

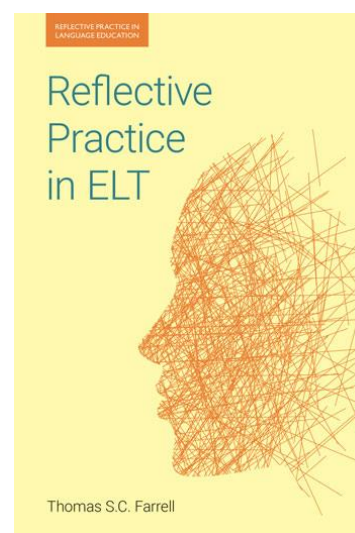
Thomas S. C. Farrell

# Reflective Practice in ELT

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Review by Michael Joseph Ennis

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*Reflective Practice in ELT* is the first book in a new series on *Reflective Practice in Language Education*, written by the series editor—and prolific author on reflective practice (RP)—Thomas S. C. Farrell. The book introduces readers to the theoretical and methodological foundations of RP and its specific application to the field of TESOL/ELT. Although all descriptions, summaries, and positions are duly supported with references to the body of scholarship and research on the subject, the book is written in a personal style which assumes no prior knowledge, making it accessible and informative for experienced researchers, expert teacher trainers, and pre- and in-service language teachers alike. Unlike some introductions to topics in TESOL/ELT, this book actively resists the temptation of prescription.

Divided into eight chapters, the first four chapters aim to aid readers in arriving at their own model of RP by using the author’s model only as an example—albeit a meticulously researched and intricate one. Chapter 1 carefully disentangles terms such as “reflection,” “critical reflection,” and “reflective practice” as they are used disparately, though often interchangeably, throughout the literature. While the term “reflection” is vague in that it can range from an expression of one’s emotions and feelings about perceived success or failure to a more careful examination of what was done, why it was done, and why it succeeded or failed, Farrell’s conceptualization of “critical reflection” entails a more profound contemplation of oneself as both a teacher and a human being with ideological values, assumptions, beliefs, and practices. Reflective practice, therefore, is best understood as a set of complex processes and hierarchical levels of reflection. In Farrell’s opinion, teachers are to reflect “not only on the intellectual, cognitive, and meta-cognitive aspects of practice, but also on the spiritual, moral, and emotional non-cognitive aspects [...] that acknowledge the inner life of teachers” (27).

Like most contemporary scholars, Farrell supports the notion of an evidence-based RP which drives the informed decisions of teachers. However, his view is that reflective practitioners should engage in a “strong form” of RP which extends beyond “descriptive reflection” about what works and what does not work in the classroom and “conceptual reflection” about why certain choices have been made, to include “critical reflection” on the status, role, and impact of teaching at their institution, within their profession, and across society. Through RP, language teachers should embrace their roles as “thinking humans” and should strive to become agents of change, who through their profession engage their world on larger issues, such as the commercialization of language education and social justice for themselves and their students.

After reviewing the insights offered by most major models of RP, especially the seminal work of John Dewey and Donald Schön, Chapter 2 presents the author’s most recent attempt to apply RP to TESOL—stressing that each reflective practitioner must ultimately embrace or develop an approach that works best for them. Farrell’s model includes five stages/levels: *philosophy* (i.e., reflection toward “self-knowledge” of the practitioner’s own “basic philosophy of practice”); *principles* (i.e., reflection on the practitioner’s underlying “assumptions, beliefs, and conceptions about teaching and learning”); *theory* (i.e., reflection toward a “theory of practice” including both formal knowledge and “theory-in-use”); *practice* (i.e., “reflection-for-action,” “reflection-in-action,” and “reflection-on-action”); and *beyond practice* (i.e., critical reflection on “moral, political, and social issues” both “inside and outside the classroom”). Farrell suggests that experienced practitioners can reflect at any level and move in any direction, but that pre-service and novice teachers might start at the level of *philosophy* and gradually ascend levels as they gain more knowledge and experience.

