



Introducing Reflective Practice from a Sociocultural Perspective: Toward a Strategically Mediated Reflective Practice Framework

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Abstract

Regarding the current body of literature dealing with second language (L2) teacher education copious references are made to the concept of reflective teaching for teachers to have better understanding of their careers. It is widely accepted that reflective practice should be started from a sort of difficulty, a state of doubt, uncertainty and puzzlement or let's say a problem which teachers face during their teaching practice. However, in general, reflective movement has been severely criticized for introducing reflection and reflective practice as an introspective process. Having added some more factors to the inefficiency of starting a reflective process by focusing on a problem in one's own teaching practice, the present paper goes on to argue how introducing reflective practice from a sociocultural perspective can be a remedy to the already mentioned criticisms. Although, the application of a sociocultural perspective to the field of teacher education has already been addressed and suggested, there has been no attempt to directly taking up the issue so far. As a result, the main concern of the present paper is to propose a framework under the rubric of *Strategically Mediated Reflective Practice* where reflective practice is strategically mediated with the help of more knowledgeable others and new insights and understanding emerge as a result of dialogical thinking highlighting the Vygotskian notion of *Concept development*.

Keywords: reflective teaching, socio-cultural perspective, strategic mediation, concept development

INTRODUCTION

Feeling quite disappointed with the inefficiency and inadequacy of methods, ELT found itself in what Kumaravadivelu (1994) has called the post-method condition. The post-method condition "enables practitioners to generate location-specific, classroom

oriented innovative practices" (Kumaravadivelu 1994, p. 29). A post-method pedagogy is built on three principles:

- Particularity or a localized context-sensitive approach
- Practicality in which the unequal power relationship between theory and practice is overthrown
- Possibility or a manifestation of a critical approach emphasizing the role of teaching in identity formation and social transformation.

The three principles of an alternative to method rather than an alternative method, teacher autonomy, and principled pragmatism outlined by the post-method condition also failed to address the inefficiency of the methods. As a remedy, the field of ELT found the reflective movement originally proposed by John Dewey and expanded by Donald Schon quite responsive and effective to the needs of the teachers in classroom.

Reflective practice was originally proposed by educational philosopher John Dewey in the early twentieth century. Dewey (1933) makes a distinction between action that is routine and action that is reflective. Routine action is guided primarily by an uncritical belief in tradition, and an unfailing obedience to authority, whereas reflective action is started by a conscious and cautious "consideration of any belief or practice in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads" (Dewey, 1933, p.4).

In the Deweyan view, teaching is seen not just as a series of predetermined and pre-sequenced procedures but as a context-sensitive action grounded in intellectual thought (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Teachers are seen not as passive transmitters of received knowledge but as problem-solvers possessing "the ability to look back critically and imaginatively, to do cause-effect thinking, to derive explanatory principles, to do task analysis, also to look forward, and to do anticipatory planning" (Dewey, 1933, p. 13).

Exactly half a century after the publication of Dewey's book, Donald Schon (1983) published a book titled *The Reflective Practitioner* in which he expands Dewey's concept of reflection. Schon shows how teachers, through their informed involvement in the principles, practices, and processes of classroom instruction, can bring about fruitful perspectives to the complexities of teaching that cannot be matched by experts who are far removed from classroom realities. He distinguishes between two frames of reflection: reflection-on- action and reflection-in-action.

REFLECTIVE TEACHING AND SOME GENERAL CRITICISMS

What has to be underlined is the issue that the concept of teachers as reflective practitioners is clearly a vast improvement over the limited and limiting concept of teachers as passive technicians, where teachers have to submit themselves to the principles of methods. However, reflective teaching is not without its shortcoming. In

general, reflective movement has been severely criticized for introducing reflection and reflective practice as an introspective process.

Solomon (1987) makes a powerful case for reflection as a social practice, in which the articulation of ideas to others is central to the development of a critical perspective. Reflective movement has also been criticized for its lack of attention to the discursive or dialogical dimension of teacher learning (Day, 1993). Moreover, Zeichner and Liston (1996) believe that reflective movement has portrayed reflection as largely a solitary and individualistic process involving a teacher and his or her situation and not as a social process. Finally, Kumaravadivelu (2003) stresses that by focusing on the role of the teacher and the teacher alone, the reflective movement tends to treat reflection as an introspective process involving a teacher and his or her reflective capacity, and not as an interactive process.

