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*Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research*



Urmia University

TESOL, a profession that eats its young! The importance of reflective practice in language teacher education

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ABSTRACT

The field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is similar to other fields in that we must not take it for granted that novice teachers will survive their first year without some kind of support. This paper outlines how three novice ESL teachers in Canada survived their first year without any support from the school they were placed. Specifically, the paper outlines how they, with the aid of a facilitator, engaged in reflective practice by using a framework for reflecting on practice to help them navigate complex issues and challenges they faced during their first year of teaching. Had they not engaged in such structured reflection during their first year, they would have probably become another statistic of those who quit the profession and contribute to the growing perception that TESOL is a profession that eats its young. The paper suggests that language teacher educators and novice teachers should not just wait until their first year to learn the skills of reflective practice but should do so much earlier in their teacher education programs so that they can be better prepared for the transition from their teacher education programs to the first year of teaching.

Keywords: reflective practice; novice teachers, language teacher education

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 3 Aug. 2016

Revised version received: 23 Aug. 2016

Accepted: 15 Sep. 2016

Available online: 1 Oct. 2016

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Introduction

Teaching is, as Halford (1998) has suggested, “the profession that eats its young” (p. 34). This is a statement widely recognized in the literature on general education and as the title of this paper suggests, I have extended it into the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) profession. Some of the numbers in general education are astonishing: some 30 per cent of all teachers leave the field within their first three years; and it gets worse, because within five years, nearly half of all novice teachers leave their jobs (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In addition, the overall average career length of a teacher (any teacher) in the U.S. is eleven years (Belmonte, 2006). This is similar to the career length of a professional athlete who must endure the demands of a physical sport and all that it entails, with injuries and so on. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that this may also be true for the TESOL profession, hard numbers are difficult to find as this is not a much researched or debated topic in the profession, and it is not much talked about by language teacher educators, many of whom are happy to just graduate teachers without any follow-up as to their success or failure. This is mostly because language teacher education programs vary greatly both in length (from a weekend course to an MA degree) and in content, with some focusing exclusively on theory (such as second language acquisition theory or linguistics) and very few concerned with how teachers can put into practice what they have learned in these programs.

Thus, as language teacher educators we must look both within and beyond our programs and ask ourselves how we can better prepare novice teachers. In this paper I will attempt to answer this question by proposing we can prepare language teachers better by developing their skills in reflective practice during their teacher education program. Specifically, in this paper I outline a *framework for reflecting on practice* (Farrell, 2015) that can be used in teacher education programs and how three female native English-speaking novice ESL teachers (each had just started their first year teaching ESL) used this framework to survive their novice year of teaching.

Why Reflective Practice?

Because teaching experiences are so varied, unpredictable and thus contextualized, language teacher educators must not only prepare teachers with subject and pedagogical content knowledge but also to be able to respond to an unknown reality which will vary from context to context and individual to individual. The best way they can do this is to help increase their level of awareness through developing skills in anticipatory reflective practice. Through such anticipatory reflective practice, novice teachers can also fill in any gaps that may appear in any mentorship program (if indeed any mentor has been appointed) and/or induction program where traditionally novice teachers could go for help during their first year. This reflective approach to language teacher education supports Wright’s (2010) observations that language teacher preparation should place “an emphasis on the student teacher’s learning to teach, and becoming a thinking teacher” which “in turn means a great deal of reflective activity programmed into learning experiences” (p. 273).

However, this reflective practice should not be just a cursory discussion of how to reflect; rather it should include a course length examination of how to incorporate reflective practice into their learning to teach during their first years as language teachers. Such a course can provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop skills in reflective practice so that they can better manage the various issues, challenges, conflicts, and problems they may face in their first years of teaching. Such skills in reflective practice can be provided using a new framework for reflecting on practice that I recently developed (Farrell, 2015).

