

Reflecting on Different Aspects of Classroom Teaching: Mirrors on the Road of Educators' Self-Professional Development

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Abstract

Nowadays, the topic of teacher professional development (TPD), has attracted a great deal of attention. Professional development aims to help teachers become aware of and learn the different skills and strategies they need to cope with different teaching contexts and situations as well as learners with different needs, interests, and backgrounds. Undoubtedly, reflection can be viewed as a pivotal tool on the road to teachers' continuous professional development. Reflection is not but a mirror that reflects educators' practices, shedding light on the positive as well as the negative aspects of the lesson to make informed decisions to address these issues or any other emerging challenges. After combing the literature, the researcher identified some areas where there is much still to be revealed. Therefore, the current study aims to reveal educators' awareness of reflection and if they are involved in any type of reflection as a means of self-development. The study aims to investigate the different ways (if any) in which in-service language teachers engage with any form of reflection. Finally, the study aims to present teachers' views on whether pursuing reflection has any positive impact on teachers' teaching, personality, and practices. Qualitative research was adopted as the method where the aim is to paint a clear picture of participants, their views as well as their practices. Therefore, interviews were implemented and they could successfully result in rich type of data. The data showed that participants resorted to reflecting on the different aspects of their classes. Implications for teachers and stakeholders were made clear whereas suggestions for future research were provided.

Keywords: *Teacher professional development, teacher professional development activities, reflection, novice teacher, experienced teachers and stakeholders.*

Introduction

Due to its inevitable importance, Mizell (2010) stressed the need for ongoing TPD activities that empower teachers with the best teaching methods that will have positive impacts on their teaching and improve students' learning. Dehviri (2015) defined TPD as a consistent cycle of teacher learning beginning with initial training and lasting for as long as a teacher remains in the profession. Actually, there are many professional development activities that teachers can adopt such as reflection.

Teacher professional development can be viewed as a lifelong learning process as clearly emphasized by Alibakhshi & Dehviri (2015:38): "Teachers' learning never ends. That is, teachers' teaching lives consist of two poles: teaching and learning, and they are always moving from one pole to the other."

After combing the literature and to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is almost no research on TPD in Syria with a special focus on in-service teachers and their views and practices of reflection as a tool of self-correction. This reflects the need to investigate in-service TPD where having an idea of TPD in that phase may help teacher educators paint a clear picture of the factors that may facilitate or hinder teacher professional development, thus ultimately contribute to the provision of more effective teacher education.

The current research is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

- 1- Do teachers engage in reflection? If so, What types of reflection activities do teachers say they engage in, if any?
- 2- Does reflection have any positive effects on teaching?

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Literature Review

Reflection can be defined as a process of critical examination of past experiences that are recalled, considered and evaluated for future decision-making and actions. Empowered by reflection “Teachers can decide which method would be most beneficial to them depending on the purposes of their reflections (Mansoor et al., 2020). Teachers who engage in reflective practice can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching” (Aryal,2024: 27). In other words, reflective teachers are responsible ones as they show careful consideration of the consequences of their actions. As Bill Templer (in Harmer 2007: 410) says: “we need to hold up mirrors to our practice, making more conscious what is beneath the surface.”

Similarly, Brandt (2008) spotlights the idea that an effective teacher is a reflective one. In addition, reflection is said to enable teachers, especially the novice ones, to approach their ELT classroom with a degree of self-confidence. Reflection empowers teachers to develop critical thinking skills rather than blindly following their routine way of teaching. As highlighted by Farrell (2007), reflective thinking helps teachers pose critical questions about their teaching, bring underlying beliefs to the level of awareness, and realize that there is no simple solution or answer. Likewise, Mann and Walsh (2017) spoke of an interesting idea “Reflection in the wild”; teachers in practice play the role of the researchers following many different stages. Teachers collect pieces of data and evidences from their own teaching experiences. Then, they reflect on their practices. After that they can take well-informed decisions with the ultimate goal of bringing about desirable changes.

Furthermore, reflective teachers are characterized by being in a better position to monitor their practices, take well-informed decisions, respond to the changing needs of learners, and make appropriate judgements about their own teaching behaviours more than less reflective teachers (Bolton 2010; Hedberg, 2009).

Reflective practices should be adopted in a way that is most convenient to particular contexts taking into consideration the teachers’ different needs, levels, development, and experiences. So, tools should be chosen in a way that leads to “timely reflection” (Mann and Walsh, 2017: 21). Reflective practice can bring about desirable changes, “reflective practice is a key factor that brings change to two main areas of teachers’ professional life, namely, teacher identity and teacher quality” (Supharsi & Chinokul, 2021:237).

In short, reflective teachers are characterized by being confident teachers who have a clear idea of their abilities and skills as teachers and who are well-equipped for the realities and challenges of the classroom. By sharp contrast, non-reflective teachers seem to be less self-confident. They show a tendency to put the onus on themselves if students are not doing well or if they cannot meet their students’ different needs and interests all the time. In other words, non-reflective teachers may simply throw up their hands and place a great amount of trust in the role of chance or Fate in shaping educational process rather than human agency.