Additionally, the consequence of such a shortcoming has also been highlighted by Valli (1997) stating that

If left unsocialized, individual reflection can close in on itself, producing detached, idiosyncratic teachers. Because reflection is not an end in itself, but for the purpose of action, communal dialogue is essential. Many different voices are necessary. (p. 86)

Elsewhere, Lortie (1975) refers to teaching as the *egg carton profession* because the walls of classrooms become boundaries that separate teachers as they each occupy their own insulated niche. Consequently, engaging reflective practice aiming at teacher development in such isolation can lead to what Wells (1994) has called “the loneliness of the long-distance reflector” (p. 11).

REFLECTIVE TEACHING: MORE FACTORS TO CONSIDER

There are also some other important issues which have to be meticulously brought into consideration regarding the issue of reflective teaching. The major significant issue is that what triggers the reflective process in most of the frameworks is *a state of doubt and uncertainty or facing difficulties or problems* on the part of teachers during the class period; but such a trigger is quite limited and limiting due to certain reasons. Below come a number of major limitations and shortcomings.

Context Uniqueness

The first problem is the issue of uniqueness of teaching contexts and situations which is more often neglected during making a reflective process. If the starting point of reflective process is the emergence of a problem or a problematic situation and the aim is to fix the situation and solve the problem, reflective practice is of no help since the same problem presents itself in different ways in other teaching contexts for the same practitioners. In other words, reflective practitioners are making a repertoire of teaching experience which is of no use due to context variation and situation uniqueness in teaching practice.

Moreover, as Richards and Lockhart (1994) point out, "Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher and experience is insufficient as a basis for development" (pp. 3-4).

Unwarranted Repetition

The second issue regarding choosing a problem as the starting point of reflective practice is that it only sheds light on what teachers do inappropriately. This could be due to their ignorance and lack of attention. In other words, it investigates what is known by the teachers but not practiced due to a variety of reasons. As Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978) have argued, there is a gap between what teachers say they believe (their "Espoused Theories") and the ways in which they act (their "Theories-in-action"). But what about those issues that are neither known nor practiced by the teachers at all? Those for which there are no "Espoused Theories", let alone to consider and reflect upon their realities in one's teaching practice. In the first case, the practitioners try to make a balance between what they believe and what they do. In other words, they investigate their teaching practice in the light of what they believe; but considering the second case, it seems unreasonable to expect them to have the same result as in the former case, especially using a problem as the starting point of reflective practice since there is no belief or prior knowledge to be detected in practicality for further adjustments.

Insignificant Results

The third problem with a reflective process using a problem as the departure point is the end product of this view. The first point in this part is the identification of a situation as a problem. Sometimes the process of reflection is directed toward issues which are not pedagogically valuable since there is no one fixed single-shot qualified criterion for identification of a situation as a problem. The next point is whether practitioners come to right solutions or not! It cannot be taken for granted that whatever practitioners arrive at as solutions due to reflection could be considered as the right and appropriate decision regarding how to tackle the problem. Consequently, such a procedure would make a problematic situation even worse and practitioners might reach solutions and make decisions that are neither theoretically justifiable nor practically feasible which would cause further problems by themselves.

Inefficient Instrument

The fourth problem is that all the issues which require deep reflection do not necessarily present themselves as problems during the class time period and even if they do, they are not eye-catching enough to be noticed but at the same time are of paramount importance. It is logical to conclude that individuals do not necessarily have to be in a state of doubt, uncertainty or facing problems during their teaching practice to start a reflective process.

Ideological Barriers

The fifth issue with starting a reflective process by looking at a problem or even one's practice during the class time period is that correction or appropriation is made only at the level of practice through adjustment in accordance with one's belief. But the question is that "Have teachers already established the right and proper belief prior to starting the reflective practice?" In the first case one's practice is investigated in case of whether it matches to one's belief or not; but the investigation is not made at the level of belief to see whether the practitioners have the proper and correct beliefs before starting a reflective practice or not.