Framework for Reflecting On Practice

The framework for reflecting on practice encompasses a holistic approach to reflective practice that focuses not only on the intellectual, cognitive and meta-cognitive aspects of our work, but also the spiritual, moral and emotional non-cognitive aspects of reflection that acknowledges the inner life of teachers. The framework has five different stages/levels of reflection: *Philosophy*; *Principles*; *Theory*; *Practice*; and *Beyond Practice*. Throughout the reflective process, teachers are encouraged not only to describe but also examine and challenge embedded assumptions at each level, so that they can use the framework as a lens through which they can view their professional (and even personal) worlds, and what has shaped their professional lives as they become more aware of their *philosophy*, *principles*, *theories*, *practices* and how these impact issues inside and *beyond practice*.

Philosophy, the first stage/level of the framework, can be considered to be a window to the roots of a teacher's practice, because having a philosophy of practice means each observable behavior has a reason that guides it even if the teacher does not articulate this reason. *Principles*, the second stage/level of the *framework for reflecting on practice*, include reflections on teachers' assumptions, beliefs, and conceptions of teaching and learning. *Theory*, the third level/stage of the framework, explores and examines the different choices a teacher makes about particular skills taught (or they think should be taught) or, in other words, how to put their theories into practice. *Practice*, the fourth stage/level of reflection in the framework, examines the more visible behaviors of what we do as teachers in the classroom and what influences what we do. The final stage/level of the framework entails teachers reflecting *beyond practice*, or the sociocultural dimensions related to teaching and learning (see Farrell, 2015 for more details on each stage of the framework).

The Study

The study utilized qualitative methods of research that include a case study approach (Merriam, 1988; Richards, K. 2003) that was exploratory and descriptive in nature (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982). The use of case study methodology was chosen because it best facilitates the construction of detailed, in-depth understanding of what is to be studied, and because of the depth that is possible (Stake, 1995).

Context & Participants

The teacher reflection group consisted of three novice female native English-speaking English as a second language (ESL) teachers all of whom had just commenced teaching in the same institution. Each has a similar qualification in teaching with a bachelor degree as well as a teaching certificate. All three novice teachers volunteered to meet in this group for one semester (14 weeks) in order to reflect on their practice together with a facilitator (this author). All three were employed on a part-time basis in an institution that ran an ESL program for international students at all proficiency levels of English as a second language. Most of these students intended to enroll in full-time courses in the university that the institution was affiliated with after they had successfully completed their English language courses because many of the students had been granted conditional acceptance for some courses on condition that they pass the ESL program. As group facilitator, I shared my perceptions openly with the group as a participant-observer in the group discussions where appropriate; however, I did not reflect on my own teaching. Rather, I managed the process so that the teacher-participants could feel they had space in which to reflect on their own practice.

In order to protect the identity of the teachers I have not given them any titles or pseudonyms but rather report the role identities that emerged from the group discussions as a whole. The teachers are 'named' T1, T2, and T3 to keep their identities protected. I fully recognize that by not giving a full description of each teacher in order to protect their identities can be considered a limitation of this study.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data collection was over a one-semester period (14 weeks) that constituted the winter term of a school year in that institution. During that period all three novice teachers agreed to commit themselves to attend interviews before and after the project and all group meetings while they were teaching. In terms of interviews, an initial interview was conducted before the group meetings commenced in order to illicit information about the novice teachers' life stories. All three novice teachers also attended open-ended interviews at the end of the period of group reflection in order to examine and clarify any themes or issues that emerged during the semester reflections and/or to capture any further first semester experiences of the novice teachers that did not come up during the group meetings. The group also engaged in weekly discussions in which mutual understandings were constructed through talk (Mann, 2005). All group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Since the interviews were open-ended, they along with the group discussions allowed participants to talk about a variety of topics pertaining to their first year teaching experiences.

When participants began to talk about similar topics (in the open-ended interviews and the group discussions), patterns began to emerge that illustrated the perceptions of the novice teachers and were then organized into themes related to their transition from their teacher education program (in)to their first year of teaching. In order to establish the trustworthiness of my findings, I (along with two graduate research assistants who were trained in the coding techniques) assessed the quality of the data by checking for its "credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301) suggest that several activities can be engaged in to increase "the probability that credible findings will be produced." The first of these activities is prolonged engagement. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301) define this as "the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the 'culture,' testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or the respondents, and building trust." As the study took place over an intensive 14-week period, this establishes sufficient time.

