

On Reflective Teaching of EFL Teachers in Local Universities of China - A Case Study of Leshan Normal University, Sichuan

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Abstract

Presently, China plays a vital role in the world. Therefore, Chinese passion for English has reached an unprecedented level. Nevertheless, various problems occur in EFL teaching. Thus, EFL teachers must make the teaching qualities better by reflective teaching, an effective way to improving EFL teaching.

The paper is to study the definitions, approaches and the characteristics of reflective teaching, so that teachers can clarify what reflection teaching is, how important it is, and how they can become reflective teachers. In addition, the paper also analyzes one case study of teacher reflection in Leshan Normal University in the perspective of improving EFL teachers' teaching. Finally, the paper draws a conclusion to trigger the further study.

Keywords: reflective teaching, EFL teachers, local universities

1. Definitions of Reflective Teaching

Basically, the definition of reflective teaching originates from Dewey (1993), who compares "routine action" with "reflective action". Routine action is guided by the factors like habits, tradition and authority and by institutional expectations and definitions, according to Dewey.

Zeichner and Liston (1985) define reflective teaching in a different way. They assert, "A reflective teacher is defined as one who assesses the purposes, origins and consequences of his or her work at all levels". Cruickshank (1981) defines reflective teaching as the teacher's thinking of what happens in the teaching, and thinking of alternative way of achieving aims. He further regards it as an approach to provide students with a chance to weigh the teaching event analytically, thoughtfully and objectively.

According to Xiong Chuanwu (1999), reflective teaching is defined as teachers' solving the troubles generated from inner self, teaching methods and teaching goals by means of action research, and by combining 'learning how to teach' with 'learning how to learn'. Therefore, teachers can play the role of teaching practical rationality and finally become well-experienced.

2. Characteristics of Reflective Teaching

Pollard and Tann (1987) list the characteristics of reflective teaching as follows:

- 1) Reflective teaching combines enquiry and implementation skills with attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness.
- 2) Reflective teaching implies an active concern with aims and consequences, as well as with means and technical efficiency.
- 3) Reflective teaching is based on teacher judgment, informed partly by self-reflection and partly by insights from educational disciplines.
- 4) Reflective teaching is applied in a cyclical or spiraling process, in which teachers continually monitor, evaluate and revise own practice.

3. Previous Researches of Reflective Teaching Abroad

In previous researches of reflective teaching abroad, Dewey (1933) is the first one to regard the teachers as reflective practitioners, who are the professionals that can bring the initiative into full play in education reforms. According to Dewey's works, people carry out some deeper researches into teachers' reflection. Current researches on reflective teaching have used diverse and conflicting terms. Van (1977) presents 3 levels of reflection derived from Habermas (1973): one, technical reflection; two, practical reflection; three, critical reflection.

4. Previous Researches of Reflective Teaching at Home

Generally speaking, domestic works on reflective teaching are rather few. There is only one famous book *On Reflective Teaching*, written by Professor Xiong Chuanwu (1999). According to Xiong, reflective teaching has 3 major features: 1) it accelerates the mutual development of the teacher and students by learning to teach and learning to learn 2) it can give a creative solution to the problems in practical teaching 3) it is helpful in improving teaching practice and exploring the rationality of teaching and learning.

Li (2002) reckons reflective teaching as a process of understanding and improving the teaching, which should be carried out throughout the career of a teacher. Chen (1999) presents the characteristics of completeness and internal coherence in the process of reflective teaching.

5. Approaches to Reflective Teaching

Some commonly-used reflective approaches are introduced by Richards and Lockhart (1996) in their book *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* for English teachers to study classroom teaching. These approaches are as follows:

- 1). *Lesson reports: The written accounts of lessons which describe the main features of the lessons.*
- 2). *Teaching journals: The written or recorded accounts of teaching experiences.*
- 3). *Audio and video recordings: The recordings of a lesson or part of a lesson.*
- 4). *Surveys and questionnaires: The activities such as administering a questionnaire or completing a survey, designed to collect information on a particular aspect of teaching or learning.*
- 5). *Action research: The implementation of an action plan designed to bring about change in some aspect of the teacher's class with subsequent monitoring of the effects of the innovation.*
- 6). *Observation: The tasks completed by a student teacher observing a cooperating teacher's class, or peer observation (i.e., tasks completed by a teacher visiting a colleague's class).*

6. A Case Study of Reflection on Teaching in Leshan Normal University

In this case study, the author analyzes the classroom observation scripts of two classes before and after the reflection, combining free individual reflection and guided reflection in forms of group discussion and interview, with a purpose to find out the problems in EFL teaching and some feasible solutions through reflective teaching.