TEACHER EDUCATION AND SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The message that all of the criticisms mentioned previously want to get across is the issue that reflective teaching in its purely cognitive and introspective sense cannot be responsive to the dilemmas and the problems with which teachers encounter during their teaching practice. One of the solutions to this problem, that is the treatment of reflective practice as an individualistic and introspective process, was introducing reflective practice from a sociocultural perspective, where any sort of knowledge is dialogically constructed as a result of interaction among individuals.

This shift in paradigm, i.e. moving from a cognitive position to a more situated and social epistemology in teacher education, has been acknowledged and addressed by scholars such as Johnson (2006, 2009); Johnson and Golombek (2003, 2011); Freeman (2004), and Hawkins (2004).

Johnson (2006) writes that learning to teach from a sociocultural perspective is based on the assumption that knowing, thinking, and understanding come from participating in the social practices of learning and teaching in specific classroom and school situations. Johnson (2009) adds that considering L2 teacher education from a sociocultural perspective has several advantages. First, such a perspective provides us with a theory of mind which informs us of the inherent interconnectedness of the cognitive and the social processes by which teachers shape their learning of their careers. Second, a sociocultural perspective to L2 teacher education underlines and remarks the point that learning to teach is not merely a matter of enculturation to social practices connected to teaching but a matter of reconstruction of those activities to be responsive to individual and local needs.

According to Johnson and Golombek (2003), teacher education from a sociocultural perspective

enables teacher educators to see how various tools work to create a mediational space in which teachers can externalize their current understandings and then reconceptualize and recontextualize their understandings and develop new ways of engaging in the activities associated with teaching. (p. 735)

According to Hawkins (2004), from a sociocultural perspective, it becomes crucial to engage in critical reflective practices and to create learning communities within which individuals participate as teachers and collaboratively negotiate new understandings of their profession and practices.

The very basic and fundamental problem with regard to a sociocultural view of teacher education is the issue that there is no framework in which such a view is put into practice. The only application of sociocultural perspective in teacher education is just showing how teacher development is also justifiable from this perspective. As a result, the present paper tries to propose a tentative framework under the rubric of *Strategically Mediated Reflective Practice* where reflective practice is strategically mediated with the help of more knowledgeable others and new insights and understanding emerge as a result of dialogical thinking highlighting the Vygotskian notion of Concept development.

INTRODUCING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: STRATEGICALLY MEDIATED REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

The very basic issue behind *Strategically Mediated Reflective Practice* framework is the issue of concept development and more specifically development of true concept. Vygotsky (1963) distinguishes between two types of concepts 1) everyday concepts, 2) scientific concepts. Vygotsky believes that the content of these concepts shape our mental activity. Everyday concepts are divided in two parts depending on their accessibility to conscious inspection: 1) spontaneous, 2) non-spontaneous.

Spontaneous concepts are formed as a result of concrete practical experiences of a person as he is socialized into a culture. Attempting to bring such a concept to conscious inspection, one comes up with vague, incoherent, incomplete, and even inaccurate statement of the concept. For instance, if a teacher is asked to describe cooperative learning, he may describe it as a group work activity which is a description that mirrors his experience as a student in school.

Non-spontaneous concepts are those which are open to conscious inspection. Non-spontaneous concepts are intentionally and consciously acquired. The example of such a concept could be our learning of how to ride a bike. Everyday concepts are closely linked to concrete activities in social contexts. On the other hand, scientific concepts are not as a result of everyday experience but result from theoretical investigation of specific domain which enables learners to move beyond the limitation of everyday experiences.

Vygotsky (1987) argued that scientific concepts are not assimilated in ready-made or prepackaged form. Vygotsky (1987, as cited in Daniels, 2007) writes that

Pedagogical experience demonstrates that direct instruction in concepts is impossible. It is pedagogically fruitless. The teacher who attempts to uses this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an

empty verbalism that stimulates or imitates the presence of concepts. (p. 312)

Johnson (2009) describes the responsibility of education as to present scientific concepts to the learners in a way that involves concrete practical activities and connecting them (scientific concepts) to everyday activities of learners. Johnson, referring to Robbins (2003), writes that this lies at the heart of internalization which means the transformation of the social into the psychological.