Results: How The Framework Worked During the First Year

I now outline each stage/level and how the three novice ESL teachers in Canada navigated each during their first year as teachers.

Philosophy

In order to be able to reflect on our basic philosophy we need to obtain self-knowledge and we can access this by exploring, examining and reflecting on our background from where we have evolved. This includes our heritage, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background, family and personal values that have combined to influence who we are as language teachers. An exploration of teacher life-histories can provide deep insights into the roots of teacher practice and identify the very seeds of the philosophy of practice.

I asked each of the three novice ESL teachers in Canada to reflect on their philosophy and when T1 reflected on her life-history she noted that in elementary school she had a teacher who made sure she “understood the difference between grammar points I was having trouble with.” In other words, she noted that she wanted to be like him as a teacher because he “encouraged me in my school work even though I was not a very academic student and pushed me.” T1 maintained that this attention made her “feel special and helped me think that I could do well in school.” As a result T1 said that she would try to be a similar type of teacher as this elementary school teacher. In addition she also noted that she had a French teacher who took the opportunity to talk to her students inside and outside of class. T1 noted: “She was excited to teach the language and that showed in her teaching. She made opportunities for us to use the language by arranging an exchange trip to use the language.” Thus, T1 said that she would also give her students opportunities to use English in real-life situations whenever possible (her observed classes throughout the first semester seemed to reflect this philosophy), and would take every opportunity to talk to her students also outside of class.

When T2 reflected on her life-history she noted a specific instance from her Grade 1 class that reminded her why ever after she said she had wanted to be a teacher: “I knew that I wanted to be a teacher when I was in Grade 1.” T2 then recounted the story of the day she heard her teacher asking a student a question about colors and she said: “I knew that that student was colorblind, I also knew that he was very shy and embarrassed about it.” That day T2 said she told the teacher about the student’s colorblindness. As she recounted: “I advocated on his behalf that day, and I have been doing it ever since.” So T2 stated that as a teacher she will advocate for her students because: “I vowed that day that I would always try to understand my students.” She acted on this throughout her first semester as a novice ESL teacher.

In contrast to T1 and T2, T3 remarked while reflecting on her life-history that she never considered she would be a teacher when she was growing up; instead she said she “stumbled upon teaching [ESL] really by accident.” T3 said that she had become more interested in teaching when she moved to Canada, so she decided to get her ESL teaching qualification. It was during this qualification program, she said, that she realized that this would be her life’s work: “Once I stepped into a classroom, I knew that this is exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.” However, she said that she had one serious issue to overcome as a teacher, and that was the difference between what was expected from a teacher in her home country where the teacher is viewed as a holder of all knowledge who will transfer that knowledge to students, and in Canada where she noted that her “first TESL teacher came to classroom and said that he does not have all the knowledge and has no problem telling his students if he does not know something.” Her conception of the teacher as all-knowledgeable was still evident in classroom observations when T3 attempted to answer the questions of students from countries she considered had a similar view of the teacher; however, when she was with students who had a North American or European type view of the teacher as someone who may not have all the answers, she seemed to be more relaxed in dealing with their questions.

All three novice ESL teachers reported on in this study realized that by articulating their life histories, they were better able to make connections to what was happening to them during their first year and as a result were better able to manage their transition. In a similar manner, pre-service teachers could also be asked to tell their stories of who they are and what kind of teachers in the past may have influenced them, and then reflect on how they may still influence them (for good or for bad) today.

Principles

The teachers' principles in this study were basically manifested in their teaching styles and all three teachers had strong personalities that were displayed through their style of teaching. For example, T2 reported that she had already realized that she has a strong personality that is difficult to change regardless of her teaching experiences. She noted that although she recognizes that she may need to change her teaching style depending on who she is teaching, she will not change it a lot: "I know I still have to somewhat alter it . . . because the class dynamics of each class is different but not that you are going to change yourself permanently or 100 per cent to a different person." T2 said she tells her students that she is who she is, and believes this is the correct way for her to teach, so she will not change. She remarked: "I tell my students upfront that I will not change," and "I have my principles." It is important for pre-service teachers to articulate their underlying assumptions, beliefs and conceptions about teaching and learning because eliciting such details can "provide a meaningful basis for discussion and reflection" (Basturkmen, 2012, p. 291) as was the case for these three novice ESL teachers.

