

# INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**Abstract:** More research needs to be conducted in the area of reflective practice in order to “validate” it as a legitimate and reliable means of professional development for teachers in general and ESL teachers in particular. Such research may include an evaluation of the prevailing approaches in teacher education. This paper focuses on one such teacher where six college-level teachers of English who were committed to improving their classroom practice set about the task of reflecting on themselves and their teaching. The reflection led to a series of processes. They found themselves gaining a deeper understanding of several classroom issues, and developed, because of the understanding, alternative conceptions of teaching and alternative instructional practices. This led them to try out the alternative ideas in their classrooms and they found the experience empowering and transformative in their personal growth and professional development. Observing this transformative process over a period of a year and a half from the records the teachers have maintained with remarkable perseverance and from the discussions she has had with them, this researcher has drawn some conclusions which have significant implications for ESL teacher learning.

**Key Words:** Journal writing, peer observation, Professional Development, Reflective Practice, video recording.

## I. Introduction

It will be worthwhile to explore this concern and identify the factors responsible for it, preparatory to finding some possible means of ‘seeing...teaching differently’ (Fanselow 1988: 114), which will help the ESL teacher face successfully any ESL situation and enable him or her to ‘transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students’ (Shulman 1987: 15).

In this country, the Guru once stood only next to God. In many invocations, he was called on as many gods in one. But today he or she has no such place... Tertiary-level teachers of English in today’s India are in an even more unenviable position. Although placed at the loom of history at a time when society’s demands on English are growing at an unprecedented scale, there are openly expressed doubts on their ability to successfully carry out the tasks on their own. In several States, not excluding Andhra Pradesh, lack of faith in them is obvious... College teachers of English are being obliged to prove themselves even for those tasks for which they have more than adequate equipment and obvious potential. The need to regain the lost ground is urgent.

(Tickoo 2009: 18 – 19)

## II. Aim of This Study

The principal aim of this study is to examine how reflective practice enables ESL teachers to make sense of their professional worlds as well as make significant and worthwhile change within themselves and in their teaching practices.

The study has a secondary aim as well. In general educational research, 'teachers' ways of knowing', which are referred to as the 'new scholarship' (Schon 1995, Zeichner 1999) or 'practitioner research' (Anderson and Herr 1999), are gaining recognition: the knowledge produced by teachers out of their own lived realities as professionals is increasingly being regarded as legitimate. The process of legitimizing this knowledge calls for a broad-based movement that seeks to examine and make public the new scholarship. This study is an attempt in that direction in the ESL context in India.

### III.Literature Review

Nunan (1992) reports on the planning processes employed by nine teachers with different levels of experience and concluded that the teachers' plans had a significant impact on their lessons, although their lessons were substantially modified during instruction.

Johnson (1992) studied six pre-service ESL teachers, using video taped recordings of the lessons they had taught and stimulated recall reports of the instructional decisions and prior knowledge that influenced their teaching. She found that teachers most frequently recalled making interactive decisions in order to promote student understanding (37%), to promote student motivation, involvement (17%), instructional management (15%), curriculum integration (9%), subject matter contents (8%), students' language skill (8%), and students' affective needs (6%) (Johnson, 1992: 127). In a questionnaire study of the beliefs of English teachers in Hong Kong schools, Richards, Tung and Ng (1992) found that the 249 teachers sampled held a relatively consistent set of beliefs related to such issues as the nature of the ESL curriculum.

Katz (1996) made a study at a large urban state university in the United States that serves a large and diverse student population. She used two audio-recorded, formal interviews with each teacher, one at the beginning and one at the end, journal writing and conducted classroom observations, documented via extensive field notes, which were transcribed and conducted research to understand the instruction of writing to both native and non-native users of English.

Gray (1998), a teacher and a teacher trainer used interactive learner/trainee diaries as a part of a short pre-service teacher training courses and found that by listening to learners' voices, trainees can get access to essential affective factors in teaching-learning process.

Towndrow (2004) investigated the relatively unexplored field of reflective journal writing by an on-line tutor working with a group of Chinese learners of English attending an intensive communication skills programme at Singapore.

