaching and learning (Loughran, 1996). According to Farrell (2008: 2) teachers "collect data about their teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching."

The rise of reflective practice in the field of ELT can be considered as one of direct results of the post method debate (Prabhu, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). In the methods era, the only legitimate form of knowledge was a public theoretical form which was called "conceptual" by Kessels and Korthagen (1996) and teachers' knowledge drawn from their experiences was dismissed as "practitioner lore" (Crandall, 2000: 40). Procedural or practical knowledge was considered inferior to theoretical knowledge and theoreticians were highly esteemed (Johnson, 1996). In this context, the revolutionary debate about post method started a plethora of changes in the practice of the EFL teacher including the concept of reflective teaching.

Most articles in the literature trace the origins of reflective practice 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 brought to fore the discussion of treating professional actions as experimental and reflecting upon actions and their consequences. However, his work was inspired by much earlier Eastern and Western philosophers and educators, including Buddha, Plato, and Lao-tzu. According to a more recent work by Leitch & Day (2000), being an effective "reflective practitioner" is more than just improving practice and developing additional competence. Reflective practice in ESL/EFL is based on understandings of self, society and moral purposes and involves stopping, noticing, evaluating and inquiring about problems encountered in different situations.

Most definitions of reflective teaching in the literature are based on Dewey's concepts (Martin & Wedman, 1998). The rise of the reflective practice coincided with the popularity of qualitative research based on ethnography. Donald Schon built on Dewey's ideas on reflection in the 1980s by introducing two terms: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. Reflection-in-action is the real life reflection that teachers engage in as they face a problem in the classroom while teaching. It

happens when professionals face a unique situation. In this situation, rather than using theories or past experiences, they draw on their repertoire of examples, reframe the situation and find solutions (Griffiths, 2000). On the other hand, reflection-on-action occurs after the event. This is the most common type of reflection and is done in groups. However, both types of reflection start with a problem. In Munby's and Russell's (1990) words, "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: 50).

Another trend contributing to the reflective movement is feminism. According to Fendler (2003), feminists believe that expert knowledge is assumed to be usually generated by masculine mechanism and this masculine nature of knowledge has put women in a subordinate role. Reflection on mechanisms of knowledge production and changing those mechanisms in order to give more voice to women can be considered as a driving force behind the rise of reflective practice in education.

Several studies have tried to break the concept of reflection into its components. For example, van Manen (1977) considered reflection as consisting of three elements of technical rationality, practical reflection and critical reflection, while Korthagen (2001) views reflection as comprised of organized, rational, language based decision making processes that include non-rational, gestalt type operation (Akbari, 2007). Jay and Johnson (2002) came up with a step by step description of reflective practice. They consider reflection as comprised of three important steps of description, comparison and criticism. The descriptive stage is the stage where problem is formulated. In this stage, the teacher decides to focus his reflective attention on a certain aspect of his practice. The comparison stage is the phase in which the teacher thinks about the subject for reflection from different frameworks. According to Schon (1983), it is during the comparison stage that the practitioner tries to understand other people's views. The critical stage is the last stage of reflection in which the practitioner assesses different alternatives and integrates the new information with what he knows from his experience. This is actually the decision making stage which will form the basis for designing alternative ways of teaching or approaching problems.

Research on Reflection

There are a few empirical studies in the realm of TEFL/ TESL focusing on reflection. Recently, reflection has come to be regarded as an important teacher-related factor in the field of TEFL/ TESL by researchers specially empiricists. They began to test its impact on or its relationship with other variables empirically (Akbari & Behzadpour, 2007).

McCollum (1997) investigated the effect of providing teachers with a framework for reflection during an early field experience on preservice teachers' practice. Four preservice teachers were instructed to use reflection based on Tsangaridou & O'sullivan's (1994) Reflective Framework for Teaching. The results of the study showed that pre-service teachers demonstrated the ability to consistently describe, justify, and critique meaningful events that occurred in the teaching/learning environment. Moreover, the preservice teachers found this experience a valuable one. They believed that this early field experience has set a framework and a guideline for their future professional development.

