

## Learner Development through Meaningful Reflective Practice

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Looking at what you are doing and why you are doing it is part of being a professional. Although this basic concept of human learning is fairly commonsensical, it was first conceptualised as reflective practice and studied in earnest by Donald Schön in the 1980's. Since then, practitioners in disciplines as diverse as medicine, law, social work and education have been encouraged to reflect on their work in order to develop professional mastery. In this paper, I aim to explain reflective practice in more detail, and consider ways in which we might encourage our students to reflect on their practice as professional learners.

### Reflective Practice

Schön (1987) outlined three reflective processes which, in conjunction with experience, lead to professional development in educators. *Reflection-in-action* refers to the split-second decisions teachers make throughout a lesson — for example, experience tells us the point at which it is best to bring an activity to a close. This unconscious reflection alone is not enough for development, however. A more deliberate examination at a point after the action, which Schön calls *reflection-on-action*, is necessary for learning. Eventually, good practice becomes habitual as *knowing-in-action*, as practitioners become masters. Yet mastery is a contextual, uneven and fragile state; new contexts, situations and problems may lead to reassessment of practices and beliefs, and practitioners may be highly proficient in some areas of their work and skill-set, but inexperienced in others. (Elliott, 2009).

Thus reflective practice has become an integral part of many professional development programmes, particularly suited to practitioners in skills-based careers and those who need to make decisions quickly in human interaction. For language learners, reflection serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it provides an opportunity to develop their language skills. In addition, it can develop their skills as learners. I would now like to consider each point in turn.

### SLA

If we consider Second Language Acquisition (SLA) to be '...the building up of knowledge systems that can eventually be called on automatically for speaking and understanding' (Lightbown

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& Spada, 1999, p. 41), we can see a parallel with the aims and processes of reflective practice. Although there are dissenting voices — see Truscott, 1998 for a well argued rebuttal — many SLA researchers have pinpointed ‘noticing’ as an important factor in learning a language. The concept of consciousness is a slippery one, but it is key to understanding our learning. Schmidt (1990) posits that, generally, that which is noticed consciously has a far better chance of being processed and reproduced in language production. He cites his own learning as compelling evidence. After a five-week intensive Portuguese course in Brazil, he spent the next five months trying to learn the language through interaction with native speakers. His journals noted the forms and lexis he noticed, and transcriptions of recordings bore out the hypothesis that noticing leads to more accurate production. He did not necessarily learn what he had been taught, but that which he had noticed (and written up in his journal) he often used accurately in later communication (Schmidt & Frota, 1986).

It may be that Schmidt and Schon are referring to the same processes, but in different contexts and terms. Both could be said to be focusing on the development of a skill: the process of learning to do something. For Schon, reflective practice describes the attainment of professional mastery. For Schmidt, noticing and consciousness can lead to language proficiency. Perhaps *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* are cognitively similar to *noticing* and *awareness*. In describing consciousness in language use, Schmidt says this;

‘When we read or listen to an utterance in our native language or in a second language in which we are fluent, we become aware of its meaning but are seldom aware of any part of the complex decoding processes that precedes awareness’ (1990, p. 131)

This could be applied to the *knowing-in-action* of the experienced teacher, who knows without thinking how to respond to a particular routine situation in class. And yet, as a proficient native speaker of English I am writing, rewriting and reformulating my thoughts in English as I write this paper — returning to a less proficient state as a user of English as I try to find the best way to express complex ideas. I am conscious of my syntax and lexis, in a state of *reflection-in-action*.

Thus reflective practice has implications for the language learner as a learner of language. Reflection on his or her utterances, noticing of forms, will assist the path to linguistic proficiency. However, reflection is also beneficial in personal development. I would like to discuss now how attention to learning processes contributes to the development of more responsible, autonomous and critical learners.

### **Learner Autonomy**

‘One day a young girl was watching her mother cooking a roast of beef. Just before her mother put the roast in the pot, she cut a slice of beef off the end. The ever observant daughter asked her mother why she had done that, and the mother responded that her grandmother had always done it. Later that same afternoon, the mother was curious, so she called her mother and asked the same question. Her mother, the child’s grandmother, said that in her day she had to trim the roasts because they were usually too big for the pot.’

(Farrell, 2007, p. 1.)

This story illustrates that questioning our own actions, and the actions of others, can sometimes lead to enlightening answers. Students do themselves and their teachers a service when they learn to question educational practice. In providing explanations for why we do things the way we do them, we as teachers can often gain a greater understanding of our own professional actions. Students themselves, with a more explicit understanding of the thinking behind task, class and curriculum design, may feel increased motivation and a stronger sense of agency. And in the case an innocent question prompts an unsatisfactory answer ('I am not sure why we do it this way...'), teacher and student have an opportunity to negotiate improvements to their shared teaching/learning methodology.

