



## CLARIFYING SELF-REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND TEACHING

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### ABSTRACT:

For teachers to better understand their own perspectives on teaching and how teaching processes in language learning classrooms can be practiced, it can be a vital necessity to occasionally pause and reflect on one's teaching. Clarifying personal perspectives and how these may contribute to teacher development and teacher professional identity against a backdrop of modern professional teaching practices, competencies, and sub-competencies, can help one to understand the impact and significance of their role as both an individual teacher and as part of a teaching community. This author endeavors to show how his initial skill development practices as a beginning teacher helped him to create a stronger focus on the maintenance and growth of these skills, including reflective practice, in the language learning classroom as a continuing teacher and teacher-trainer. The author ends with some final thoughts and practical suggestions for enhancing one's practices in this area.

### KEYWORDS:

**SELF-REFLECTION, REFLECTIVE PRACTICE, TEACHERS AND TEACHING, TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY.**

### INTRODUCTION

Personal teaching experiences and how they may contribute to teacher-learning successes can be sometimes difficult to process or define, especially if one is in an excessively busy teaching context. As a novice English teacher in mid-1990's Korea, there was a deep struggle in defining what seemed like two clear dimensions of teaching in which I was involved. The first was being a personable, trusting teacher, while the second was a stricter "teacher as knower." The interaction of the personal and contextual can help comprise the basis of identity formation based upon socio-cultural theory (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, in Salinas & Ayala, 2018, p. 33).

Recognizing and balancing these interactions became more perceptible as classroom contexts changed, shifting from teaching young learners to young adults. Differences in learner needs and wants became clearer, as did distinctions between *knowing* about content (declarative knowledge) and *teaching* content (procedural knowledge). This was ultimately demotivating, however, as my knowledge of 'product' and presentation trumped that of 'process', which further influenced my thoughts about how teaching should be performed, a process noted by Smith (1996). How could I become a better teacher?

The pursuit of finding a clear 'teacher professional identity' amongst context challenges and my own thoughts about them, this being in the early 2000's, was not without challenge. For a more current overview of TPI, see Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop (2004), who note, "...more attention needs to be paid to the relationship between relevant concepts like 'self' and 'identity'" among others elements (p. 107). Yet, it slowly came into focus over time (Alsup, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Morgan &

Clarke, 2011, as cited in Martin, 2017). However, I felt that my Korean teaching context was blocking this formation. Diligently trying new techniques, activities, and tasks, plus speaking with peers only served to little avail. Subsequently, participating in graduate school helped me to realize that my teaching style was primarily based on learning preferences and experiences. Projecting these preferences (Ushioda, 1998, as cited in Dornyei, 2001)) had allowed my teaching motivation to flourish, and had directed my attention to additional motivational variables in classroom teaching contexts. 'Motivational realism', my own concept that I define as becoming motivated by my immediate 'real' teaching contexts, had grown out of this reflective look at myself as a teacher-learner, and a language learner within the realm of social contexts. It would seem not unlikely that this could be layered against Feryok's (2012) idea that "taking a sociocultural approach would acknowledge both the social forces and the individual experiences that shape language teaching" (p. 95). As I have gained further knowledge from the original time of the extracts below, this idea of working and responding within a social and cultural context has made much more sense to me as a language learner and language teacher.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Attending graduate school at The School for International Training (now SIT Graduate Institute) in Fall 2002 allowed for a stronger understanding of these past teaching and teaching-learning experiences and teacher identity formation. Course work allowed me to study, practice, and gain new insights into teaching approaches, methods and techniques. These experiences illuminated to me how restricted my former teaching had been. Despite past

Korean teaching experiences, there was a distinct lack of teaching pedagogy and methodology.