6.1 Classroom Observation Script of the Two Classes

Mrs. Wang has been an English teacher in Leshan Normal University for five years. However, she always finds it hard to manage a good listening class. In this case study, some experienced teaching staff as well as some young EFL teachers attended her listening class, with a purpose to find out the solution to her problems.

6.1.1 Classroom Observation Script of the First Listening Class

The listening material is chosen from the listening part of Unit 8, Book 2 of *Integrated Skills of English*, with a title of *The Torch Festival*. The first listening class was as follows.

(1) In pre-listening step:

Mrs. Wang (with a same voice and intonation during her class): Now we are going to study the listening part in Unit 8. Please turn to page 157. The title is *The Torch Festival*. Do you know the meaning of the title?

Students (in a low spirit): Yes.

Mrs. Wang: Before the listening, I would like to mention the new words and expressions. (Then, she wrote some words and the Chinese meaning on the blackboard.) Here are 5 names of our ethnic minority groups: Hani(哈尼族), Lisu (傣傣族), Primi(普米族), Naxi(纳西族), and Lahu(拉祜族). And then, 2 kinds of game: wrestling(摔跤) and tug-of-war(拔河) and one single word: parade(游行). Do you have any questions about the meaning?

Students (in a low spirit): No.

Mrs. Wang: Well, please read the four questions carefully. Then, we will begin our practice right now. Please put on your earphones. Ready?

Students (in a low spirit): Yes.

(2) In while-listening step:

Mrs. Wang: (Mrs. Wang played the tape.) Well, please check your answers. Question one: what is the time when the torch festival is held and how long it lasts?

Students (Only one third of the students answered while others remained silent.): Yes. The time is in early June or on the 25th of the month and it often lasts for four days.

Mrs. Wang: Now please look at Question 2? How do people celebrate the Festival in the evening?

Students (Only one third of the students answered while others remained silent.): By singing and dancing.

Mrs. Wang: In details?

Students (No one answered.): ...

(When Mrs. Wang asked question 3 and 4, the same happened. The students could only present simple answers instead of detailed ones.)

Mrs. Wang: Now, let's listen to the passage once again and try to get the detailed answers to question 2, 3 and 4.

(This time, the students still cannot answer completely to those questions. So, Mrs. Wang gave the answers to them directly, and then played the tape for the third time.)

(3) In post-listening step:

Mrs. Wang: Do you have any questions?

Students (in a low spirit): No.

Mrs. Wang: Finally, please master the new words in the passage out of class. Well, class is over, see you.

(During her class, the author found that there were little teacher-student interaction in her class and most students were inactively participating in the class, the atmosphere of which was less satisfactory. Worsely, some students were playing their cellphones because of lack of interest in his class.)

6.1.2 Classroom Observation Script of the Second Listening Class

After the first listening class, we told Mrs. Wang the problems, asked her to reflect the class by himself first, and then held a group of discussion to give her guided reflection of her first class, and finally let her teach the class once again with a new teaching design the other day.

The whole process of her second listening class was as follows.

(1) In pre-listening step:

Mrs. Wang (with a proper voice, intonation and stress): Now we will practice the listening part in Unit 8. Before the listening, I would like to discuss some topics that are closely related to the passage we are going to listen. One topic is festivals and the other one is ethnic minority groups of China. Well, is there any one who can name the well-know festivals in English-speaking countries?

(Most of the students raised their hands.)

Student A: Mother's Day, April Fools' Day, Halloween, Father's Day.

(Mrs. Wang corrected the incorrect pronunciation of him.)

Student B: Saint Valentine's Day, New Year's Day, Christmas, Easter.

