

MIRRORS FOR AN ESL CLASSROOM: USING REFLECTIVE TEACHING TO EXPLORE CLASSROOM PRACTICE AND ENHANCE PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

Reflection is described as the way in which people learn from their experience and seen as a deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement. Reflective teaching means looking at what you do in the classroom, thinking about why you do it, and thinking about if it works ~ a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in our classroom, and by analysing and evaluating it, we identify and explore our own practices and underlying beliefs. Reflective teaching is significant and it has a high potential of bringing about desirable improvements and changes in the teacher s instructions albeit learners performance. Reflective teaching is a means of professional growth which begins in our classroom.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, Malaysia, like many other developing countries, has undertaken numerous changes in educational strategy aiming at both expanding the educational system and improving the quality of education. These changes have taken many forms which include syllabus revisions, textbook formats, examination formats and others. Above all, the most obvious change has been towards the position of English language in the country which has directly affected the change in the national curriculum and the teacher education schemes.

Teachers of English in Malaysia

Training programmes for teachers of English are conducted by the Ministry of Education. These programmes include pre-service and in-service training given by the different divisions of the Ministry. The Teacher Education Division is the division entrusted with the responsibility of training both the pre-service and in-service teachers. The following are courses run by the Teacher Education Division for English language teaching:

Pre-Service : Primary School Education
Secondary School Education
One year Diploma in Education

In-Service : Immersion Courses - 2 weeks
- 14 weeks
One year Specialist Course in TESL

Short courses focusing on in-service training are also organised by other divisions of the Ministry to upgrade teaching skills or to expose teachers to new techniques or aspects of methodology. The Curriculum Development Centre organizes courses for KBSR and KBSM; the Schools Division has courses for the Class Reader Programme and the Examination Syndicate runs courses on Techniques of Conducting Oral Examinations.

Courses for English teachers at degree level are conducted by the local universities namely the Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, and Universiti Utara Malaysia. A twinning programme for the pre-service and in-service teachers of English has commenced in June 1992 and is a collaborative effort between the Teacher Education Division represented by MPIK and Institutions in the United Kingdom. It is part of an effort to upgrade the skills of the English teachers and increase the number of graduate TESL teachers in Malaysia.

In-Service Teacher Education in Malaysia

The in-service courses for teachers of English in Malaysia were adopted as the Malaysian Ministry of Education's main strategy for orientating teachers to the new KBSR English curriculum. According to Noor Azmi (1991) this strategy was adopted first because it enabled the Ministry of Education to ensure that every KBSR teacher received the required exposure to the curriculum within the limited time available for the implementation. Second, it was considered to be one of the best ways to create opportunities through which teachers could interact with each other and react to the new curriculum. The need to look at the in-service courses in relation to the implementation of KBSR was heightened by the fact that they would play an important part in the implementation of a new national secondary school to be introduced in the country from 1988.

Despite being on the receiving end of a great deal of knowledge about the teaching and learning strategy recommended for the KBSR which went along the

following lines, as stated by Noor Azmi (1991: 97):

- an integrated approach in teaching and learning;
- variety in teaching methods with group teaching for same ability or mixed ability groups, class teaching and individual instructions;
- variety in learning activities;
- flexibility in the choice of content and in the use of teaching methods and aids;
- continuous evaluation that is incorporated into the teaching and learning process; and
- an informal classroom atmosphere with spaces to allow varied activities, many teachers are still reluctant to practice the innovation in their classroom because on the one hand, they did not know how and on the other, they were not given any professional guidance and assistance as to how to carry out the innovation.^f

In observations carried out by the Committee for the Planning and Coordination of the English language programme in schools throughout the country in 2000, it was revealed that very little group activity was being carried out, insufficient attention was paid to the teaching of listening skills, there was not much evidence of wider reading and the teacher of writing was not giving sufficient attention to the extended expression of ideas. Teaching and learning materials or aids which had been produced by the Ministry of Education, State Education Departments and local universities had not been adequately utilised by the English teachers. This reflected the situation stated by the Education Minister (*News Straits Times*, 2000:6), The level of students proficiency in the English language is still low and effective measures must be taken to address this problem from as early as possible in a student's school life.^f

Looking at it now from a critical point of view, I can say that the full benefit of the in-service courses has not been attained. This point is made in a study by Noor Azmi(1991) in which he indicates that the evidence suggests the in-services courses had a surface effect but not the impact that could bring deep assimilation of all the development features. He further claims that one could attribute this to the weaknesses in the courses, which were informative rather than experiential, or in terms of other factors such as the course techniques, the limited time allotted for the courses and the credibility of some teacher trainers.