Several courses in particular helped raise my awareness of proper teaching methodology and techniques. A 'Four Skills' class was a major revelation due to the way each of these skills was analyzed and broken down into various teaching components, some of which I had done in my own teaching of writing classes in particular. These Four Skills applications and techniques, such as error correction, scaffolding and recycling, were valued so much because at that point in my teacher learning, they greatly informed my belief of giving students greater options in their learning. Knowing *how* and *why* my students learned were aspects that I have come to more fully appreciate in my later teaching. This insight has allowed me to be more open in my present classroom teaching when presenting new information to teacher trainees, specifically in four skills' coursework.

It was unfortunate that my feelings of inexperience in formal teacher training led in part to a projection of personal learning preferences onto my learners. It may also seem somewhat ironic that my sense of failure by doing so in the classroom led me to the abundance of teacher-learning that I had experienced at graduate school. Finding a motivational construct in which to engage future learners had become a personal and professional challenge, because I had begun to define my own motivational realism based on my real moments in teaching, and not a priori as a concept. Of the major educationally motivated constructs to have come out of the last few decades, and even though all are somewhat lacking in "empirical support within L2 contexts" (Dornyei, 2001, p. 107), the two that I seem most strongly related to are Dornyei's tri-level framework (Dornyei, 1994, p. 280) and Vygotskian-based social-constructivist models (Adams, 2006; Williams and Burden, 1999, p. 83)

Stipek (1996, in Dornyei, 2000, p. 85) stated that as important a factor in learning success as motivation is, developing teacher skills of 'motivating' should play a larger role in student learning and teacher development. Considering individual differences in students' beliefs, attitudes and background knowledge (BAK) cannot be overstated, in my opinion, due to fact a teacher is the prime mediator in the classroom. Due to a variety of learner factors definitely outside of my control in Korea (age, ability, BAK, Confucian ethics, etc), and teacher factors (split-shift work, set curriculum, limited resources) motivation and motivating became a huge challenge.

Motivational realism was, and still is, my attempt at sorting out personal thoughts, judgments, and decisions that shaped my teaching and learning behaviors. Perhaps the sorting of these thoughts and experiences could be aligned on Freeman's (2002) four themes: how teachers learn content and teaching practices; how teachers' mental processes are conceived; the role of prior knowledge; the role of social an institutional context in learning to teach (p. 2). Learning about myself as a teacher through the domains of teacher-learner, social context, and the

pedagogical processes (Freeman & Johnson, 1998) at SIT helped the development of a motivational realism framework, respectively, through reflective writing and experiential learning, small group interplay, a South African teaching internship, as well as other coursework, all meshed against past experiences. I had faith that my new awareness and abilities will be well served in motivating students in future contexts. Utilizing and adapting frameworks of motivational strategy should prove challenging when combined with this new learning. Thus, motivational themes presented by Dornyei and Otto (1998) center around creating basic motivational conditions for 'preactional,' 'actional' and 'postactional' phases (Thanasoulas, 2002).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Attending graduate school led to an increased awareness about the relationships between learning and teaching. This was experienced through a South African teaching internship, thoughts of which were first reflected in a reflection on past Korean teaching awareness. Although my individual learning preferences were valued, there was still difficulty in conceding some control of lessons; the boundaries were for these personal exchanges and anecdotes had always been blurred. The switch from teaching children to young adults caused a small adjustment in this area, though finding the balance between meaningful contribution from myself and adult students to the material was tricky. Comments about this recurring dilemma while teaching in Korea were rationalized, as I stated:

*I found a new set of responsibilities to the students who were not just content to absorb material, like children do. I enjoyed students who desired to learn and had something to contribute because it allowed me to use my experiences as tools for knowledge too; we were sharing. I found what the students valued what I had to say at times, even when I considered it to be derogatory.*

This interaction helped to verify personal experiences as teaching content, and yet full acceptance of the learning value of it was not gained until realizing that learner 'control' and 'initiative' was just as important a process for a teacher too. This enabled me to more fully gauge these past contributions toward future learning contexts.