In Chapter 3, Farrell further summarizes how his approach to RP is guided by six principles: for him RP is *holistic*, is *evidence-based*, is *dialogical*, serves as a *bridge* between teaching principles and teaching practices, requires an *inquiring disposition*, and is best defined as a *way of life*. Making RP “holistic” implies a rejection of the reductionist “technical rationality” or “fix it” paradigm that has too often exploited RP as “a tool to fix some problem or issue that has been identified in practice,” which often results in reflection becoming “too ritualized,” “mechanical and robotic,” and “reduced to a set of prescriptive techniques,” RP should instead be about the self-“empowerment of teachers” and becoming “more autonomous decision-makers both inside and outside the classroom” (59-60). In order to ensure that RP is “evidence-based,” practitioners should collect data to answer five fundamental questions: 1) *What do I do?* 2) *How do I do it?* 3) *Why do I do it?* 4) *What is the result?* 5) *Will I change anything based on the answers to the above questions?* (62). Some of the most useful data, according to Farrell, is “dialogical,” implying that

one should engage in “dialogue with the self” for the sake of self-reflection, and should participate in a community of practice engaged in “dialogic inquiry.” The upshot of reflection is a “bridging,” or “alignment,” of principles and practices, that is to say, “by reflecting-*on-in-for*-action and comparing our articulated beliefs [‘espoused theories’] about teaching and learning, and then monitoring our teaching by regularly comparing our beliefs and practices [‘theories-in-action’], we can then begin to construct our theories-*of* and -*for*-action” (73). RP, therefore, requires an “inquiring disposition” which includes Dewey’s original virtues of “open-mindedness,” “responsibility,” and “wholeheartedness” (75) and RP should be embraced as a “way of life” that represents a “lifelong” endeavor to (re)construct a “teacher role identity” that helps us understand “who we are as a teacher” and “the roles we play in our practice” (77).

Perhaps the most useful contributions for practitioners come in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 4 describes the eight tools most frequently used by practitioners: *dialogue* with colleagues; *writing for/as reflection*; *classroom observations* conducted by oneself or by one’s peers; *action research* conducted alone or collaboratively; *narrative study* of “important events” in one’s “life as a teacher;” *lesson study* performed in teams; *case study analysis* of cases embedded in one’s own or other contexts; and *concept mapping* done by teachers or their students. Chapter 5 recounts “one teacher’s reflective journey” as an example of Farrell’s model implemented in practice. Chapter 6 delves deeper into the “inquiring disposition” required by reflective practitioners before outlining some of the initiatives institutions and administrators can implement for the sake of “cultivating reflective practice” (or “promoting a culture of reflection”), including: using multimedia teaching *portfolios* for evaluation rather than checklists; the *mentoring* of novice teachers by more experienced teachers; *team teaching* with equals or superiors; various arrangements of *peer coaching*; encouraging staff to develop *critical friendships* with colleagues, also in *teacher reflection groups*; and *school sponsored events*, such as brown bag lunches where colleagues share and discuss classroom experiences or guest speakers from outside the institution.

It is difficult to find much fault with *Reflective Practice in ELT*. There are many perspectives and applications of RP which are lacking. For example, with the increased use of learning management systems, virtual learning environments, and internet communication technologies in language education and the digitalization of educational records, teachers have the ability to collect unprecedented amounts of data about their teaching practices and the responses of students and colleagues. Farrell seems to be most interested in the subjective observations of teachers, their colleagues, and their students. A truly “evidence-based reflective practice” would exploit the big data accessible to contemporary language teachers and would employ mixed

methods to reflect also on increasingly blended, flipped, and remote modalities of teaching. The book is also somewhat limited in application, in that it never discusses differences in educational contexts, such as how a language teacher working in a community program or private language school might reflect differently from a university language instructor or professor. But as the introduction to a new series, the author explicitly invites colleagues to fill such gaps, offering a lot of food for thought with ten rhetorical questions about the past, present, and future of RP in the final chapter, which also previews the next five books in the series. Hopefully, other colleagues will contribute to this new series and hopefully many more will be inspired to embrace the “way of life” of the reflective practitioner.

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