Based on my personal experience, I strongly feel that the ineffectiveness of the in-service courses in Malaysia is due to the absence of instrumental content. Most of the in-service courses were conducted along the lines of a content model where the emphasis was primarily on information giving (Noor Azmi, 1991:122). Teachers were not given the opportunity to use the new teaching and learning strategies or principles to generate individual lessons, that is, to develop model lessons during the courses. According to Doyle and Ponder (1978), a change proposal must describe a procedure in terms which depict classroom contingencies as evidence has shown that only after teachers have experienced the innovation in the actual classroom setting - that is, have translated the proposal into concrete procedures - does any full sense of understanding result.

Another significant reason for the ineffectiveness lies in the fact that there were no follow-up activities either in the form of meetings or supervision and post-course guidance for the teachers. According to Breen (1989), follow-up meetings have two major functions: first to maintain the momentum of planned innovations and investigations initiated by the local and training workshops and, second, to provide that important support during the year between the workshops so that teachers can share progress and difficulties with colleagues in their group. Follow-up activities should be made integral parts of training strategies as they are the linkages between the in-service courses and the actual classroom practices (Noor Azmi, 1991). These would provide the teacher trainers with a view of how theory and practice are integrated. As it appears, most teacher trainers have the conception that knowledge of the appropriateness of the relevant theories would change practice but Fullan (1989) concludes from his study that teachers understand new conceptions by first trying out practices and then reflecting on and discussing the underlying changes.

Therefore, in my view, in a developmental educational programme, the need to include follow-up activities is particularly important not only because of the above reasons but most importantly because it would provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect. In-service courses should now concentrate on feasible goals which can initiate and emphasise the process of reflection which would then set the stage for the continuous professional development of teachers. Rudduck (1985) claims that critical judgment and reflection are crucial to the task of improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. If teachers are encouraged to go beyond the surface realities of the classroom and reflect on their teaching, they would not only become better teachers, but also, it would set in motion the process of thinking about teaching which would enable continuous professional education to take place (Brumfit, 1979). Richards (1990) and Zeichner (1981-82) share a similar view which

states that reflection is acknowledged to be a key component of many models of teacher development and the skills of self-inquiry and critical thinking are seen as central for continued professional growth. As I share these views of education in which reflection is an essential characteristic of teaching and learning, I believe that English teachers in Malaysia need to be convinced of its worth.

Why Is It Important?

Reflecting on my teaching experience, I must agree with Kyriacou (1994) who states that many teachers demonstrate a naturally reflective style in their daily work. Based on my experience and observations, I could say that a number of English teachers do think about their teaching and they have possibly adopted an uncritical and mechanistic approach to their teaching for much of the time. As a result of this, their reflection may be unintentional as well as unfocused and unsystematic. Kyriacou (1994:3) further stresses that reflection goes beyond simply thinking about one's teaching on an occasional basis. Rather, it refers to an orientation towards one's own practice which is based on inquiry and problem-solving. It refers to a stance in which teachers positively seek to explore their current practice.

Dewey cited in Pollard and Tann (1993) states that reflection requires the development of requisite attitudes which include

- a. introspection, that is, engaging in thoughtful reconsideration of all that happens in a classroom with an eye toward improvement;
- b. open-mindedness, that is, willing to consider new knowledge and willing to admit the possibility of difficulty; and,
- c. willingness to accept responsibility for decisions and actions.