### IV.Procedures for Carrying Out Reflective Practice

Several strategies and techniques have been developed to investigate classroom teaching by reflective practitioners. They are a. Self-Monitoring, b. Teacher Support Groups, c. Peer Observation, d. Teaching portfolios, e. Critical Incident Analysis, f. Team Teaching, g. Action Research, h. Diary/Journal Writing

### V.Case Studies of Reflective Practice, especially in Second Language Teacher Learning

#### 1. Description of Subjects

After attending a programme on reflective practice, six teachers teaching undergraduate ESL classes at colleges in and around Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, decided to carry out reflective practice through one or more means for their own on-going professional development. The participants were heterogeneous in

different aspects, such as age, qualifications, training, experience, and place of work. They teach students of similar profiles learning English as second language.

Teacher A is an English teacher working in a degree college in the suburbs of Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh. He has a Masters degree in English, and is interested in phonetics. He has not undergone any special training in teaching English as a second language, but he has taught English for 29 years in an Intermediate and Degree college. He teaches mostly rural students, who are from Telugu medium schools. He has acted as a resource person at workshops on communication skills and English grammar for English teachers working in the suburbs of Vijayawada. He has attended four refresher courses, one train-the-trainer programme<sup>1</sup>, one career guidance-training programme and the Jawahar Knowledge Centre (J.K.C) Training programme<sup>2</sup>. Besides being a teacher of English, he is also working as a coordinator and a trained mentor for J.K.C students.

Teacher B is an English teacher working at a well-known degree college in Vijayawada, the students of which are from good academic backgrounds. The teacher has a Masters degree in English literature. She also has a bachelor's degree in education and special training in ELT through the 'Post graduate certificate in teaching English' from the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (now English and Foreign Language University), Hyderabad. She has taught English for 32 years, 18 years at the school level and 14 years at college level. She has attended six national seminars and one international seminar. Her college has divided the students into four streams based on their linguistic abilities. She has opted to teach stream C, the lowest ability stream, in her college.

Teacher C is working as an Assistant Professor of English at an engineering college on the outskirts of Vijayawada. She has a Masters degree in English literature. She has 15 years of experience of teaching English as second language at the undergraduate level. She has had no special training for teaching English.

Teacher D heads the department of English in a reputable women's college. She has a Masters degree in English literature and has taught English for 25 years. She has presented papers in national and international seminars and participated in workshops. Currently, she is also acting as an Academic Officer in her college.

Teacher E heads the department of English in a degree college in Vuyyuru, about 25 kms from Vijayawada. He has taught English for 31 years. He has a Masters degree in English literature. He has not had any training in teaching English as a second language.

Teacher F is a teacher of English working in a degree college in the suburbs of Vijayawada. She has a Masters degree in English literature and 9 years of experience in teaching English and communication skills. She has had no training in teaching English.

## VI.Procedures Adopted for Data Collection

This researcher has maintained separate files for each of the six participant teachers with his/her pseudonym. In the file allotted for each participant, the researcher kept a copy of the teacher's profile containing his/her personal details, designation, educational qualifications, years of experience, objective in choosing the teaching profession, and a copy of the transcript of the interview. The information was obtained through interviews on various emergent themes/strategies/patterns, which were considered important.

Besides journal writing, Teacher A had opted for audio-video recording for self-observation. The teacher himself arranged for the recording. Later, the teacher viewed and re-viewed the recording and analyzed it, selecting an item for observation through a checklist. Still later, the teacher re-taught the same lesson, and video-recorded it to find out whether the expected improvement had taken place in his teaching.

Teacher D opted for journal writing. Before she set about the task, she collected information from her students about their learning preferences by administering a questionnaire to them.

Teacher F opted for peer observation. As her colleagues were busy and were reluctant to observe her classes, this researcher herself had to act as her observer. Before observing each class, the researcher had a discussion with the teacher, and the teacher decided on the aspects to be observed by selecting from the observation checklist provided to her. The observer entered the class to be observed five minutes earlier and sat in the last row without disturbing the students. After the class the observations were discussed with the teacher.

