

Reflexive Inquiry and Reflective Practice: Critical Reflection and Pedagogy in English Language Teaching

Sarala Krishnamurthy
Polytechnic of Namibia

Abstract

There is an ongoing debate on learners' poor performance in English at the Polytechnic of Namibia. The main challenge that the institution faces to train faculty is addressed by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) which has an Academic Support Unit in charge of organizing teacher training workshops, special lectures and several other activities. While some members of staff believe that it is impossible to mark a test without taking cognizance of the language in which it is written, others distinguish between form and content and choose to ignore the language component of a test. This discrepancy of thought has led to skewed results with students scoring brilliantly in their content subjects like Mathematics, Business Management courses, etc, and failing in English. The current state of affairs begs the question: what do we focus upon in our teacher training programs: is it on language or on content?

This paper looks at the specific question of the relative importance of training in different areas to develop a pedagogy that fosters reflexive inquiry and reflective practice through a contrastive analysis of language skills and teaching skills.

Introduction

Critical Reflection can be assumed to be one of the most essential elements in any teacher development programme. Particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT), the ability to think critically and scrutinize one's experience and integrate knowledge with the insights gained for the purposes of self improvement is considered to be the characteristic of an adult learner. Critical Reflection has been defined as "the process by which adults identify the assumptions governing their actions, locate the historical and cultural origins of the assumptions, question the meanings of the assumptions, and develop alternative ways of acting" (Stein 2000). Critical Reflection helps in creating new understanding by making conscious the social, political, professional, economic and ethical assumptions that support or constrain one's actions. It allows us to learn from our mistakes, examine our actions, evaluate them against prescribed norms, alter them for success, repeat successes, revise and plan continually. Senior teachers are privileged in that they have polished their teaching skills against the blackboard of experience. But teachers entering the profession need to be given an opportunity to study critical reflection.

Sarala Krishnamurthy has a PhD in English with 20 years of teaching experience at postgraduate level at a premier university in India. She is the current Dean of the School of Communication at the Polytechnic of Namibia. She has several publications to her credit. Her research interests include Post Colonial literature, Literary and Critical Theory, Applied Linguistics, English Language Teaching and Online Education. *E-mail: skrishnamurthy@polytechnic.edu.na*

The need for reflection comes from a key tension in teaching pedagogy. This is the tension between teaching practical and career focused skills, and teaching critical and/or interpretative analyses. For the purposes of my paper I define Critical Reflection in terms of two main elements: Reflexive inquiry and Reflective practice. The nature of reflection in action was first posited by Donald Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). He describes how reflection in action could be used by professionals as a tool to improve their practice. Reflexivity on the other hand is described as an interactive process that takes into consideration the relationship between self, the other and the context. Reflexivity expands the frame to include the underlying assumptions and priorities that shape interaction within a given time, space and situation.

The differences between reflection and reflexivity are readily apparent. Reflection is related to self and improving future practice through retrospective analysis of action. It takes a cumulative body of knowledge that can be used to improve practice. Reflexivity is pro-active as its focus is on providing the practitioners with a tool that will simultaneously improve their communication and help make them aware of assumption and priorities that shape their interaction with others. The difference between the two lies in the moment when introspection takes place. In reflection, introspection takes place earlier, but in reflexivity it happens during interaction.

Another difference relates to whom the introspective process is considered to be most relevant. According to Schon, (ibid) in reflective practice, the actions of the practitioners and the context in which they occur are foremost, whereas reflexivity involves an interaction between the practitioner and the environment that influences the form of the reflexive process. It is believed that reflexive process is of two types: first, which represents non-logical procedural knowledge used in ongoing practice which is reflection in action and, the second, which presents to practitioners details of their own craft, allowing them to broaden its application beyond immediate circumstances.

The generic principle of reflection is defined as a ubiquitous, cognitive process not only reworking tacit knowledge into skill, but providing, through symbolic transformation, a means for linking social and knowledge contents and for translating one sort of experience such as an academic one into a practical experience. This definition accommodates competing models of reflective teaching. Properties of reflection drawn from philosophy and social science applied to educational contents are those of “bridging” and “transforming” which basically consists of three components (Silcox:1991):

a. Ego driven nature of reflection

Reflection is intentional and can be stated as *reflect on purpose with purpose*. Writers such as Buckman (1986), Schon (1987), Liston and Zeichna (1990) van Manen (1991), Sockett (1987), Clarke (1991) promote pedagogic decision making as reflective practice.

b. Constructive thinking

According to Piaget (1971) we remake experience by linking new means to new ends as re-synthesized schemes. Mead (1921) points out that “Reflexivity” is vital

for constructing an inner dialogue with one self. Past and present events are reviewed in the light of possible futures. This marks reflection as a transcending and potentially innovative act. It presents a spatial and temporal bridge quintessential to human adaptation.

c. Combining, transforming, contextualizing within perspectives

The effectiveness of reflective thought is based on the transformative process and because reflection unites temporarily and spatially disparate elements.