My teacher awareness also bloomed on this internship, as I finally had time to truly reflect on new learning by teaching in a new context at Port Elizabeth Technikon (PET; now Nelson Mandela University). A memo that I had written about this experience shows how increasing learning-style cognizance helped me to recognize its influence on teaching style. Of significance was how best to maintain awareness of what I *thought* the students were learning and what they were *actually* learning. I stated that this is going to be a continual, conscious process to be worked on, proclaiming, "*it is something that I need to keep aware of lest I start to make assumptions about things,*" like I had done in Korea. My PET supervisor affirmed my new awareness of this by responding:

*I quite agree that we tend to teach according to our learning style- that is not a problem- if, as you point out, we maintain our awareness of it and consciously work at providing different kinds of learning opportunities for those learners who have a different learning preference.*

There is a need to be careful not to inadvertently presume that the students 'should know' how to approach new learning material. Pursuing reflection and different forms of student feedback helped me to sustain this awareness.

An increased awareness of my own assumptions about teaching and learning was also gained. As the youngest of five children, I often heard from siblings that I was spoiled, though I did not always agree. Though we were all praised equally in my view, life can still be subjective. When the use of praise came up in a Silent Way demonstration, it made me re-evaluate praise usage in my learning and language teaching, including in overseas' contexts. In retrospect, I had tended to over-praise, because: *"Giving praise to students is what I thought a good teacher did, because that is how I learned and was taught to teach."* I was familiar with praise used as reinforcement for personal learning experiences and had assumed that it was almost always needed to encourage students. This Silent Way demonstration was important because it clarified that the transference of past learning assumptions was not necessarily needed nor perhaps wanted and may inadvertently subvert learner autonomy.

My continued use of praise does have my own self-imposed limitations as to when to use it, how much to use it; I use it more so to gain maximum effect for the intended recipient versus my own self-satisfaction. One example that comes to mind in particular is that of a co-teaching experience I recently had in a young learner context. The school administrator was very overworked and was thus not able to be as hands on and receptive to the teacher's needs. In this context, I had mentioned to the administrator that a little bit of praise might do the staff some good; however, it was not so forthcoming. Therefore, I commented on the efforts of my co-teacher (a non-native English speaking teacher or NNEST) that I had observed over a six-month period, telling her that her efforts were having a great effect on the young learners that we were teaching. The effect that this feedback had on her was immediate, profound, and long-lasting. An instant change in teaching attitude (she was a bit overworked) was noticed for the better and very observable. There seemed to be a strong appreciation in her eyes that told me more than any direct feedback could proffer, and this perceived thankfulness was evident for many weeks thereafter.

A further assumption made in past teaching was with error correction for a writing class in Korea. The assumption was that a good writing teacher always corrects students' papers – I had always done so - as seen in an extract from a Four Skills paper *Developing Reasoning for Writing*. This class helped me realize how an over-reliance on teacher autonomy had once again limited student learning:

*In this class, the variety of ways to correct student errors has been an eye opener for me. I can see now how the method of peer review... raises (student) consciousness of how and why they made their mistakes. It is also a learning-sharing process for student peers in the classroom, and turns around the mindset that errors are bad and should never be made.*

Having tried out this type of error correction and other techniques like peer review has led to a higher consciousness in students' classroom learning, as well as informing teacher practice, more recently in my own experiences with student peer review processes (see Manning & Jobbitt, 2018). Writing examples and outcomes were pretty much straightforward in terms of output and goals (drafting and assessment), but other cultural aspects in English seemed to have hazier guidelines and borders. I had endeavored to remain aware of the fact that I was teaching writing in English and not culture (or so I thought); not wanting to complicate classroom dynamics, unless students *really* wanted to know something specific about America. This was possibly because it was easier to teach, talk or write about the more explicit items of my culture, like communities, products, practices and persons than it was about perspectives (Moran, 2001; 29).