## VII. Post-Reflection Discussion

The researcher had a 15-minute discussion with Teacher A. When he was asked to respond on the importance of video recording, he expressed his satisfaction. He said that he would prefer video recording to journal writing, as the former helped not only in improving his teaching skills but also in assessing the learning capabilities of the students.

Teacher B expressed her satisfaction in reflection through journal writing because she was confident that it raised her self-consciousness about her own teaching. From the post reflection discussion, the researcher could notice the teacher's confidence in the usefulness of reflective practice, if followed regularly. She is confident that journal writing definitely helps the teacher, if done regularly. She realizes the importance of a thorough preparation after making self-introspection through journal writing. She expresses her hope of becoming a better teacher if she continues to reflect upon her classes on a regular basis. She suggests that experts in this field should conduct workshops and seminars periodically with a view to helping ESL teachers with guidelines to improve their classroom teaching.

Teacher C feels that reflective practice is an active process, which brings out teachers' capacity for expressing, analyzing and renovating the knowledge they use in their classrooms. She also says that this process is retrospective in nature and helps in improving our perception of our day-to-day work. The teacher believes that language as a means of communication can be learnt not only through formal instruction but also unknowingly through social interactions. She also feels that accuracy in communication is very important. Like a conventional teacher, she too believes that drill and practice can bring in accuracy in language use. She is of the opinion that students should learn speaking and listening skills so that they can be efficient learners in reading and writing.

When the researcher approached the teacher D, for taking her consent to participate in her research, she readily consented as she felt it to be an opportunity for professional growth. She opted for journal writing. The teacher feels that the effectiveness of teaching depends on the learners' learning preferences. She uses a learner-centered model of teaching minimizing the lecturing and motivating the students by asking critical questions and using various other means such as jokes, and stories paper cuttings. She is of the opinion that teaching will be effective if the teacher realizes the learning styles of her learners. To learn the needs of learners, the teacher administers a questionnaire to them, which is designed to elicit information about their learning styles and preferences. From her questionnaire survey, the teacher found that the majority of her learners were kinaesthetic, auditory and tactile learners. A few students were visual. She, therefore, decided to use more listening exercises through tapes, team activities and exercises designed to listen to others, in order to help the auditory learners. She planned to use role-plays and other activity-based methods for kinaesthetic learners; and she has also planned for projects so as to give a 'hands-on' experience to the tactile learners. She had strategies for the visual group as well. This teacher also asked her students to answer another questionnaire (Willing, K. 1988. pp. 106-7) to investigate their learning preferences.

When teacher E was asked to reflect on her experiences, the teacher spoke with optimism about the value of reflective practice. The post-reflection discussion reveals that the teacher believes in reflective practice as an effective means of self-evaluation and of developing sensitivity to students' learning. He opted for journal writing. The teacher said that he had no idea of 'Reflective Practice' as a theory or as a concept but that his teaching depended purely on thoroughly thinking about the previous class he had taught. Documenting his reflections was a new experience for him. The teacher prefers story telling as his teaching strategy. He relates classroom situation to day-to-day experience. He prefers divergent questions while teaching and referential questions while summing up. When he was asked to respond to his own "reflective practice" through journal writing, he sounded skeptical but spoke with considerable enthusiasm about the value of journal writing in developing one's writing ability.

At the informal meeting with teacher F, this researcher, sought her consent to participate in this study, explained the significance of reflective practice in effective teaching, as well as the procedures for reflective practice. The teacher chose peer observation. As her colleagues were reluctant to observe the teacher's classroom teaching due to rigid time schedules, this researcher herself decided to act as her observer.

## VIII. Findings Based on Teachers' Experience

### 1. Decisions about Timing through Reflective Practice

The reflective practice of the teachers in this study helped them to be sensitive to the time needed by the students to carry out an activity, and make adjustments in time allocation. It also helped them estimate the number of activities that could be set in a period. Furthermore, it helped the teacher identify and assess the attention span of the students.