Methodology

Qualitative research is usually conducted when the researcher needs to explore a problem in its natural setting; when he needs to study a group of people and hear their “silenced voices” (Creswell, 2007:40). In my case, I am interested in understanding issues related to the teachers and their reflective practices where the voices and views of the participants themselves are heard in a natural and unprompted way.

It is descriptive, where the researcher focuses on the meaning that comes from the participants’ understanding and interpretation. Holliday, (2007:19) stated that “qualitative researchers portray people as constructing the social world and researchers as themselves constructing the social world through their interpretation of it”. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate and understand

the participants' own beliefs, attitudes, and practices of reflection. Consequently, the interview is chosen as the instrument for data collection.

Undoubtedly, the interview has a pivotal role in revealing important views and information from the participants themselves who can have the chance to talk about their own experiences, ideas, practices, and interpretations of the world around them. Moreover, interviews can reveal rich data and enable the researcher to put on different lenses and view the world as well as human experiences from different angles “regarding knowledge as generated between people rather than as objectified and external to them.” (Hyland, 2004: 254).

In this study, I therefore used a semi structured type of interview which is characterized by its flexibility. In other words, the interviewer enjoys the freedom of changing the order of questions and asking follow-up questions to probe potentially important or interesting ideas.

In addition, the semi-structured interviews give full rein to the interviewees to speak rather than focusing only on the interviewer's ideas (p.249 cited in Borg, 2006:204). Interestingly, Richards (2003), stressed that the semi-structured type of interview gives the researcher the freedom to elicit information on other related general topics and motivate the participants to express their ideas, beliefs, and practices as freely and smoothly as possible.

The interview questions were intentionally organized in an effective way, where each question led to the next one. As stressed by Mann (2016: 38): “thinking about the sequence and type of questions that you are going to ask will help develop your interviewer repertoire too.”

The main study included twenty teachers with different backgrounds. They varied on the following variables: educational level, experience, training, age, and gender. The participants were fully briefed on the main objectives of the research and that they would be interviewed. They were assured of confidentiality and that data will be safely stored in a password-protected computer. Then participants were asked to sign the consent form to participate in the research.

It is worth mentioning that three main elements were taken into consideration while conducting the interviews, following the advice that “successful interviewing boils down to three main elements: developing rapport, eliciting and listening.” (Mann, 2016: 118). Interestingly, the study resulted in a very rich type of data where the participants were interested in the research and willing to provide information.

The Results and Discussion

Reflection after Class

Most of the participants (17 teachers) pointed out during the interview that they currently had the habit of reflecting after delivering their classes, as a spontaneous, self-chosen practice. For instance, T4 stated that he focused on the negative side; and what was wrong:

“what I do is remember where my students seem confused, or I try to remember where I did something wrong. I try to think if I did so and so... I keep things in my mind”.

Reflection is often seen by experts as important for 'problematizing' teaching, to see where improvements can be made, and has been widely promoted as a means of TPD. In this sense, teachers can be considered as effective teachers, who can make informed decisions and intervene to make a positive change. By sharp contrast, ineffective teachers simply blame students for anything that is not successful rather than reflecting on what they could improve.

On the other hand, four participants reported that they reflected on both the positive as well as the negative sides of their lessons. For example, T12 stated:

“I spend some time after delivering the lesson to think of the successful and unsuccessful aspects of my lessons”.

Interestingly, some teachers highlighted the idea that reflection can lead them to make informed decisions while preparing for the next class. In this way, reflection is a mirror that reflects their actual practices to bring about desirable changes. So, there is a shred of clear evidence that reflection positively affects their practices. So, teachers continually reflect on and examine their practices to make informed decisions as far as their instruction is concerned (Ball, 2009). Some teachers, however, pointed out that they reflected more when they first started teaching as novice teachers as indicated by (T5):

“I reflected on classes, especially at the beginning of my career as a teacher” Background information shows that this teacher did not follow any kind of training.

I may interpret the teachers’ points of view as showing, for the most part, that they see reflection as a continuous timeless, and lifelong process. This same idea was highlighted by many researchers such as Jaccobs and Yendol-Hoppey (in Martin et al, 2014) who stressed the idea that teacher inquiry should focus on the teacher’s concern where reflection is cyclic, teachers go through the process of data collection, observation, reflection and deciding the results of their inquiry, then they go through the same process of inquiry again with an ultimate aim of making informed decisions about their practices and bring about the desirable changes. As indicated by T12 who said:

“For example, I was not asking the students whether they understood the ideas and the information at all....therefore, I changed my teaching method and I started to allocate a certain amount of time after each part of the lesson to activate students on one side and to double-check whether they understood that part of the lesson or not.”