In a similar vein, Kozulin (2003) outlines three types of information that are conveyed in educational setting as follows:

1. Psychological tools (true concepts)
2. Technical skills
3. Content

According to Kozulin, psychological tools are the most powerful because they guide our cognitive activity in many situations while technical skills are used only in activities which they were learned and the content is usually confined to a knowledge area.

What has to be underlined is the importance of concept over content. According to Johnson and Golombek (2011), when concept and content are presented together, one may mistakenly take content as concept. Such a mistake deprives him from developing psychological tools or the true concept of an issue.

Going back to the example of cooperative learning mentioned previously, which the teacher defined it as a group work, we see that if the concept of cooperative learning is presented to the teachers as a set of procedures for the matter of practice in the class, they may think that 'group work' is cooperative learning and this prevents them to fully internalize the concept of cooperative learning.

The same is true for the field of teacher education. Issues of language teaching are the same as the scientific concepts that could not be taught or as Vygotsky believes be directly instructed. As a result, the present paper argues that the content of any teacher education programme should be after concept development, not just providing the teachers with the appropriate content knowledge. Moreover, most of the mismatches and discrepancies observed between what teachers say and what they do are due to not developing true concepts of their field's content.

Considering the importance of concept development in teacher education, the present paper suggests, once the contents are presented to the teachers, they should be provided with the chance to verbalize their understanding of the contents, and teachers should receive feedback by more knowledgeable others. Such a process can be captured through the notion of verbalization. According to Gal' Perin (1992) verbalization is a process by which individuals make their own perceptions explicit to others.

Once the teachers verbalized their understanding, their perception is made explicit for dialogical mediation and based on their verbalization, it is the job of the more knowledgeable others to introduce them the scientific concepts. Introducing scientific concepts could be in the form of reading a particular article or a specific book suggested by more knowledgeable others. Then new insights and understanding should be achieved as a result of dialogical negotiation between the teachers and more knowledgeable others. Such a process should be continued to the time that evidence of true concept development is heard from the teachers. It is in this sense that the term mediated reflection comes to play a significant role. Moreover, such mediation should be strategic in the sense that not all kinds of mediation lead into development rather based on the individuals' needs, it is the job of more knowledgeable others to provide them this strategic mediation.

Besides, one might argue that such mediation and even strategic mediation by more knowledgeable others would make individuals more dependent and less autonomous comparing with reflective practice as an individualistic and introspective process. But what should be brought into consideration is that the ones who act with the help of more knowledgeable others must not be considered weaker than those who act independently. As a matter of fact, it is absolutely the other way around from a sociocultural perspective. According to Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994), potential level is more indicative of mental growth than actual development. Moreover, they underlined that individuals who are able to respond to such mediation must be considered to be at a more advanced developmental level than the ones who fail to do so, because those who responds to mediation can be expected to show a more rapid rate of actual development. Importantly, what is significant is not what a person can do on his own; but rather how far one can move forward and reach what he can potentially do. Moreover, Lantolf (2000) argues, "even in those cases in which experts and novices do come together, as in a teaching situation, novices do not merely copy experts' capabilities; rather they transform what the experts offer them as they appropriate it" (p. 17).

CONCLUSION

Since strategically mediated reflective practice framework is framed through a sociocultural theory and based on the notion of concept development, it has great advantages over the other frameworks in which reflective practice is largely treated as an individualistic, solitary, and introspective process.

It is believed that teachers practice is largely controlled by the existing psychological tools in individuals' minds (Kozulin, 2003). Psychological tools are described as "true concepts". According to Vygotsky (1963), one way to arrive at true concepts is by providing the individuals the opportunities to investigate their "everyday concepts" in the light of the "scientific concepts".

Such a process of investigation could be realized through what was proposed by Gal' Perin (1992) as "verbalization" by which individuals make their own perceptions explicit

to others. Once individuals' perception is made explicit, they are open to dialogical mediation which can lead to restructuring of the individuals' perception. This also provides the teachers with psychological tools or true concepts by which they can control their activity in close association with their perception. Since the teachers develop true concepts through a strategically mediated reflective process, the present paper hypothesizes that the gap between what they believe and what they do, which is a significant concern in teacher education, would be to a great extent minimized and in some cases removed entirely.

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