The above points highlight the need to develop reflection among the English teachers as a means of promoting interventions for classroom events and considering what the implications are for the future.

Besides practicing and sharpening their skills, English teachers need time for reflection. They should be able to stand back from their experiences accumulated while teaching and facilitating classes, and review their thoughts and feelings as teachers. They should reflect backward over their professional development to date, as well as reflect forward over the development that they would like to take place in the future.

Time has to be made for reflection so that English teachers can review their work. Through reflection, they can develop the effectiveness of their approaches, techniques, methods and resources, and also their effectiveness as teachers of the

second language. The importance of reflection to ESL teachers is captured in the following statement:

“Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching. Teachers who are better informed as to the nature of their teaching are able to evaluate their stage of professional growth and what aspects of their teaching they need to change. In addition, when critical reflection is seen as an ongoing process and a routine part of teaching, it enables teachers to feel more confident in trying different options and assessing their effects on teaching.”

(Richards and Lockhart, 1994: 4).

I would agree with Baldwin and Williams (1988) who claim that reflection is not just a process of making sense of experience; it is also a process of recovery and regeneration.

In the light of the preceding views, it is hoped that the proposal of developing reflection among the English teachers in Malaysia would be able to contribute to the teachers' professional development in such a way that it would

1. make teachers more aware of their own teaching, that is, more able to identify their strengths and exploit these strengths and as a result solve or overcome the problems they face teaching English.
2. encourage teachers to speak of their problems openly and to be able to share them with their colleagues, that is, to be able to develop the attitude of open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness as mentioned by Dewey cited in Pollard (1997).
3. educate teachers by equipping them with techniques that would help them reflect critically on their own practice so as to become more competent and autonomous, and hopefully, would gear them towards furthering their own professional self-development.
4. develop collaborative work where teachers work, experiment, talk, discuss and more importantly reflect on their experiences with each other. As Dewey cited in Pollard (1997: 17) states, reflective teaching, professional learning and personal fulfillment are enhanced through collaboration and dialogue with colleagues .

“Teachers should put creativity into teaching to maintain the interest of students”

(Education Minister, *Daily Express*, 2004:4)

“Teachers should strive to make learning atmosphere in classroom lively...”

(Deputy Prime Minister, *Daily Express*, 2004:4)

It is undeniable that most Malaysians would agree to these views stated above. Given this situation of significant need to improve the English language skills for the benefit of the continued growth and advancement of the level of Malaysian students' proficiency as well as teachers' professional development, this proposed study would focus on how ESL teachers use reflective teaching to explore their classroom practice and enhance their professional growth.

A Change of Approach – A proposal

The development of effective teachers is a primary goal of teacher education programs. According to Pennington (1990:134): A teacher education program oriented to developing teachers as professionals will have two central goals:

1. To engender an attitude favorable to continued growth and change, and,
2. To provide the skills necessary for analyzing teaching performance, for valuing new ideas, and for implementing those ideas deemed worthy of putting into practice as part of the individual's career growth.

In the act of trying to find a way to improve the present methodology of in-service courses for teachers in Malaysia, I have developed a theoretical framework which I believe is more systematic and would help the teachers, including myself, to promote a view of teachers as autonomous and creative professionals, with responsibility for the wider development of professional theory and practice (Ur, 1996). More importantly, it is hoped that through the guidance of this framework, it would be of some help to the Ministry of Education or, at the lower level, the State Education Department, to achieve the aims and objectives of in-service courses.

In-service education and training courses can provide teachers not only with input from trainers but also an opportunity to learn from each other and to stand back and reflect on their own teaching (Bowker, 1998:19). Therefore, the model I am about to describe endeavours to incorporate elements of the reflective model, presented by Wallace (1991). The main principle behind it is also influenced greatly by the enriched reflection model by Ur (1996:7) in which she emphasises that the most important basis for learning is personal professional practice; knowledge is most useful when it either derives directly from such practice, or, while deriving originally from other sources, is tested and validated through it, and hence, should, in principle, be integrated into the teacher's own reflective cycle in order that effective learning may take place. As I share the view of education in which reflection is an essential characteristic of teaching and learning, and is seen

as central for continued professional growth (Wallace, 1991; Zeichner, 1981-82; Ur, 1996; Richards, 1990), I intend to make it a key component of my model.