Gimenez (1999) discusses the contribution of teacher thinking to the notion of reflection. He stresses the need for teachers to think more systematically about their work, and specifically to make their own beliefs about language learning more explicit. The researcher also discusses different approaches to reflective teaching. She suggests that teachers' understanding about the language learning process should derive from a "dialectical relationship between knowledge generated by personal experience and by research conducted externally." (p. 141).

Kang (2004) investigated in-service teachers' learning through reflection activities in an in-service training program whose goal was to develop teachers' reflection-in-practice. The findings revealed that reflection assisted teachers to take more control of their teaching actions, and to find justifications for their unintended actions. The teachers participating in Kang's study viewed reflection as a way to change their teaching practices.

Coro (2004) (cited in Farrell, 2008) investigated teachers' reflections about methods for adult literacy instruction vis-à-vis their beliefs about effective adult literacy instruction. He found that in some cases, "participation in practitioner inquiry research appeared to correlate with the use of more student-centered approaches" (p. 213).

Tigelaar, Dolmans, Meijer, DeGrave, and Van der Vleuten (2008) explored the relationship between medical teachers' interactions and collaborative reflection processes during peer meetings. The participants of the study included five experienced teachers and a teacher trainer. Three peer meetings were recorded (videotaped and transcribed). The results of the analysis showed that the interactions promoted reflection on technical and moral, political and emotional issues. "Guiding/directing", "proposing and alternative" and "exploring an alternative" comprised the principal interactions in the peer meetings.

Y-T Sung, K-E Chang, W-C Yu and T-H Chang (2009) proposed the design of a structured digital portfolio equipped with multiple aids (e.g. self-assessment, peer assessment, discussion and journal writing) for the professional development of teachers. The study also evaluated reflection and professional development as demonstrated in digital teaching portfolios with multiple

supporting measures. The participants of the study were forty-four in-service substitute teachers who were asked to take a course of classroom assessment and use a Web-based portfolio system. Based on the framework of teacher reflective thinking developed by Sparks-Langer et al., the researchers found that most participants demonstrated moderate levels of reflection in their journals and only one-third of them showed the highest level of reflection. They also found that the professional knowledge of teachers about classroom assessment improved significantly during the construction of portfolios.

Valencia (2009) conducted a qualitative, descriptive-interpretative study to describe the way the knowledge base of five in-service teachers had been constructed. Data were collected through journals and interviews in a seven month period. The results of the study showed that teachers' knowledge base is the result of life experience and educational process. The components of knowledge base favored by the teachers included content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge and the knowledge about their role, their students and the teaching context. The findings of the study indicated that the knowledge base of language teacher education should not merely be based on the knowledge provided during professional training; it should also be understood against the background of teachers' language learning stories and instructional practice experiences.

Al-Jabri (2009) investigated EFL teachers' attitudes towards reflection through questionnaires and interviews. The findings of the study showed that teachers considered reflection as a tool for professional development, a tool that helped them improve their teaching. The participants also reported a high level of engagement in activities which involved or provided opportunities for reflection.

According to Farrell (1998), reflection can help EFL teachers in different ways. First, teachers' reflection on what they do in the English classroom helps them go beyond routine method-based behavior. Second, it helps teachers prepare for every session and thus takes away any anxiety by relaxing them. Also, reflection as a sign of intelligent action is an asset that makes teachers into distinguished educated people. Finally, reflection turns teachers into professionals who are both capable of practicing existing theories effectively and forming theories of their own (Farrell, 1998).

Furthermore, Kumaravadivelu (2001) mentions three alternative pedagogical principles: particularity, practicality, and possibility. He proposes "a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy that is based on true understanding of local linguistic, socio-cultural, and political particularity" (p. 544). His critical pedagogy is against the old dichotomy between theorists as producers of method and teachers as consumers and employers of teaching methods.

