Interactive reflection

Jason Anderson considers the potential for learning in your own classes.

Over 100 years after John Dewey first argued for the importance of teacher reflection, it's fair to say that it remains somewhat of an enigma in teacher education. Despite being widely invoked in models of best practice and promoted as an integral part of teacher training and development programmes, we still know comparatively little about what reflection is, how it works, and exactly what impact it has on practice. This rather vague aura around reflection recently prompted me to conduct my own research into it: both the literature, and the phenomenon itself.

Reflection in teacher education

Reflection, as a cognitive process, essentially means 'thinking'. Yet its use – consistent with the mirror metaphor it invokes – implies something more: an introspective process in which we carefully, and often critically, examine what we do, how and why, in order to learn from the experience. Although Dewey first used the term in this sense, its impact on teacher education occurred more recently, during the 'reflective turn' of the 1980s, with writers such as Donald Schön and David Kolb using it in the wider literature and, soon after, in language teaching, with Michael Wallace in 1991 recommending a reflective practice model over the 'craft' and 'applied science' models that he perceived were dominant at the time.

During this period, a number of tools to support reflective practice became more widespread, including the use of reflective diaries, reflective assignments in teacher education programmes (eg the 'Lessons from the classroom' assignment on the Cambridge CELTA) and even the 'self-evaluation form' that many of us are expected to complete after observed lessons. It is notable that all of these are written forms of reflection – much easier for supervisors to check, log and evaluate, but not necessarily more useful for the teacher. Some of us have even become sceptical that, particularly when such written reflection is compulsory, many of us might simply 'fake it', pretending to reflect just to get the paperwork done. I know I have.

More recent, data-driven research by Steve Mann and Steve Walsh (among others) has looked more carefully at the potential value of spoken, dialogic reflection for language teachers, for example in post-lesson discussions. This is an area that remains under-researched, despite the potential for dialogic reflection to be at least as useful as written forms.

My own research on the topic found that there is surprisingly little hard evidence of the benefits of teacher reflection, with only Thomas Farrell's wider review noting a generally positive (yet arguably still rather vague) impact of reflection on language teacher cognition and practice, particularly through increased understanding of self, and greater awareness of one's beliefs in relation to theory and practice. However, one thing I noticed that was far less commonly researched, probably because of the challenges of studying it, is reflection during the lesson itself.

The dimensions of interactive reflection

So, putting aside the research on reflection that happens when we're not teaching, what do we know about reflection when we *are* teaching? Do we have time for it? Do we remember it afterwards? And does it lead to learning?

The answer to these last three questions appears to be 'yes', according to a study I conducted in 2019 with English language teachers of adult learners working in the UK. Interested in exploring Schön's influential construct of *reflection-in-action*, I worked with four

teachers to investigate whether the use of immediate post-lesson video self-observation made it possible for them to recall the thoughts they had while they were teaching (what I call 'interactive reflection') separately from the *post-active* reflection that occurs afterwards – often called 'reflection on action'. I then used a range of research methods to explore whether evidence could be found that the participants were *learning* from their interactive reflection. Interestingly, as well as finding evidence to support Schön's construct of reflection-in-action largely as he envisaged it, my research also revealed that there seem to be a variety of potentially formative reflective processes at work in interactive teacher reflection, several of which were not anticipated by Schön.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the types of reflection proposed in my study. It reveals three broad types of interactive reflection, located on a cline from faster, less challenging decisions to slower, more deliberated thought processes. The three types, in the study, often corresponded to specific 'patterns' in the teachers' thoughts and corresponding actions.

Practical reflection

While many post-active reflection tasks require us to think carefully about what we do, the reality of teaching is that we need to make a vast number of evaluative decisions quickly every lesson, although many are fairly straightforward, familiar choices, such as when we confirm an answer during feedback to an exercise. As we gain experience, the related response patterns become automated, yet remain conscious, and are termed 'automated responses' in the taxonomy.

Adaptive reflection

All experienced teachers know that some of the most important events in a lesson are unplanned, such as a student question or challenge, or an idea that we suddenly have. How we *respond* to such 'affordances' is potentially of great importance to the success of the lesson. At such stages, effective reflection necessarily involves adapting to this changing situation flexibly. The corresponding 'response strategies' that we develop even become a defining feature of how each of us teaches – the teachers in my study exhibited a range of distinct response strategies specific to their context and the affordance in question. One teacher, for example, in response to a student who had difficulty answering a simple question involving a newly-taught phrasal verb found himself simultaneously reflecting on how he should help her and why she wasn't able to remember the phrasal verb; both of these influenced his response, which happened after only a moment's contemplation. Interestingly, we are much more likely to recall moments of *adaptive reflection* than *practical reflection* after the lesson, making them potentially useful stimuli for *written reflection* (discussed below).