There have been several interpretations of “Reflective” and “Reflexive” as is evident in the literature on ELT; but I choose to define it exclusively. For me, Reflexive inquiry is constructed around notions of personal empowerment, self-directed learning with an emphasis on personal history, whereas Reflective practice engages in meta-cognitive selection of techniques and strategies for successful task completion and for successful learning. Reflexive inquiry includes reflexive thought which is the process of remembering the past and thinking about events that have already occurred and it is also meta-cognitive in nature since it is the very thinking about the thinking process. Reflective practice takes this idea and puts it into practice.

In this paper I examine the importance of Reflexive inquiry and Reflective practice in teacher development in the Polytechnic of Namibia. I would like to argue that in a country like Namibia where the teacher training programmes are not very well developed, it devolves upon us to develop a programme to help our teachers and this can be done through Critical reflection as defined above. I present alternative ways of encouraging professional teacher development (henceforth referred to as TD).

Background

Since independence when Namibia adopted English as its official language, there has been a concerted effort from all quarters to improve the standard of English to bring it on par with the rest of the world. The language policy of Namibia advocates ‘transitional bilingualism’ as the means of imparting quality education at school. But seventeen years after independence we are still faced with challenges that we need to overcome both at secondary and tertiary levels of education. The main challenges are: lack of qualified teachers, lack of trained teachers and a singular lack of resources. English teachers teaching in small towns and villages across the country feel isolated, marginalized and helpless. These insecurities get compounded when it comes to the transference of knowledge to the learners. At tertiary level we end get students who perform dismally in English Communication.

At the Polytechnic of Namibia English is offered as a service course to students who study in different programmes. All students who are admitted to the Polytechnic are required to appear for a Diagnostic test which “places” them in the correct module.

We offer Modules 1-6 which are devised in the following way:

1. Modules 1 and 2 deal with Basic English Grammar and Vocabulary (Basic English).
These are bridging courses and there is a lot of remedial work that is done in these modules.
2. Module 3 and 4 deal with Academic English (Intermediate level).

These courses introduce the students to academic writing such as summary, paraphrase, essays, letters and academic reading, such as reading for comprehension, skimming, scanning etc.

3. Modules 5 and 6 deal with Business Communication and Professional Communication.

These courses prepare the students for the world of work. The students are required to study communication theory, business letters, report writing, memo writing, using World Wide Web to gather information, to send emails, attachments etc and are trained in presentation skills making use visual aids such as power-point. They also get trained in conducting meetings, negotiations and in public speaking.

Challenges

The main challenges that we have to face are those given above: lack of qualified and trained teachers and absence of resources leading to a paucity of materials for use in teaching. At the Polytechnic of Namibia, we do not get qualified teachers to teach our courses. The other problem is the lack of clarity regarding the definition of the term "curriculum". A plethora of ideas, connotations, emotions, conflicts and opportunities are connected with the notion of curriculum. Our new and young teachers do not really know what a curriculum is. Is it inflexible or negotiable? Is it a mandate of another providing a sterile and concrete space within which one must function? Or is it concurrence between the teacher and learner about certain fundamental issues regarding learning a language and communication? This leads to another problem, which is, "syllabus".

Insufficiency of policy and clear sightedness both at the governmental and institutional level has resulted in a lack of coherence of developmental programmes for the improvement of English. Confusion about the role of English in the institution has led to this subject being treated as a step-child with very little support being offered to the programme. English is perceived only as a medium of instruction and not a subject in its own right. Content subject teachers believe that English is only a handmaiden and therefore they do not take cognisance of errors that students make in their writing. Consequently, the students score very high marks in their content subjects because their lecturers mark only the keywords and do not assess the language in which the answers are written, but score very poorly in English. This issue has been debated at length in the various academic bodies of the Polytechnic with the poor English teacher's voice being drowned by the vociferous comments of other privileged members of the Polytechnic campus: lecturers from the Engineering, Business Management, Nature Conservation and other streams who refuse to mark down students who do not write grammatically correct answers. This confusion permeates to the lowest echelons of the academic environment as well, where students being burdened with many subjects neglect the study of English.