Benefits of reflective practice have also been pinpointed by Florez (2001) who emphasizes the

concepts of flexibility, practicality, and professionalism among others. Reflection can be used in different areas of teaching including classroom tasks, teaching context, lesson purposes, etc. (Reed, Davis, & Nyabanyaba, 2002). Reflection is by nature an excellent tool for EFL/ESL teachers' professional development and it can even be used by those who are pressed for time. A number of researchers have highly recommended that reflection be included in teacher education programs for both pre-service and in-service teachers (Wallace, 1991; Richards & Lockhart, 1994)

Thus, the present study focuses on the possible effect of Iranian EFL teachers' self-reflection on their language learners' writing achievement.

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Setting and Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 100 EFL teachers teaching adults in language schools in Mashhad. They were both male and female and have at least a year of experience. The other group of participants included 1000 EFL learners studying at the intermediate and above levels from the same language institutes in Mashhad where the teacher participants of the study were chosen. They all were the students of the teachers who participated in the study.

1.2 Instrumentation

Reflective Teaching Instrument

This study makes use of a reflective teaching instrument devised by Akbari and Behzadpour (2007) (see appendix A). This instrument is a five-point Likert scale which has been designed based on six factors (elements): cognitive, metacognitive, affective, practical, critical, and moral. The five options 'Never', 'Rarely', 'Often', and 'Always' give the impression of taking a series of 42 items in a multiple-choice test format. Reliability of the sum scale computed using Cronbach's coefficient Alpha is 0.90. Moreover, Reliability of each factor of the scale is completely acceptable – all are above 0.7 (Akbari & Behzadpour, 2007).

1.3 Interview

An unstructured interview with 10 teachers of each group of highly reflective and low reflective teachers was conducted to obtain information on the teachers' attitudes toward reflection and reflective teaching. The amount of time spent on each interview ranged between half an

hour and forty-five minutes. The reason why this format was used for the interviews was to let the teachers convey what was on their minds easily in a relaxed atmosphere and with no constraints inflicted upon them by the research agenda (Dornyei, 2007). As Dornyei (2007) puts it, such types of interview are best for studies which focus on "the deep meaning of particular phenomena".

1.4 Data collection

The researcher first obtained permission from the language institutes participating in the study to provide him with a list of teachers who taught adults at the intermediate, higher intermediate, and advanced levels. Then after obtaining the consent of the teachers, the teacher's reflection instrument was administered to the teachers in each institute. Participants were asked to answer the question "Would you also like to take part in an interview to contribute more?" on the questionnaire. Next, after obtaining the necessary permission, the researcher visited the participating classes at the intermediate and higher levels in each institute to administer the SILL and the Characteristics of successful EFL teachers' questionnaire. Students were assured that the results would be confidential and their teachers would not see the results of the questionnaires. They were then asked to write the names of their teachers and their level. The testing departments of all the English language institutes were then requested to present a copy of the writing scores of every class participating in the study to the researcher at the end of the term.

1.5 Data Analysis

Pearson correlation co-efficient formula and an independent T-test formula were used to analyze the collected data.

1.6 Scoring Procedures

The reflective teaching instrument was scored on a 5-point Likert scale from A ("rarely") to E ("always"). The "rarely" response was scored as 1 point and the response "always" was scored as 5 points on all items.

2. RESULTS

2.1 Descriptive Statistics

As it is done in any empirical study, in this part, the basic descriptive statistics, namely, mean, standard deviation, range, minimum, and maximum scores are reported. The calculations have been performed for all the instruments as shown in table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.	Variance
	Statistics	Statistics	Statistics	Statistics	Statistics	Statistics	Statistics
Teacher's reflection	100	155	53	204	130.5	13	145

2.2 Investigating the First Research Question

The first research question was “Is there any significant relationship between EFL teachers’ reflection and their students’ writing achievement?” In order to investigate this relationship, the statistical technique of Pearson-product moment Correlation was used. Table 2 summarizes the correlation coefficient between the two variables.

Table 2
Correlation Between Teacher’s Reflection and Learners’ Writing Achievement

		TR	WA
TR	Pearson Correlation	1	.78*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N		100
WA	Pearson Correlation	.78*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	100	

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05level (2-tailed)
 TR: teacher’s reflection. WA: writing achievement.