Mrs. Wang: Well done! In addition to those festivals, there are some others like Independence Day and Labor Day, etc. And then, is there anyone to list our Chinese festivals?

(All the students tried to be the first to answer the question.)

Student C: Mid-autumn Festival, Double Ninth, Torch Festival and Kite-flying Day.

Student D: Lantern Festival, Spring Festival, Dragon-boat Festival, The Day for Mourning the Dead.

Mrs. Wang: Well done! (Facing student C) You talked about the Torch Festival, which is the title of the passage we are going to listen. Which ethnic minority group of China will hold the festival?

Students (in a high spirit): Li is Yizu people.

Mrs. Wang: Good! And do you know what other ethnic minority groups in China?

(All the students raised hands.)

Student A: Dongzu, Baizu, Qiangzu, Zhuangzu, etc.

Student B: Zangzu, Miaozi, Naxi, etc.

Mrs. Wang: Good! Today we will learn more minority groups from the listening material than you listed just now: Hani(哈尼族), Lisu (傣族), Lahu(拉祜族), Primi(普米族). (Mrs. Wang wrote the English and Chinese meanings on the blackboard) Well, so much for the related information. Now, let's turn to page 157 and look at today's topic: the *Torch Festival*. And the last question is how much you know about the Torch Festival. You will be given 3 minutes to discuss with your partners with English. Then I will ask one of you to present discussion results. Now begin your discussion.

(All students were actively discussing with the partners.)

Mrs. Wang: Time's up. Is there any volunteer?

(All the students raised hands, willing to answer.)

Student A: The Torch Festival is held in Yunnan where Yizu people make big torches in the evening and dance around them.

Mrs. Wang: Right! And do you know what is the torch made of, when the festival is held and how long it lasts?

Student A: No, I don't know.

Mrs. Wang: Thank you. Sit down, please. Don't worry. We will get the answers later from the passage. Now, let's get down to the business. In the passage, we will hear some difficult words: "wrestling", which means the fight by grappling with somebody and trying to throw him to the ground, and "parade", which means the procession of people, etc. Please read these words after me.

(Mrs. Wang pointed out the wrong pronunciation of the students.)

Mrs. Wang: Ok, please read the 3 questions on page 157. And I am going to add some additional questions for you to think about.

(Then, Mrs. Wang wrote two additional questions. The first one is: "What is the difference of the celebration by different minority groups?" The second one is: "What is the torch made of?")

Mrs. Wang: I will classify the 5 questions into difficult ones and simple ones. You should give the answers to the simple questions after the first time of listening. And after the second time, you should answer the difficult ones.

Mrs. Wang: Well, let's begin the first time of listening. Please put on your earphones. Are you ready?

Students (in a high spirit): Yes.

(2) In while-listening step:

Mrs. Wang: (Mrs. Wang played the tape for the first time.) Did you get the main idea of the article? How about the answers to the simple questions?

Students (in a high spirit): Yes.

(Mrs. Wang began to check the answers and found that most of the students got the right answers.)

Mrs. Wang: Well-done! Let's turn to the difficult questions?

Students (in a high spirit): We only caught incomplete answers.

Mrs. Wang: It's Ok. I am certain you will do a better job after listening the second time. While listening to the passage, please keep in mind the following listening skills: focus on content, avoid emotional involvement, make necessary notes, and stay active by asking mental questions, avoid distraction, use the gap between the rate of speech and your rate of thought. (Then Mrs. Wang began to explain the six listening skills, and played the tape again.)

Mrs. Wang: Did you get what you need after listening the second time?

Students (in a high spirit): Yes.

(Mrs. Wang checked the students' answers and found only minor errors made by the students.)

(During her re-teaching, the author discovered that the students were obviously more active than the first one and

she also tried to keep sentence short and grammar simple and to use exaggerated intonation and stress to catch the students' attention, together with frequently paraphrasing and repeating.)

(3) In post-listening step:

Mrs. Wang: Any questions about the passage?

Students (in a high spirit): No.

Mrs. Wang: Now, I will play the tape for the third time and during the last time you must repeat after it, which is beneficial for cultivating a good language sense.

(Mrs. Wang played the tape for the last time and the students repeated after it with loud voice.)