Theory

One means of reflecting on theory is to explore and examine critical incidents. Although critical incidents are situations that actually occur during practice (the next stage/level in the framework), I include them here because they can be used to guide a teacher's theory-building. A critical incident poses a particular anomaly for a teacher, between what he or she conceptualizes as practice and an actual classroom experience that may run counter to such a conceptualization. In addition, critical incidents may also arise when a classroom experience runs counter to past teaching decisions, and this can cause teachers to perceive dissonance between their beliefs and theories and actual practice. Many teacher education programs do not prepare novice teachers to be able to recognize and deal with such teaching dilemmas, but these do originate in practice and as such need to be documented and reflected on.

For example, T3 related one such incident that later reminded her of her life-history reflections outlined above. One day, she said, she suddenly had a new student show up five weeks into the term. In addition, on arrival the new student did not look happy and did not want to interact with female students from different countries, but would not explain why. T3 noted: "I gave them all an activity to work on in groups, but he just sat there by himself, with an attitude." Then she said that she did not know if "he was happy to be put down a level in the middle of semester to her class." T3 said that this new student did not want to work in any group and just sat there. What was also worrying for her at that time was that he tried to "influence another male student from the same country, who had been fine up to this, to join him." T3 said that she was trying to give her students more freedom to do what they wanted but this was a sudden challenge for her so she did not do anything at that time. She allowed her class to continue with the groups talking and people walking around as they wished, as this was the system she said she had wanted to develop.

However, she continued to think about the incident for some time after. As she said: "I have to say that it really bothered me at first." So she tried to figure out why it bothered her. T3 noted that she understood that her students "come from countries where teachers most often have control of everything that goes on in a classroom [and] he probably was shocked to find his class in some form of chaos." In fact, she stated, she herself comes from an educational background where the teacher has total control of the class all the time:

I came from the same structure and perhaps was trying a bit too hard to break away from total control. As during my first classes I give more freedom to the students so they can get comfortable talking to each other I should have explained the purpose to my students. To them the whole situation looked like I have lost the control of the classroom.

T3 said that she then realized that she too may not be fully comfortable in allowing group work with students wandering about her classroom, given her own background. When asked about the overall result of her reflecting on this critical incident, T3 said: "I think I learned that I next time I will ease my students into North American style of learning/teaching slowly and explain (a bit) the value of the effort that they have to put into working in what seems like chaos." Similarly, second language teacher education preparation programs can provide teacher learners with opportunities to practice reflection on critical incidents.

Practice

Up to now, the framework for reflection has emphasized *philosophy*, *principles* and *theory*, or the "hidden" aspect of teaching. We may think of the whole teaching process as an iceberg, where we cannot see the part that is beneath the surface of the water (the "hidden" aspect), which is much larger than the visible part on the top. All we can see is the top of the iceberg, or 10 per cent of the whole. In teaching this constitutes our *practice*, the fourth stage/level of reflection in our framework. Of course such reflections are directly related to and influenced by our reflections on our *theory* at the previous level (e.g., see critical incidents above) and on our *principles* and *philosophy*.

T2 invited me to observe her teach a series of her conversation classes with the general idea of providing her with "some" feedback on her teaching but without any specific instructions on what to observe. The classroom observation commenced and after some initial instructions and a review of previous homework, the teacher started a question-and-answer segment with the class that lasted for twenty minutes, in which I coded using a seating chart observation record (SCORE) instrument (Acheson & Gall, 1987), to plot the communication flow during the class. I do not have enough space to go through the SCORE analysis in detail (but see Farrell, 2016 for more), but as we examined it, we both noticed that this class segment seems to have been dominated by one particular male student, which was surprising for the teacher as she had initially estimated that everyone had contributed equally to the discussion. So for the following week T2 said that she wanted to expand the interaction within her classroom so that she could include all the students as equally as possible and especially not have any students dominate the class of which she was successful.