As observed, the correlation coefficient was calculated to be 0.78, which is significant at $P < 0.05$. This correlation is moderately high and positive. Therefore, higher

Table 4
Determining the Significance of the Mean Scores Difference in Writing Achievement

		Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
GE	Equal variances assumed	.166	.684	9.064	99	.000	2.70427	.29837	2.11485	3.29369
	Equal variances not assumed			9.109	99.99	.000	2.70427	.29689	2.11776	3.29078

The above table shows that the difference between the two mean scores is significant, $t(99) = 9.06$, $p < .05$, and learners with highly reflective teachers have higher writing achievement scores than those with low reflective teachers.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The concept of teachers’ reflection refers to the extent to which EFL teachers contemplate and reflect on their teaching experience in the classroom in order to get ahead in their careers. The researcher in this study tried to investigate to what extent teachers’ reflection may influence their students’ writing achievement.

The findings of the study showed significant correlation coefficients between the participant teachers’ reflection and their students’ writing achievement. Highly reflective teachers who believed they were responsible to take control of their teaching tried harder than those with lower levels of reflection. Their main instrument was

teachers’ reflection leads to better student achievement in writing.

2.3 Investigating the Second Research Question

The second research question seeks answer to the question “are there any significant differences between the writing achievement of the learners whose teachers are highly reflective and that of those whose teachers are low reflective?”. Table 3 shows the mean scores of the two groups of learners.

Table 3
A Comparison of Mean Writing Scores of Students with Highly and Low Reflective Teachers

	TR	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
WA	High	48	86.20	5.94	.214
	LOW	52	77.50	5.76	.205

TR: teacher’s reflection. WA: writing achievement.

As shown above, the mean score of learners whose teachers are highly reflective is 86.20 and that of those whose teachers are low reflective is 77, 50. Table 4 demonstrates whether this difference in mean scores is significant or not.

reflection and contemplation on their teaching practice, spending more time to receive feedback from their learners, supervisors, and colleagues to solve problems they encounter in the classroom on a daily basis. Figure 1 illustrates the continuum representing the reflection-writing achievement relationship.

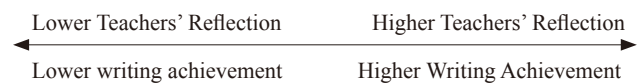


Figure 1
The Reflection-Writing Achievement Relationship Continuum

Interview sessions were also held with both highly and low reflective teachers. Each group comprised of 10 teacher participants. Subjects were asked to speak freely about their attitudes toward teacher’s reflection. Highly reflective teachers reported higher levels of motivation than low reflective teachers. They believed that their careers had benefited significantly from reflective practice.

On the other hand, low reflective teachers were mostly (9 out of 10) unaware of the reflective teaching paradigm. Following a description offered by the interviewer, they showed positive attitudes toward reflective practice. Some of the low reflective teachers found reflective practice so interesting that they said they would certainly try it in their classes.

Teacher's reflection requires teachers to take control of their professional development. This can only be achieved through an ongoing process of self-evaluation and self-assessment. EFL teachers have to stop following predesigned methods blindly. They are to question these methods and try to rethink them considering the context of their teaching. Through action research they can come up with their own theories and implement them in the classroom.

Reflective teaching highlights the importance of classroom research (McKay, 2005). This type of research helps teachers deal with problems they face in the classroom on a daily basis. It helps them evaluate every nuance of their classroom experience and come up with solutions that work in the context of their classroom.

Farrell (1998) believes that reflection helps teachers in four main ways:

(1) Reflective teaching helps free the teachers from impulse and routine behavior. (2) Reflective teaching allows teachers to act in a deliberate, intentional manner and avoid the "I don't know what I will do today" syndrome. (3) Reflective teaching distinguishes teachers as educated human beings since it is one of the signs of intelligent action. (4) As teachers gain experience in a community of professional educators, they feel the need to grow beyond the initial stages of survival in the classroom to reconstructing their own particular theory from their practice. (Conclusion section, para. 1)

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