The situation regarding the status of English within the Polytechnic will improve only if the Department of Communication takes ownership of English and brings about a radical change in the teaching and learning of English in the institution. This is only possible through teacher development and as I pointed out earlier, the onus of teacher development falls on us and I posit that it can happen through critical

reflection not just at institutional level, but also throughout the country. I present TD at three levels for it to be meaningful, action oriented and result driven.

They are: Teacher Development at

1. the level of the country
2. the institutional level
3. The individual level.

Teacher Development at the level of the country

For a pedagogical practice to be effective across the country it has to take into account the notion of “multi-literalism” (Stevens: 2005). Multi-literacy is derived from traditional literacy in pedagogy where it is grounded in the belief that sound-letter correspondence results in a stable system which by its very nature is authoritarian and restrictive. Multi-literacy on the other hand “creates a different kind of pedagogy, one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes” (ibid). In other words multi-literacy contributes to an enabling, collaborative learning environment which is possible through the formation of a teacher’s association. It has been pointed out that, “Collaboration yields benefits which include developing networking opportunities, making friends, building confidences and self esteem, enhancing team working skills and developing leadership skills” (ibid). The answer to this is the formation of a teacher’s association open for all educators of English in the country. There is a need for a forum where issues related to the classroom and teaching can be dealt with, established in order to provide opportunities for professional and personal growth for all teachers of English in Namibia. Namibian ESL teachers, theorists, policy makers, textbook writers and examiners will be able to share ideas on a common platform. The purpose of the Teachers’ Association will be to raise awareness about ELT issues and bring together all practitioners of English to share common problems, issues and concerns. The Namibian English Teachers’ Association (NETA) will become a centre for the professional development of English teachers. The theoretical underpinning of this association is to bring about Critical Reflection amongst its members.

The Namibian English Teacher’s Association which was launched on 14 April 2007 by the Deputy Minister of Education, Mrs. Becky Ndjoze Ojo has received a tremendous response from about 150 teachers around Windhoek and neighbouring regions. Two workshops were held on *Teacher Associations* and *Reading* deriving from the needs analysis questionnaire which was distributed to determine the exact needs of teachers. Both workshops were immensely successful and stand as testimony to a collaborative learning environment as suggested above.

Teacher Development in the Institution

Every institution has its policies and procedures which emanate from its vision and mission, and its identity as an institution. For any institution to be recognised as one that provides quality education and as a centre of excellence, its most important resource is its teachers. Therefore Teacher Training and Development is imperative. At the Polytechnic this training happens at three levels: institutional, departmental

and individual levels.

Institutional Level

A Centre for Teaching and Learning has been established for the express purpose of teacher training and development. The Centre conducts orientation for the new staff, arranges lectures on teaching, learning and research issues and also conducts workshops for the faculty. Some of the presentations have included the following:

- *Learner Centered Education: A Practical Classroom Example of Policy Implementation (A video demonstrating learner centered education will be viewed and a discussion will follow).*
- *Working with English Language Learners in University Content Classes*
- *Strategies for scaling the hurdles in adopting Integrated Digital Instruction Suite*
- *Using E-Learning for Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century*
- *Improving Classroom Assessment*
- *Becoming A Reflective Educator*
- *Dealing with Students' s Grammatical Development in English as a Medium of Instruction: A Morpho-Syntactic Approach*

Departmental Level

At the departmental level two things were done to bring about Critical Reflection: introduction of the Seminar series and, Online Education and Training.

- **Seminar series:** For any department to function, the first priority is to make an effort to function as a team working towards common goals and purposes. While there were many lecturers in the department who actively engaged with the learning situation by trying out new ideas and new techniques, they worked in isolation. There were others who were inexperienced and therefore had problems tackling the issues on hand. To create a platform for the faculty to adopt reflexive thinking and reflective practice, the seminar series was introduced where senior staff members presented papers on topics relevant to the context for dissemination and discussion. With this it was hoped that it would trigger an interest in research in the department even if it was basic, action research. Some of the topics that were covered were:
 - *Second Language Acquisition.*
 - *Oral Communication in the Namibian Context*
 - *Hybrid/Blended Teaching*
 - *Vocabulary issues: teaching, learning and evaluation.*

The seminar series generated a lot of interest because all the members of the Faculty made it a point to be present and bring up questions for discussion. The first topic was in the form of a proposal for a PhD. The input from several members of the department helped the presenter to refine his thoughts, spot the deficiency in his theoretical framework and reconstruct his proposal for final submission to the university. However it was felt by some of the junior members of the department that they felt threatened by the erudition of the paper presenters and felt that they would find it difficult to present though they would love to participate in the seminar series.