Teacher interactive reflection			
Broad types	**Practical →**	**← Adaptive →**	**← Reflexivity**
Patterns	Automated responses	Response strategies	Recovery strategies Internal reflexivity Acknowledgement Face loss
	Faster Less challenging More automated ←	→	*Slower More challenging More deliberated*

Figure 1 A taxonomy of teacher interactive reflection

Reflexivity

Less frequent than the other two types of interactive reflection documented, *reflexivity* refers to those moments when our interactive reflection becomes critical, either in a positive or negative way, locating it higher on the challenge cline than practical or adaptive reflection. The teachers in the study almost always reflected on episodes of reflexivity in their audio diaries at the end of the day, and almost all were recalled – usually in detail – over a week later. They indicated specific awareness of success, relief ('*I felt really glad that she'd …*'), regret, or awareness of alternatives ('*I realised I should've …*') that were indicative of a type of cognitive 'surfacing' and restructuring that Schön argued leads to learning. Among those patterns documented were 'recovery strategies' (in which we manage to get a lesson back on course after a difficulty), 'internal reflexivity' (in which we have time to reflect on a specific action during the lesson), and 'acknowledgement' (when we 'own up' to a mistake, or recognise the need to admit a problem or omission to the learners). Despite being less common than the other two types of interactive reflection, I identified almost 100 examples of reflexivity in just eight lessons, strongly supporting the hypothesis that teachers learn from interactive reflection. And, as they did with adaptive reflection, the teachers each seemed to have distinct reflexivity profiles, developed over the many years that they have been teaching.

Enhancing teacher learning

Hopefully, many – if not all – of the processes documented above are likely to be familiar to you. After all, they are a central part of our conscious cognition. As such, you are entitled to ask exactly how my documenting them is likely to be of use to us as practitioners.

Well, interestingly, you may be able to answer that question yourself. As you read about the types of reflection described above, did you recall instances from your own teaching? Did the example of adaptive reflection provided take you back to something that happened in a recent lesson? And did the patterns discussed under reflexivity bring back, perhaps, less welcome memories of times where you 'goofed' (as a teacher in Janet Shroyer's study put it)? If so, you were reflecting, not only upon your own practice, but also on the characteristics of both the practice itself and the concurrent reflection, thereby (hopefully) increasing your understanding of the link between the two, and their relationship to other types of interactive reflection through the taxonomy above. If I'm right about this, a number of possible recommendations can be made, all of which are tentative, still evolving, and potential areas for further research:

Improving the quality of written reflection

Very often, when we are asked to reflect upon our teaching in written form, very little guidance is offered on how to do this. 'Self-evaluation' boxes often appear in admin documents with no further guidance at all, and even assignments on teacher education courses can remain vague. By encouraging

teachers to recall a range of moments in the lesson, involving both adaptive reflection and reflexivity (but probably not practical reflection – we rarely recall it), written pro formas and task rubrics may succeed in triggering specific memories of interactive reflection, which in turn may help us to assess the effectiveness of related value judgements, decisions and their consequences.

Scaffolded therapy for more difficult moments

I'm certain I'm not alone when I confess that I've experienced what are called 'face loss incidents' in the taxonomy: moments when – to be blunt – the lesson seems to fall apart in front of us. I'm sure we can all recall a similar melt-down moment, when we could no longer work out what the right answer was, or, as a teacher in my study put it, *'I just saw words and they lacked meaning'*. It can be of great comfort after such an event to learn that such 'critical incidents' have names and are a normal part of teachers' practice – even experienced teachers – although these incidents are more frequent when we are beginning our careers. I definitely would have benefited from knowing this, and would potentially have opened up more often to colleagues when this seemed to happen with disturbing regularity during my first teaching job!

Improving video self-observation

With the technology we have at our fingertips today, video self-observation has become accessible to all, without the need for a technician or even a colleague to operate the recorder. With student permission, we can often prop up a mobile phone at the back of the classroom to capture a five-minute presentation or a two-minute instruction that we can self-observe immediately after the lesson. While doing so, it's possible to pause the video, recall our interactive reflection directly, and then take time to consider the consequences of our thoughts and our actions – whether we really did the right thing at that moment. It's often a good idea to begin by analysing something you feel you are doing well, and then move on to areas of your teaching where you feel less confident.

Developing our reflection literacy

Giving something a name helps us to understand it (think about an elderly relative who has difficulty even *describing* the problem they're facing on an uncooperative computer). The ability to describe phenomena is a type of literacy, one that focuses on internal cognitive processes. For example, during a post-lesson discussion, teacher and observer can both describe what happened more accurately, and better evaluate its impact, if they can name and classify the cognitive processes, and then relate them to the lesson events. As well as the taxonomy, my research documented eight types of interactive thought that we can refer to:

1 Planned intention;

2 Knowledge/memory access;

3 Perception;

4 Decision;

5 Affordance awareness;

6 Uncertainty awareness;

7 Value judgement;

8 Reflexivity.

Teachers who have developed their reflection literacy may be able to refer to these in their discussions. For example, was a 'value judgement' the best one available? Was a 'perception' accurate? And was an adaption made from a 'planned intention' as part of a 'response strategy' appropriate, given the aims and what actually happened in the lesson itself? By improving our reflection literacy in this way, we are likely to recall cognitive processes more accurately, and – ultimately – improve our ability to reflect, both while teaching and afterwards.

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This brief overview of teacher interactive reflection has necessarily had to simplify more complex processes and constructs. Yet I hope it has left you eager to learn more about interactive reflection, or research it in your own classroom. If so, do get in touch: I'd be interested to hear how it goes, particularly in contexts which are different from those in my research. The ViLTE archive of the University of Warwick includes an example of the video self-observation described above. You can watch this at *https://vilte.warwick.ac.uk/items/show/43*. And if you are interested in reading more about my study, there's a more detailed overview that also leads to the paper itself at *https://speakinggames.wordpress.com/2019/08/17/can-teachers-learn-from-interactive-reflection-a-study-into-schons-reflection-in-action*. ∎

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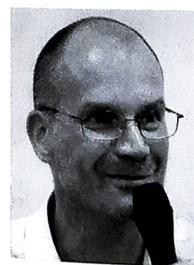
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