So, there is clear evidence that teachers widely adopted reflection after class as a means to an end where the ultimate aim is to improve their teaching and their teaching methods, and future lessons and overcome any difficulties. Therefore, an effective teacher is a reflective one (Brandt 2008). For example, T11 said:

“Every teacher should reflect after delivering his classes to see if the lesson was successful, did the students understand the idea, or whether there is a problem in the way the idea was delivered, or if the students have certain difficulties. So, the teacher can work to a better improvement”.

Furthermore, many teachers highlighted the idea that reflective practices positively affect different aspects such as improving teachers’ critical thinking skills, personalities, teaching practices, and their professional development more generally. In this way, reflective practice therefore gave some of these teachers the chance to develop their critical skills and attitudes and grow professionally speaking. (Burnett and Lingam 2007; Ryder, 2012).

Reflection on the Previous Term

Around half of the teachers interviewed (11 teachers) said that they reflected termly on their English classes. In sharp contrast with reflection after classes, it is very clear that reflection on a whole term is not a technique that was adopted quite often. Probably because this could be attributed to the fact that the majority of them reported reflecting on teaching periodically almost on a daily basis. In this way, teachers do not feel the need to reflect on their classes termly, as indicated by some teachers. For example, T1 pointed out that: “I always reflect on my lessons almost periodically, so there is no need to reflect on them termly.”

On the other hand, some teachers declared that they did not adopt a termly type of reflection due to lack of experience as they may not be aware of that. Again, there is a clear reference here to lack of experience with indirectly indicates the lack of preservice training that can pave the way for teachers on the road to

continuous professional development. By contrast, other teachers such as T13 have a different point of view; he explicitly stated that he reflected termly as he did not reflect after every lesson.

It is worth mentioning that, teachers who reflected on their classes termly referred to the positive effects or the benefits of adopting it. The positive effects are represented by the fact that reflection termly gave the teachers a sense of self-confidence, innovation, and above all the chance to reflect on their classes to improve their teaching methods taking into consideration students' needs and interests as a priority.

Keeping a Diary/ Lesson Report

During the interview, some of the teachers reported keeping a diary or writing a lesson report as a means to an end: writing down their thoughts and ideas for later consideration and reflection. Some of the teachers reported using a diary to reflect on both the positive as well as the negative aspects of their lessons. By comparison, others adopted this professional development activity to check the effectiveness of their teaching methods. For example, the teacher explicitly expresses a similar point of view: "Usually, I keep a notebook where I write on it all important notes such as to see if my new method of teaching is making any progress or not."

By sharp contrast, some other teachers reported using a diary for a teaching purpose only. They used in order to write down some important vocabularies or sentences or even some notes about students' level and their performance. However, this might be attributed to the fact that these teachers were encouraged by supervisors to keep what is called a "Teachers' Notebook" to write down a lesson plan or any other issues to be viewed by both teacher and stakeholder. In other words, the focus of this diary is meant to be lesson plans or the like. In this way teachers are misusing and missing an important feature of lesson report as a tool for reflection and professional development. Their approach goes against what many researchers have stressed regarding the pivotal role of reflective lesson reports. For instance, Jasper (2005) found these a means that facilitated creativity, critical thinking, analysis and discovery.

Conclusion and Implications

The majority of teachers reported an interest in reflection after delivering their classes. They adopted different types of professional development activities as a tool for reflective practices such as: reflection after class, termly reflection and keeping a diary. Some teachers reported reflection on either the negative or the positive aspects of teaching, whereas others focused on reflecting on both the positive as well as the negative aspects. Also, the majority of teachers considered reflection as a continuous timeless process and as an inseparable part of their road to continuous professional development. Teachers reported adopting reflection to reflect on their classes daily or termly. Also, the majority of teachers clearly stressed the idea that reflection on their teaching practices positively affects their personality, teaching, their teaching and professional development. They were able to approach their classes with a notable degree of self-confidence.

Following the results of the current study, the researcher recommends the following issues:

1-Pre-service training should be provided by MoE for teachers just after graduation and before starting with the profession of teaching. Teachers in some countries can start teaching just after graduation which could be challenging for them. They may not be fully equipped for the realities and challenges of the classroom.

2-The availability of continuous training courses. Some of the teachers believed that training should be available for teachers throughout their careers as teachers, not just once every couple of years. Teachers can be introduced to the importance of reflection and trained by requiring them to write reflectively about notable events in their day-to-day teaching.

3- Teachers themselves should carry on with reflection as an effective tool to improve themselves; they are the main agents of change as far as their own TPD is concerned.

Something that became apparent during the study was that the majority of the participants themselves showed a great sense of interest and enthusiasm to participate in this novel piece of research. The majority of the participants felt the value of conducting similar research as it could hopefully lead ultimately to important changes in their practices not only locally but for educators all over the world. It is hoped that the implications arising from this research prove useful and would be seriously taken into consideration not only by researchers, but also by teachers, and other stakeholders as well as decision-makers.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend her appreciation to Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University for funding this research work through the project number (PSAU/2023/01/25977)

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