In a *reflection on a 'Reflection on ICC Interview'*, I stated that team teaching could be a start in raising cultural consciousness for students. I had assumed a relationship between this approach and student learning when I stated:

*By helping the students first raise their awareness of their own cultural being, and then looking outward at how this can impact others, is a good first step. Looking at one's self first, in relationship to friends and family, is a safe place to start" and "By doing so in a group process with peers, students themselves can refine their own experiences too, and gain additional insight into their cultural identity.*

This assumption about between how I thought I would teach and how students might learn about culture was greatly expanded upon in later teaching in Korea. The teaching of culture became less needed, however, in my Korean teaching context as the Korean context became more acculturated in terms of Western culture – shopping, increased travel opportunities and exposure to more Western products. Indeed, over my nearly twenty-years of teaching in Korean, the transformation of certain elements of the classroom culture have been easily mirrored or outpaced in the greater socio-cultural milieu of Korea at large. It has been a continually engaging set of processes to behold, both personally and professionally.

In my early teaching experiences in Korea, a need for professional development in my teaching skills had greatly affected my attitude. I recognized challenges to my teaching approaches, but I did not always know how best to change my teaching. Recollections of my former teaching, and how I would like to change it in the future, are shown from a *Listening Response paper*. The variety of techniques and methods learned in this class, such as going from general-to-specific and breaking up the task into manageable parts, was extremely exciting because I

realized how much I had to apply myself in future teaching applications. I stated:

*It has been quite a learning experience, learning how to break apart a task into these manageable chunks; I had never considered this before in my prior teaching. I now that I will have the opportunity to do this in my future teaching; I just hope that I am able to do it correctly.*

My absurd lack of awareness about how to use different techniques for the teaching of the four skills, and listening in particular, had greatly stifled my development as a teacher and negatively affected my attitude toward the subject matter, and in addition, my teaching abilities.

I had reached into my past experiences quite often while learning new concepts, theories and techniques at SIT, and felt that the knowledge that I had drawn upon helped me to see shortcomings developed while teaching in a foreign context. My comments in a *Developing Reasoning for Writing* paper illustrated a progressive attitude to change my teaching based on techniques I learned in Four Skills. I opined that I would like to be able to “bring a newer set of learned evaluative variables to my future students based and nurtured upon the approaches and techniques that I have learned at SIT” to future learning environments. Looking objectively (and not without a bit of chagrining) at the contrast between former experiences and new learnings at SIT changed my views on teaching and has further shaped my behavior in present classroom contexts.

In my earlier teaching, most classroom preparation revolved around designing supplemental activities for pre-planned units. I never had the chance, nor felt able to, design a course on my own. Therefore, the overall designing of lesson plans and units that I learned in a Curriculum Design and Four Skills, plus my internship experiences in South Africa, was extremely challenging and productive for me; that is why I have chosen to highlight my knowledge of creating and implementing effective and appropriate lesson plans. As a still-improving teacher dedicated to expanding my abilities, I can honestly state that significant progress in designing courses and lesson plans has been made, though done so now on the teacher-trainer side. New classes that arise in graduate school and undergraduate school often need to be taught by whomever is available; this kind of flexibility is very desired it seems among university staff on the part of its teaching staff.

Pursuing higher education at graduate school had also allowed me to gain knowledge of theories, methods, techniques and materials for teaching language and culture. For example, the Four Skills class heightened my knowledge of techniques and materials that I had barely noticed in prior teaching. In a *Reading Respon* paper I commented on learning the value of previewing material more thoroughly with students, and breaking down the word schemes within sentences, or how “chunking together” the text can make new data less intimidating for students. I had never considered how to really break down text into “chunks” like this before, only word-by-word. It

made me stop and reconsider “how interactive a reading assignment can be and how much L2 readers might have to struggle with the text” to make sense of it. This insight showed how my ability to weigh newly acquired information helped me to reinterpret my past experience so that I could do things in the future that could more greatly help L2 learners truly interact with text.