The model I propose to use consists of three main phases which I would name: *PRE-COURSE*, *IN-COURSE* AND *POST-COURSE* (see Figure 1). This model is further elaborated to show the procedure which led to the determination of my framework and approach in improving the in-service programme in Malaysia. The design of the components is adopted from Wallace s (1991) reflective model, Ur s(1996) enriched reflection model and the TRIST model in Williams (1991).

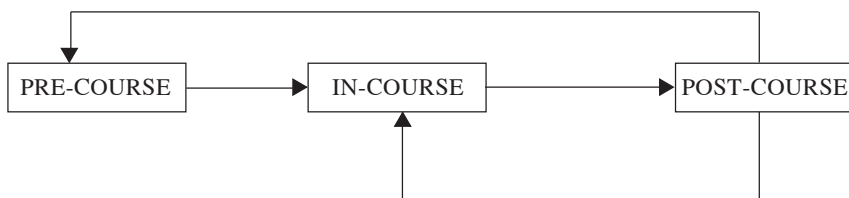


Figure 1: The framework of teacher reflection in the proposed programme

Pre-course

The idea of analysing teachers development needs should become synonymous with ELT. Information on the teachers development needs would allow the drawing up of a *profile* to establish coherent objectives and present subsequent decisions on course content. The identification of training and development needs is the key to the in-service teacher education planning process and is also perceived as a dynamic process since identified needs would have to be reconsidered in the light of changing circumstances (Williams, 1991).

It is in light of this view that I have decided to carry out a pre-course for the proposed in-service teacher education programme, most significantly with the aim of involving teachers in planning the in-service teacher education programme. As Leithwood, cited in Walker and Cheong (1996:207), claims that for professional development to aid improvement, and so help teachers deal with change, teachers should be more actively involved in its design.^f

My main tool for the pre-course would be the reflective meeting which I feel could provide direct access to the teaching force of the programme. It would not only provide a quick and comprehensive way of gathering information from individual teachers, group of teachers and in fact the whole school community, but

would also be the best means and platform for teachers to develop as reflective teachers. More importantly, it would help me to establish the atmosphere of trust, collaboration and the development of the reflective attitudes. Consequently, it would also provide input for the programme planners to plan the structure of the in-course which would indicate the program syllabus and teaching methods to be employed (see Figure 2). At the same time, it would create a learning environment which fosters a good exchange of information.

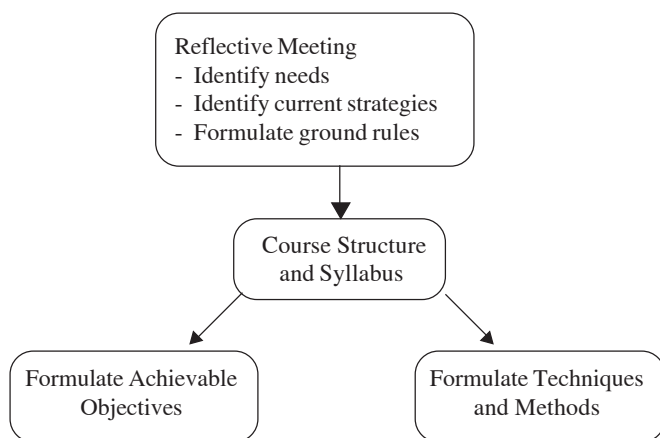


Figure 2: The Pre-Course Stage

In-course

With the pre-course completed, the next step is to commence the course. The in-course methodology is aimed at the exchange of information and at facilitating participants' construction (individual and social) of knowledge. It could be oriented towards providing teachers with the most recent developments in English teaching methodology, pedagogical skills, classroom resources, and career development materials. More importantly, it could concentrate on providing input about the importance of reflection, its levels and types, introducing teachers to the reflective tools and their importance and encouraging teachers to use them effectively. Therefore, more time could also be allocated for the course participants to work with the new ideas or new resolutions, discuss the implications they would have for their teaching and try to adapt the ideas to their individual

teaching contexts and teaching styles. This method would facilitate the ownership of ideas among the course participants especially the experienced teachers who would be more willing to experiment with any new innovation. Figure 3 illustrates how I have integrated the reflective model (Wallace, 1991), and the enriched reflection model (Ur, 1996) into a framework for teacher reflection.