Mrs. Wang: Before the end of the class, I will assign some follow-up activities to you. The first assignment is to write a short essay about the torch festival using all the information you learned today. The second one is an oral practice: on the basis of the passage, you will prepare a free talk with the topic of "Spring Festival" that will be presented in the next class. Are you clear?

Student (in a high spirit): Yes!

Mrs. Wang: Ok, class is over, see you.

6.2 Analysis of the Classroom Teaching: "Reflection makes a difference."

6.2.1 Interview about the Difference of the Two Classes

The second class was obviously more interesting, dynamic and successful compared with the first one. By this way, Mrs. Wang learned that reflective teaching can greatly improve EFL teaching and promote her professional development. Based on the experience, the author and Mrs. Wang carried out the following reflective practice afterwards in the form of interview.

(1) Question one: What did you reflect during the interval of the two listening classes?

Mrs. Wang: I did the integrated reflection and I found out that I must think carefully the following 5 aspects: teacher's belief, teacher's role, decision-making, language used in teaching and the interaction in EFL classroom. Only in this way can I be a good EFL teacher.

(2) Question two: What is the difference between the two classes in pre-listening step, and why? You used lead-in skill by introducing the related information to the topic and gave some time for the students to discuss in pairs in your re-teaching, right?

Mrs. Wang: That's right. In pre-listening step of the first listening class, I just simply read the listening material without careful planning or detailed analyzing. But I realized my mistakes and benefited a lot from the integrated reflection. By reflecting teachers' role, I found that EFL teacher should have a diversified role including planner, curriculum developer, analyst, facilitator, and materials developer, etc. For this reason, I knew the necessity of correcting the students' wrong pronunciation during the re-teaching of the class. By reflecting on teachers' belief, I found it necessary to understand what makes English listening so difficult for students and think about what is the best way to improve the class. By reflecting about interaction in EFL classroom, I found the importance of group discussion. By reflecting teachers' decision-making, I found the importance of planning before teaching including specifying quantity of learning content and materials and setting instructional goals. That is why I planned two additional questions when I gave the re-teaching. The result is that the classroom in the re-teaching was more dynamic than the first one.

So, I summarized the right pre-listening step as follows:

A: Set up appropriate purpose for listening so that the students will know what they will pay attention to and they will become active listeners, which enhances their comprehension and retention.

B: Rectify wrong pronunciations of difficult words and remove linguistic obstacles of the students.

C: Arouse interest by discussion and enrich some background information and motivate students to attend to the oral material.

In the pre-listening part, we should design discussing activities for the students. By discussion, they can predict what they will listen. In this way, both students and teachers can create a perfect atmosphere where students can feel more relaxed and willing to listen in order to examine their prediction. It is clear that prediction not only increases listeners' motivation but also increases their comprehension.

(3) Question Three: What is the difference between your two classes in while-listening step, and why? You

introduced six effective listening skills to the students and divided the questions into simple ones and difficult ones, right?

Mrs. Wang: Right. In while-listening stage of the first class, I just simply played the tape from the beginning to the end and then gave the correct answers, failing to notice that most of the students were not attentively involved in the class. Then I benefited a lot from the integrated reflection. By reflecting teachers' decision-making, I found it necessary to think about whether the students need more information and to judge the necessity of increasing student involvement in the activity. By reflecting teachers' belief, I found the essence of effective teaching. By reflecting teachers' role, I found that EFL teachers should also perform as group organizer and quality controller in class. By reflecting about interaction in EFL classroom, I recognized the importance of communicating with the students frequently in class. By reflecting the language used in the classroom, I found the importance of classroom language and I learnt to keep sentence short and grammatically simple and to use exaggerated intonation to hold the students' attention, with frequently repeating and paraphrasing.

Therefore, I summarized the right while-listening step as follows:

A: Supporting and managing listening process.

B: Teaching listening skills

C: Dividing questions into types.

(4) Question four: What is the difference between your two classes in post-listening step, and why? You designed follow-up exercises related to the listening material, right?