On reflection, Teacher A found himself planning for his lessons carefully such that his students were able to learn vocabulary through practice, though it was basically a time-consuming activity.

Similarly, Teacher B set up a time-bound practice exercise to sustain her students' interest while teaching reading comprehension.

Teacher C was found to plan her lesson dividing the duration of the class equally among all her students, thus finding the time to motivate her students to interact in English both with her and among themselves. Time became an important factor for making her students summarize and recall the words and expressions learned from the text, and she was able to manage it with ease.

Teacher D's decision about timing was interesting. She decided to teach grammar in the afternoon sessions, being conscious of the mood of the students.

### 2. Decisions about solving the students' problems through reflective practice

The teachers could also assess the kinds of problems that students had in understanding certain concepts and instructions. Though the classes differed slightly in 'personality' and 'perception', surprisingly, the kinds of problems that the students faced were rather similar.

The teachers could identify the students' problems, tried out different methods of explanation within the lesson series, and thus arrived at workable method of solving the students' problems.

### 3. Better decisions about the use of visual aids and inventing new strategies through reflective practice

The reflective practices of five of the six teachers indicate significant improvement in their classroom practice in terms of teaching strategies and teaching aids. Reflective Practice has evidently helped them think about alternative strategies and teaching aids to make their classroom teaching more effective and interesting.

### 4. Building on the familiar

A significant insight that all the teachers derived from their reflections was that, for better learning to emerge, they should attempt to build on what was already familiar to their learners.

## **5. Opportunities for active involvement**

Data indicate that reflection enabled the teacher participants to realize the need for providing opportunities to their students to interact with the teacher, text or with their friends during the class.

## **6. Taking advantage of wide variety of resources**

The significant change that occurred due to reflection among the teacher participants is that they were motivated to think and prepare for the class in advance and to select teaching materials appropriate to the level of their students.

## **7. Developing a sense of belonging with the classroom**

Reflective practice enabled the teacher participants to realize that making students feel at home in the classroom would greatly facilitate learning. The data show the teachers attempting to make their students feel at ease in several ways, in particular, through the elicitation method. This developed in the students a sense of responsibility and belonging.

## **8. Sensitivity to learners' difficulties**

The significant insight that the teachers derived from their own reflections was that, for effective teaching-learning to take place in the classroom, the teacher should be sensitive to the difficulties of the students in the learning process and that each lesson should be planned keeping the learners' difficulties in mind.

## **9. Seeking advice and outside support**

The data collected indicate that the teachers realized the need for collaborative work, and sought advice from their senior colleagues to solve their classroom problems and for their self-evaluation.

## **10. Utilizing effective classroom management strategies**

Reflection made the teachers realize the need for effective classroom management as a significant requisite for effective teaching. All the teacher participants were found to realize the significance of group activities for creating interaction among their students.

## **11. Maintaining flexibility and a positive attitude**

Yet another significant outcome that the data analysis indicates is that the teachers understood the need to have a positive attitude towards their students and that they realized that flexibility in attitude and action in classroom would make the students learn better.

## **12. Promoting learner autonomy**

Reflective practice helped the teachers realize both the need to give freedom to the students to choose the activity or the lesson to be taught and the necessity for creating a climate conducive to learning in the classroom.

## **13. Integrating language skills and resources**

All the teacher participants learned to integrate language skills while designing activities for their students. By means of group discussions and pair work among the students, the teacher participants learned to integrate listening, speaking and reading skills. Teachers A and C encouraged their students to use the internet to gather information for classroom activities. Teacher E made his students utilize the library resources to collect information related to the lesson prescribed, and the task served to integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

## **IX. Conclusion**

The report by the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (Carnegie Corporation 1986) recommended the use of teacher-generated case reports as a core source in teacher education. This research may well be regarded as a contribution to that emerging core source in second language teacher education.

This researcher hopes that by bringing teachers' ways of knowing through reflective practice into scholarly discussion, this study will strengthen the struggle, waged since the 1980s, to gain validity for inquiry-derived knowledge through reflective practice in ways afforded to disciplinary or theoretical knowledge, which still remains foundational to second language teacher education.

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