Autonomy '...can be broadly defined as the capacity to take control over one's own learning' (Benson, 2013, p. 2). It is a simple definition and yet there are a number of factors which have to align in order for a degree of autonomy to be achieved. These can be internal factors such as motivation, or external factors such as the opportunities for independent action afforded by the teacher and/or institution. Teachers, too, may strive for autonomy; the autonomy to emerge as self-determining professionals and to make decisions about their own practice. The interplay between teacher and learner autonomy allows both actors to develop. Little (1995) asserts that autonomy..

'...entails at once a positive attitude to learning and the development of a capacity to reflect on the content and process of learning with a view to bringing them as far as possible under conscious control' (p. 175).

The content of learning has been discussed in the previous section of this article. Little adds a new element, process, which takes us back to Schon's reflection-on-action. Learners provided with the opportunities and the means to reflect are more likely to incorporate new knowledge into their existing construct.

Benson suggests that 'The relationship between reflection and autonomy lies in the cognitive and behavioural process by which individuals take control of the stream of experience they are subject to' (2013, p. 106) and neatly summarises what research can tell us about reflection.

- It is a mental process involving rational thought, emotion and judgement.
- It may be consciously initiated by the reflector or by others, or may be prompted by a disturbance in the normal pattern of feelings or events.
- It is context-bound. We must reflect on something in some specific situation and under specific constraints.
- It is goal-oriented. Although the goals of reflection vary, they generally involve learning.
- It can be retrospective, introspective or prospective.
- It can be modelled as a cyclical process involving the deconstruction and reconstruction of assumptions or beliefs.
- It may or may not lead to action or deep change in the learner. Reflection leading to deep change is liable to be difficult and even painful.

(Benson, 2013, p. 106)

In sum, research suggests that conscious awareness is an important part of both language

acquisition and learning to learn, and that reflection helps to enable the process. In the final part of this paper, I will suggest a model for implementing reflective practices with learners and suggest some reflective task cycles for language classes. Before we reach that point, however, I would like to briefly discuss language teaching methodology in general, and how particular approaches square with reflective practice.

### **Methodology and a Model for Task Design**

Language teaching methodology has undergone fairly regular reassessment, particularly since the 1970's, but it would stand us in good stead not to pick up and discard new ways of teaching off-the-peg. Grammar translation, now seen by some as old-fashioned, has nevertheless enabled many millions to learn foreign languages to a certain level of proficiency over the years. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was supposed to free students from dry textbook activities and allow them to express themselves, and Task-Based Learning (TBL) went one step further in basing learning on a natural need to communicate. However, none of these approaches necessarily incorporates the reflective element which I would argue is essential for linguistic and learner development. In Ellis' outline of TBL, the need for reflection is dismissed as perfunctory.

'Only the 'during task' phase is obligatory in task-based teaching. Thus, minimally, a task-based lesson consists of the students just performing a task' (2006, p. 20).

Each methodology described offers something useful for the teacher and learner. The explicit instruction on form in grammar translation, the emphasis on communication in CLT and the affordances for natural learning in TBL. However, I contend that a reflective component is a key part of any task design. I will illustrate my point by describing a class activity.

In the first phase, students are given the opportunity to prepare. This may involve the explicit presentation of new language, or recycling language previously taught. The second phase is the production, performance or practice phase. In order for the final phase to be most effective, this phase will be recorded. In the final post-task phase, learners will reflect on their performance. The final phase should provide material to begin the cycle again. Here is a typical and simple example of an activity incorporating a reflective component.

#### *Phase One - Preparation*

The students are assigned a topic for discussion. Some discussion gambits ('What do you mean by that?' 'But what about...?' etc) are explicitly taught/reviewed and practiced. Students bring short news articles related to the topic, summarise them, and teach each other key vocabulary.

#### *Phase Two - Performance*

Students get together in groups of three to discuss the topic. The discussion is recorded.

#### *Phase Three - Reflection*

Students transcribe part or all of their recording, and check for errors or alternative ways of expression. The learners may be assigned specific language based questions about the use of vocabulary or phrases studied in phase one, as well as more general reflection questions about the learning process.

### **Reflection for language, reflection for autonomy**

There are some differences in the way teachers should approach reflection, depending on their aims. To improve linguistic competence reflection should be more immediate, consistent and explicit. In order to reflect on the learning process more effectively, it may be better to allow more room for surprise. University students habitually complete end of semester teacher evaluations in order to fulfil obligations to the education ministry (Ryan, 1998), but I would argue the questions asked of them are over-familiar and neither encourage students to reflect meaningfully on their own learning, nor provide teachers with enlightening insights into their own teaching practice. I suggest reflection questions need to provide a jolt which knocks a subconscious truth to the surface. 'What did you like about this lesson?' is likely to produce a less thoughtful answer than 'If your mother or father was stood in the corner of this classroom today, what would he or she say about the lesson?' Bolton (2005) suggests that uncertainty enables professionals to uncover deeper seated beliefs and thus enables them to be addressed. In this way, reflection to change the learner is more challenging than reflection which merely addresses their language ability.

Socrates, via Plato, informed us that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. By reflecting on our lives as learners, I believe that we will benefit greatly. Reflective practice should be an important part of our lives as both teachers and learners.

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