Mrs. Wang: In post-listening step of the first class, I just simply asked the students to memorize the vocabulary without asking them if they have understood the materials thoroughly. Then I benefited a lot from the integrated reflection. By reflecting teachers' role, I found that an EFL teacher should not only be responsible for the students' study in class, but also for their self-study out of class. By reflecting teachers' decision-making, I realized the importance of evaluative decision, which requires that after the lesson, the teacher must make decisions about its effectiveness and what the follow-up to the lesson will be. By reflecting teachers' belief, I found that a good EFL teacher should also attach great importance to the post-listening stage.

Then, I summarized the right post-listening step as follows:

A: Responding, reflecting, and reconstructing understanding.

B: Design follow-up activities.

(5) Question five: What did you benefit from the reflection?

Mrs. Wang: There are many things to be explored in teaching listening, which is more than just playing tapes and checking students' comprehension. The ultimate goal of listening course is to increase students' possibility of success in applying students' listening skills and strategies to real-life communication. Obviously, successful combination of pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening from a teaching approach is very helpful to the goal. So, in listening courses, we integrated pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening indispensable to be successful listening class from a teaching approach. In this way, it can be more promising to help students develop their listening proficiency along with other language skills and become effective and successful listeners both in and out of the classroom.

6.2.2 Two Teaching Journals

In the two listening classes, Mrs. Wang also carried out individual reflection by writing 2 teaching journals about her feelings after the two classes respectively:

November 7, 2008

Today's listening class was similar to what happened before. I still couldn't ignite the students' interest and teaching listening part really depressed me. In the class, I couldn't even know if all students were attentively listening or not. The students still could only answer simple questions, but for difficult ones, they couldn't answer them unless listening to the passage again and again. A lot of problems were facing me. How to solve them? Why do I teach the way I do? What roles should I perform in the class? Do I need any change? After thinking about those questions, I found that I had to re-design my listening class.

November 8, 2008

Today's re-teaching was the most successful one I've ever had. I have never seen the students more attentively

and actively involved in my listening class. Because of their interest and passion, they could understand the listening materials easily, even for the difficult questions. The changes should be attributed to the integrated reflection, my own individual reflection as well as guided reflection by the staff. Even so, I couldn't stop thinking. Can I make my teaching better? How to make the follow-up activities more scientific and instructive? What kind of language is the most suitable in EFL classroom?

6.3 Summary

From the example mentioned above, it is clear that teachers' conception of teaching can be improved by using reflective teaching, especially integrated reflection. Nevertheless, this is a systematic and complicated project fulfilled by the interaction between internal and external causes. For example, the following work needs to be done:

A: Explore teachers' internal cause, which is about impetus source. Impetus source refers to the inner necessity for changing teaching concept, that is, in the teaching practice, new requirement is made by the changeable teaching goal, but teachers don't know what they are doing in class. Obviously, starting their inner necessities is the first step to help teachers change traditional teaching concepts, which can benefit the class.

B: Get rid of the outmoded perspective through the following steps so that teachers can realize what they are doing:

- a) Learn theories about reflective teaching and study how to practice.
 - b) Demonstrate the successful results/examples according to reflective teaching.
 - c) Observe students' performances so that teachers can rethink their own teaching methods.
- 3) Reflect immediately the unreasonable contents during the process of teaching.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, the paper mainly discusses EFL teachers' reflective teaching, with a purpose to find out how English teachers can improve their teaching quality by teacher reflection.

Obviously, reflective teaching is a difficult process, which involves a major shift in emphasis on our acting and thinking. By reflective teaching, teachers reflect their own teaching to solve problems and to perfect their professional development. Besides, reflective teaching does not deny the traditional teaching methods. Actually, it comes from the reform of traditional methods and will promote the reform. All approaches have their weakness and strengths. Reflective teaching has no exceptions.

So far, most of studies on reflective teaching start from the theoretical perspective. Thus, educators and teachers need to make more practical researches on reflective teaching. In practical perspective, teachers will find so many interesting and valuable ways that they can follow so as to become increasingly reflective as professionals. It is hoped that all teachers can become reflective practitioners easily and get joyful from routine teaching. What's more, not only the teachers but also the students and even the parents need reflection so that they can make joint efforts to solve the problems in EFL teaching.

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