In teacher education programs pre-service teachers can be shown how to reflect in a similar manner as T2 above and have several different methods of accessing their reflections on *practice*. For example, they can engage in classroom observations (self-monitoring, peer critical friendships or group observations), and they can record (audio and/or video) their lessons and later transcribe the recordings for a more accurate review of what occurred. However, one of the most common ways of reflecting on classroom teaching is to engage in classroom observations. They can show how to reflect while teachers are teaching a lesson (reflection-*in*-action), after they teach a lesson (reflection-*on*-action) or before they teach a lesson (reflection-*for*-action). When teachers engage in reflection-*in*-action they attempt to consciously stand back while they are teaching as they monitor and adjust to various circumstances that are happening within the lesson. When teachers engage in reflection-*on*-action they are examining what happened in a lesson after the event has taken place and this is a more delayed type of reflection than the former. When teachers engage in reflection-*for*-action they are attempting to reflect before anything has taken place and anticipate what may happen and try to account for this before they conduct the lesson.

Beyond Practice

This fifth stage/level adds a sociocultural dimension to teaching and learning which, Johnson (2009, p. 2) points out, is "not simply a matter of enculturation or even appropriation of existing sociocultural resources and practices, but the reconstruction and transformation of those resources

and practices in ways that are responsive to both individual and local needs.” This is called *critical reflection* and entails exploring and examining the moral, political and social issues that impact a teacher’s practice both inside and outside the classroom. Critical reflection moves the teacher *beyond practice* and links practice more closely to the broader socio-political, as well as affective/moral issues that impact practice. Such a critical focus on reflections also requires teachers to examine the moral aspect of practice—that is, the moral values and judgments that impact practice.

If novice teachers have been adequately trained in the ways of reflective practice during their teacher education programs, they can use this training to become more proactive decision-makers during their first year. They can do this by taking more control of their experiences in this initial year by collaborating with other novice teachers in a reflection group. Because novice teachers are often left to sink or swim in their first year of teaching, they tend to feel and become isolated thus further compounding whatever challenges they face because they have nobody (perceived or otherwise) to go to for help. The isolation does nothing to help them navigate these difficult waters because they cannot or do not reach out to others for advice and help, so unfortunately many do sink. This could have been the situation for all three novice ESL teachers reported on in this paper, had they not been participants in the novice ESL teacher reflection group that was set up during their first semester of teaching. All indications are that the three novice ESL teachers used the group meetings to break from their isolation because they had no other forum in which they could really seek advice during their first semester.

As the weeks passed, the three novice ESL teachers began to get an overall sense of their professional efficacy, in that they felt that they were able to impact student learning, and their language about teaching and learning became more positive and hopeful towards the end of the period of reflection. The teacher reflection group played an important role in helping them reach this stage of hope because they were able to deconstruct various aspects of their first-year practices during the group discussions. As they began the weekly process of deconstructing, analyzing and making interpretations in the group with the aid of a facilitator, their sense of self-efficacy was increasing as they generated ideas about how to better control their professional world. The collaborative nature of the group enabled them to share critical incidents so that they could analyze and interpret them together and ultimately generate their own solutions. As T1 noted, “I found it useful to meet just to bounce ideas off of, like because they’re in the same position, so we could bounce ideas. I felt like actually we’re reflecting on the teaching. I go home and I’m nice and happy. I don’t have to complain to my husband about no meetings and all that stuff.” What usually occurs in many schools, as T3 noted above, is that experienced teachers tend not to want to interfere with novice teachers with the idea that they are too busy anyway, and so they do not share their experiences with the novices. Thus, it is important for novice teachers to have conversations with others during their first year and a reflection group set up within a school seems to be the best way to go about this. Teacher preparation programs can similarly encourage preservice teachers to collaborate by showing them how to set up similar (novice) teacher reflection groups that can be used to combat the isolation many novice teachers experience in their first year, and thus help them make a smoother transition from the teacher education program to their first year as ESL teachers.