Transmission

This phase creates a two-way process, in that, both the teacher educators and the course participants would provide the input. The teacher educators see themselves as having a broad theoretical and practical knowledge which will need to be complemented by the situational knowledge brought by the participants from their own teaching contexts. Therefore, there is a combination of the insights from research and theory with the daily experiences of the participants. The teachers are encouraged to keep a reflective journal, an internal activity that can serve as an aid to internal dialogue. It is also important that the trainers and the teacher educators review and make comments in the journal on a regular basis

Exploratory

This phase involves the exploration of classroom experiences focusing on personal teaching problems. As Calvert (1994) points out, because the intent of reflective practice is to improve the quality of professional performance, we begin our inquiry by focusing on problems of practice. Personally, I would agree with this view as my experience shows me that the main reason most teachers, either novice or experienced, attend an in-service course is not only to acquire new knowledge but more importantly is to find solutions for their personal teaching problems. However, in a course with different teaching colleagues (teachers coming from various different schools) identification of problems is not easy. Therefore, one essential factor which I would use to help the course participants uncover and discover problematic situations within the context of their practice is to undergo personal change as part of a group endeavour. Collaboration facilitates reflection by providing two crucial requirements: support and guidance which could be both personally and educationally effective.

Design and Development

Educators and participants cooperate on the design and development of teaching plans, techniques, strategies and teaching procedures and, more importantly, in finding ways of resolving the problems discussed previously. This is the stage

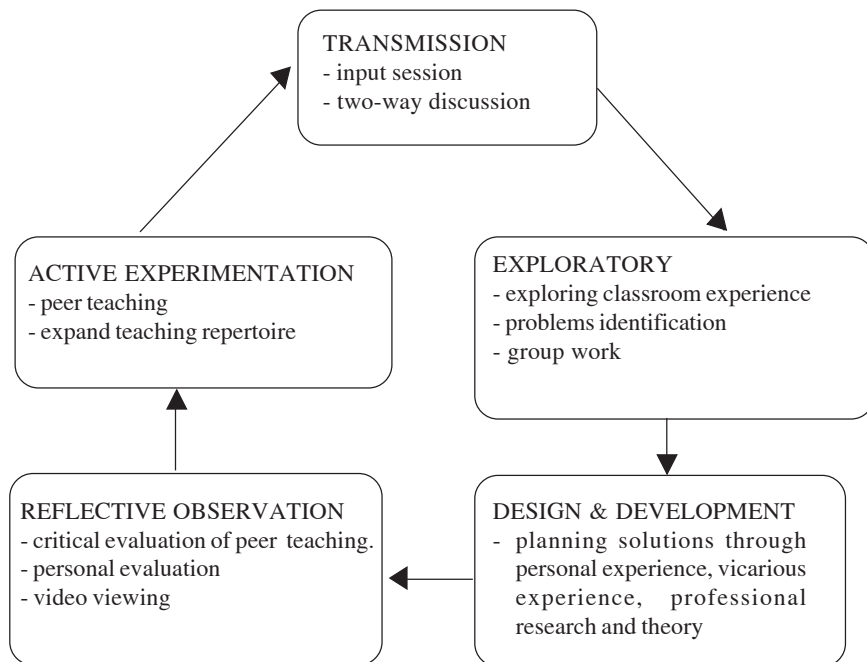


Figure 3: The In-Course Stage - the Teacher Reflection Model

where the educators as well as the participants, especially the experienced teachers, would suggest possible solutions based on their experience and knowledge.