My understanding of language teaching methods broadened when I began looking at the relationship of how the teacher may guide student learning within a communal context. Working on a Community Language Learning paper I perceived that the “teacher’s role is pivotal in the momentum shift from the initial ‘communal cognitive’ to the individual cognitive process, the direction that each student wants to go in” as they are engaging in the learning process. As a teacher used to traditional classroom formats, I was still appreciative of how the positioning of the teacher in CLL, behind the student, has the ability to create a student-perceived autonomy, while still providing safety, or security for the student. Ironically, when I do teach a Methods course and introduce the CLL method, it usually has the opposite effect – students are more anxious because they are absolutely not used to having someone stand over their shoulder – student tend to be more on edge, more stressed about producing the right language.

My Four Skills *Final Response paper* exhibited my journey of understanding about how to begin appropriately teaching the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) based on past to present teaching and learning experiences. I observed that I had come to an overall grammar-to-genre focus as a result of learning about how to provide more choice to my students via: providing variety in reading materials, going from general-to-specific themes in listening activities, to peer review methodologies in writing, and contextual values of used versus valued language that students would be speaking. Combining these four areas into a cultural foundation can be daunting for any developing teacher, but I believed that by specifically focusing on each skill as a core unit of understanding, students would converge toward an individual comprehension of how they apply their core cultural ‘knowns’ to the material, and thus gain a deeper appreciation of their own knowledge in the process.

All of the theoretical knowledge, plus methods and techniques, helped me to gain more skill with creating lesson plans and units. While supplementing pre-planned units was commonplace in my overseas teaching, I had never actually designed a curriculum before taking a Curriculum Design and Integrated Assessment (CDIA) class. In that class I experienced a significant change in understanding how much work goes into curriculum design by overhauling a previously taught Business English course. Attempting a portfolio in that class was a difficult and sometimes humbling process because I had not considered the skill analysis in such detail, and was not wholly aware of how limited my former teaching methods had been. For example, I had initially confused *objectives* for *activities*, making an activity the measure of student

mastery for a goal. While I do had felt partially successful with this first attempt at design, I realized that there was much more to be learned. Subsequently, the portfolio was a great introduction tying all of the pieces together. These days, my curriculum design is less hurried due to a more structured teaching load from semester to semester, but I do continually tweak the plans as needed.

### CONCLUSION

All teachers experience either positive or negative growth in their teaching processes; the trick is being able to learn from both experiences. In my earlier teaching, I had felt that I still had much to learn in terms of facilitation techniques because there were some definite silent periods during my Korean classroom teaching. My attempts to "lead the class less" by asking questions to the students seemed to meet with only moderate success. This raised several questions about classroom pacing, instructional methods, classroom management and other variables that I was not necessarily in control of. Questions arose: Am I too intimidating? Did I seem hurried? Was I talking too much? Such questions made me quiz myself to the betterment of my teaching. Resuming teaching duties after graduate school had found me more settled in my teaching; I was more comfortable in my planning or even lack of planning if needed. I believe that this was due to becoming more aware of how my own self-learning (of both a foreign language and of English teaching) had been done; my 'motivational realism' was defined further, and I was more comfortable with that. Analyzing and sorting through these experiences allowed me to understand where I had been on my earlier path, and where that path was leading me. Having been a teacher-trainer for the past decade has forced me to examine my knowledge of subject matter and how best to present it to students, as well as how to be adaptable to the sometimes-frantic pace of classroom teaching and curriculum planning. It has still been a significant learning experience which never truly stops. My only hope is that I will continue to gain further insight and skill into how to effectively teach future students and how best to to and learn from such teaching contexts.

### GOALS FOR FUTURE LEARNING

- As a professional teacher, it is of utmost importance to me to remain cognizant of how much influence the role of teacher can have on student learning and motivation.
- Continue to contribute to professional teacher publications and conferences, specifically through action research in the classroom.
- Examine and apply research methodology in an attempt to expand my motivational realism framework, in terms of teacher-based motivational perspectives
- Develop and maintain appeals to learners' sense of autonomy and self-determination through intrinsically 'motivating' techniques and strategies

- Continue providing opportunities for my student teachers to build both personal and professional relationships in the learning classroom
- Remain aware of the fact that students are fully-valued human beings with their own sense of identity and self-worth and respect these facets of their respective identities

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