Discussion

The path to becoming an ESL teacher is as varied as the schools and methods of instruction a teacher can choose from. Most ESL teachers are trained in some formal manner—be it a weekend course, or a certificate, diploma, or graduate degree program. Many teacher educators, novice teachers, administrators and others assume that the knowledge that teachers are given in these training courses is relevant and useful to help them teach. However, many teachers who have survived their first year or years of teaching would suggest that there is somewhat of a disconnect

between the content of teacher education programs and the reality of an ESL teacher's life, at least when viewed from the perspective of teacher education. As a result of the failings of teacher education programs and the schools in which teachers are placed in their first year, some novice teachers not only feel that they have not been prepared adequately for teaching but also become so disillusioned that they begin to reconsider their career choice. Unfortunately, some novice teachers decide there and then that they may have made an incorrect decision (because of all their negative experiences) and ultimately leave the profession at a great loss to everyone, not to mention the disillusioned teachers themselves.

The results of how three novice ESL teachers utilized the *framework for reflecting on practice* (Farrell, 2015) as reported on in this paper suggest that the situation can be partially rectified if pre-service and novice teachers are exposed to this framework in their teacher education programs. The three novice ESL teachers were only exposed to this framework during their novice year because the author of the framework (also the author of this paper) facilitated their reflections during this important first year. All three novice ESL teachers reported on how useful such reflective practice was to their survival during this tough first year. However, language teacher education programs can better prepare teachers for their novice year(s) if they utilize this framework in a course designed to instruct pre-service teachers in the skills of reflective practice so that they are better able to face many issues and challenges during their first years.

During their teacher education program, novice teachers have probably experienced different contexts for their practice teaching, such as private schools or public institutions with mixed-level learners, or institutions offering courses in EAP (English for academic purposes), ESP (English for specific purposes) or ESL (Richards & Farrell, 2011). As they attempt to apply the knowledge they learned in their teacher education programs, they probably realize that each context has something different to offer and presents different challenges to overcome, including discovering what the "hidden curriculum" is in order to be able to function in a particular school context. Now that they have entered a new school context, novice teachers will need to acquire the appropriate contextual information (e.g., the nature of the school culture and its expectations, the existing knowledge levels of the students and their linguistic backgrounds) in order to be able to function effectively in that school context. Thus, learning to teach in the first year entails that novice teachers understand the specific values, norms of practice and patterns of social participation of their new school context so that they can integrate as smoothly as possible. The results of the reflections of the three novice ESL teachers in Canada suggest that pre-service ESL teachers and other novice ESL teachers, regardless of the context they are teaching in, will benefit greatly from instruction in the skills of reflective practice and especially from being exposed to the framework for reflecting on practice (Farrell, 2015) when trying to navigate the complex transition from their teacher education programs to their first year as teachers. When they possess such skills in reflective practice on graduation from their teacher education programs, more novice teachers will experience a successful and rewarding transition and continue to be caring language teachers for many years to come. Although this study focused on ESL teachers I expect the same conclusions can be stated for those who teach in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context as well.

Conclusion

This paper reported on how three novice ESL teachers used a framework for reflecting on practice to help them navigate complex issues and challenges they faced during their first year of teaching. The paper maintains that had they not had a facilitator to help them reflect on these issues and challenges during their novice year, they too would have been 'eaten by the profession' and would probably have become another statistic of those young who give up early in their careers. Indeed,

at the final interview when the teachers were asked about their experiences of their first year, T1 said that she “felt completely lost. You’re just thrown in to survive yourself... and it is kind of sink or swim.” All three novice teachers said that they found the group meetings very helpful for their survival because as again T1 noted, “we could bounce ideas off each other...I felt like actually we’re reflecting on the teaching.”

The paper suggests however that teacher educators and novice should not just wait until their first year to learn the skills of reflective practice but should do so much earlier in their teacher education programs so that they can be better prepared for the transition from their teacher education programs to the first year of teaching. However, novice teachers should not just be encouraged ‘to reflect’ without receiving sufficient support in how to engage in systematic and structured reflection. The paper thus presented a *framework for reflecting on practice* for second language novice teachers that has five stages or levels of reflection: *philosophy of practice, principles of practice, theory of practice, practice, and beyond practice*. This overall framework is designed so that language novice teachers can bring to the level of awareness that which usually remains hidden—the interconnectedness of their philosophy, principles, theories, and practice and also their reflections beyond practice. I hope that as a result of exposing preservice and novice language teachers to the *framework for reflecting on practice*, TESOL, as a profession, will no longer eat its young!

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