Experienced teachers have acquired substantial practical knowledge about teaching largely through their classroom experience rather than their formal training (Brown and McIntyre, 1993). In the act of finding solutions, there is a lot to be learnt from experienced teachers (as in the craft model), from experts, from research and from reading (as in the applied science model) - provided all these can be integrated into one's own reflection-based theories (Ur, 1996:7).

Active Experimentation

In the light of what they have been working on in the prior phase, course participants are given the opportunity to experiment with the resolutions in a peer teaching activity which would be done in pairs. It goes without saying that the

course participants are capable of expanding their skills and expertise. Therefore, through the peer teaching activity, they could complement the strengths of each other to generate fulfilling and worthwhile professional development. Working as a pair, the course participants would support each other and at the same time, the knowledge, experience and values of each other could also be utilised effectively. This type of active experimentation would also encourage a theory to practice/practice to theory interaction and therefore, could help course participants to recognise and value the fact that theory can come out of existing knowledge as well as new practice and newly acquired knowledge (Workman, 1996).

Reflective Observation

Organising peer reflective observation or even observation done by video viewing would promote peer review with critical awareness, thus making the activity learner-centred and interactive. Discussion through reflection would lead to a wider range of attitudes and ideas being applied to the resolutions in the peer teaching activity. At the same time, observation would provide an opportunity for course participants to develop their own judgment of what has been carried out in the active experimentation phase and heighten their ability to evaluate their own teaching. As Wajnryb (1992:7) points out, Developing the skill of observing serves dual purpose: it helps teachers gain a better understanding of their own teaching, while at the same time refining their ability to observe, analyse and interpret, an ability which can also be used to improve their own teaching.^f

Reflective or classroom observation, therefore, aims to develop willingness to demonstrate a reflective attitude towards one's own teaching. As a result, course participants would be able to come out of isolation and work as part of an educative community. Engaging themselves in dialogues with their colleagues and sharing ideas would also help them to develop willingness to be tolerant of differences, suspend judgment and to openly and honestly share opinions (Richards, 1990). Once teachers begin to view their teaching critically, they are likely to persist in searching for ways of further improvement. An in-service education programme that succeeds in transforming teachers' orientation towards their practice could be influential in changing the educational practice in schools (Oberg, 1986).

In order for optimal learning to take place, the knowledge acquired in any one mode needs to be followed by further processing in the next; and so on, in a recursive cycle^f (Kolb cited in Ur, 1996:6). Therefore as we can see in Figure 3, the in-process stage is a cyclical process in which teachers continually monitor, evaluate and revise their colleagues as well as their own practice. This interactive

process is a continuous flow towards the course participants' professional competence (Wallace, 1991).

Post-Course

This phase can be considered as a cooperative evaluation conference or, in simpler words, the follow-up activity to a course. This is the stage where the course participants return for a meeting, after going back to their schools to practise what they have been working on in the in-course phase, in order to evaluate and conclude the in-service teacher education and classroom practice. As Williams (1991) points out, the follow-up to a course is designed for collaborative reflection on the course participants' actual classroom experience with regard to the principles and techniques acquired during the in-course programme. It is feedback of educators and course participants and collective reflection on the contents and methods of the course. The meeting or conference would not only help the planners and the course participants to identify further development needs but would also lead to thorough discussion, careful documentation and deliberate attempts to change existing patterns and arrangements of the in-service teacher education programme where it is needed.

As shown in Figure 1, the framework of the in-service teacher education programme is a dynamic process which is intended to lead through successive cycles, or through a spiraling process, towards higher-quality teaching. Each course puts stress upon systematic analysis of actual practice in relationship to important theories in language learning and teaching.

Underpinning Values

By underpinning values, I refer to a set of notions and principles which underlie in a global manner the reflective approach to training in-service teachers in Malaysia. Teacher educators and trainers need to be aware of their own training values or principles because these will provide a rationale for subsequent decisions related to both training content and training processes (Borg, 1994:20). The values which underpin the framework of my proposed in-service teacher education programme are as follows:

Reflection

Teacher educators and teachers, like all other professionals, do more than have and use competencies. They also reflect on their intentions and their actions, and on the effects of their actions. They try to understand the reasons for what they see, and for

the effects of their actions. They thus continue to develop their understanding and practice, and thereby inform their own learning. Although practical experiences are emphasised, the goal is not to imitate or adopt the practices of the experimental classes/presentations as such but to review and analyse them critically and to reflect on them individually and collectively.

Learner-Centredness

The approach is learner-centered with emphasis on self-directed and autonomous learning, devoted to the creation of a learning environment that would produce the desirable effects. It would also create opportunities for personal development and the cultivation of positive attitudes and a predisposition towards learning.

The implications of this approach on the teacher educator are significant. The focus of power in this training scenario shifts from the educator to the learner. The educator would now function as a facilitator and manager of learning. She would not only need to understand the whole concept of training and development; she would need to understand adult learner needs and styles and be aware of educator styles in so far as they would help her facilitate learning. She also needs to understand group dynamics and be a good communicator herself. All of these point to a new orientation for the teacher educator.

Focus on Development

Teacher and educational development is concerned with the development of individuals, groups and schools as a community. The in-service teacher education programme should therefore empower and enable individuals, groups and schools to develop greater capability and competence. Making teachers experts in their own work includes giving them prerequisite tools such as the reflective tools, and dispositions for continuous renewal, research, and experimentation of their own work. Teachers freedom in decision-making, and their own potentialities in influencing their work, is also emphasised.

Emphasise Collaboration

Interwoven into the framework of a teacher education programme would be collaborative teaching and learning. The learners would form teams for learning and interact on an individual and group basis for many of the learning activities. This kind of collaboration extends also to the teacher educators who work as a syndicate among themselves, one supporting the other; often they would be collaborating with the learners as well. This would nurture an atmosphere of trust in which

teachers could communicate openly and freely, hence, encouraging learners to participate in any of the phases.

Process-based

The approach is process-based since much of the learning planned for lies in the how of the learning events; the message lies in the process and the product is but the culmination of all the processes undergone.

Bridging

To effect the transfer of learning from the participants' classroom to their learners' classroom, there needs to be a conscious and deliberate drawing out of the lesson; a deliberate act to draw together the strands of learning to make the link between what has been learnt in the participants' course and how it would apply to their pupils in the classroom. In doing such bridging, the pedagogical elements in the course would surface.

Follow-up

Every effort should be made to provide follow-up for courses as teachers could review what has happened as a result of the changes they have made. Thus a cycle is set up of self-observation, reflection, collaboration and action which would allow teachers to engage more explicitly and in a practical way, with the theoretical knowledge they have been considering.

Evaluation

Evaluation would focus on the teachers' perceptions of and reactions to the content and methodology of the course so as to involve them directly in planning and shaping the course which is being implemented.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to quote Tice (2004:3) who states:

“Reflective teaching is a cyclical process, because once you start to implement changes, then the reflective and evaluative cycle begins again. As a result of your reflection you may decide to do something in a different way or you may just decide that what you are doing is the best way. And that is what professional development is all about.”

Therefore the reflective framework outlined in Figure 1 presents the proposal for my future research on using reflective teaching to explore ESL teachers

classroom practice and enhance their professional growth. However, realistically, it is worth mentioning that there would be one main problem I have anticipated which would hinder the achievement of the reflective framework. It concerns the willingness of teachers, experienced or novice, to change and to commit themselves to the process of their own development during programmes of this type. The self-recognition that one is not operating to the fullness of one's own potential, which the process of self-development is not and may never be complete and that one has weaknesses that need working on and strengths that one has often become over-reliant on, this self-awareness can be a debilitating and depressing experience.

Nevertheless, I believe by making the proposed framework a more gradual developmental approach towards internalising the ideals of reflective teaching and by welding abstract reflection to the practical realities of teaching in real-life situations, it would help to stimulate teachers' thoughts about the value of reflective teaching. In fact, it is hoped that reflection can be turned into a habit which will encourage professional growth and development.

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