- **Online Education and Training:** With the financial support of the Polytechnic 90 percent of the faculty of the department of English Communication registered for an online course on online education. Polytechnic can be described as an institution which provides amazing computer facilities to its students. Even the government in its Vision 2030 has declared its plans of progressing to an innovative knowledge based society by the year 2030. With this encouragement and thrust from the government, the faculty members were introduced to this online course. Some of the comments of the faculty about the course were as follows:
 1. *"It is a very comprehensive and practical course for educators who want to expand their teaching to online. It is a well organized course that enables participants to apply the concept of "learning by doing". It allows individual participants to learn however much they want, but even the minimum requirements for passing are set at internationally high standard."*
 2. *"I appreciate the opportunity to be exposed to this course and I think that it is a must for teachers/instructors. A number of relevant issues are addressed and new insights are given in terms of teaching and learning - some which we might have known that were just being revived, and others which we might not have considered before. It may provide useful ideas and guidance for what we can/should do in our own institution."*
 3. *"First of all, I didn't like the timing. It started just when our department was at its busiest with Placement Testing and Registration which put all of us at a two week disadvantage. Secondly, many of us found it difficult to get connected and I, for one, could not open two of my disks as my anti-virus software warned me of potential danger of viruses. Thirdly, I don't think many of us were able to give the course our proper attention due to time constraints and I also felt that the course moved too fast for us to properly assimilate what it was about. Lastly I took the "Real-time" option which I thought would be useful for our students, but it seems that it might not be as Instant Messaging Tools are difficult to download and are not always free - I'm talking about the really good ones, now. Perhaps the developing world is not quite ready for online teaching as it is advocated by this course."*

By and large the response has been positive and for me the most important spin off was that the teachers were reading the latest articles on ICT and E-Learning techniques which is what reflexive inquiry is all about. Secondly, they were forced to critique one another's assignment which meant that they had to analyze, evaluate and synthesize whatever they had read. Their comments had to be objective and introspective as well which meant that they were reflecting critically and putting this reflection to practice. And thirdly, they had to submit a weekly diary where they had to write about their own experience of the course. Although reflection is recognized as a professional activity (for example Schön, 1983), the role of writing in teacher reflection has been less widely acknowledged (though more recently, see Moon, 2000; Pereira et al., 2004; for example).

Writing as a reflective tool has two main functions: i) Documentation: It records activity and thought, thus assisting future reflection by preventing loss of information and ii) Analysis: It acts as a form of analysis when the decisions about

what to document and how to represent activity and thought are also recorded.

The junior lecturers performed very well because they were working in an environment that was non threatening and secure. The fact that they were participating in a course which meant that they could bring about changes in their work in terms of curriculum, syllabus, teaching methodology and pedagogy empowered and energized them.

So what am I saying? Is it that everybody has to do an online course to become a good teacher? No. The point that I would like to emphasise is that the collaborative work that this particular online course afforded the faculty members is the secret that we have to unlock in order to bring about development. Teacher Training programmes tend to lean towards authoritative teaching practice that pre-service teachers hold as axiomatic and cast in stone. A post modern narrative inquiry allows for multiple responses to knowing and telling and a use of multiple reflections to forge self-understanding and self knowledge. The method that is developed is the process by which subjective personal experience evolves into objective knowledge leading to independent understanding.

Individual level

At the individual level TD can be effected through a mentoring programme. The advantages of mentoring are several. First of all, a new teacher entering an institution is exposed to the way it works. Secondly, being a one-to-one situation it affords the new teacher an opportunity to reveal his weakness and express his fears. The mentor and mentee support and sustain each other through mutual respect for professional growth and for the benefit of the institution and students.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it is the individual who has to take the initiative for professional growth, to re-conceptualize her role and transform her teaching. Reflexive inquiry and Reflective practice will ensure a renewed enthusiasm for teaching, bring fresh ideas and an awareness of a need for change. But more importantly in situations where there are no teaching programmes available, critical reflection will help teachers to subject their own beliefs of teaching and learning to critical analysis and thus take more responsibility for their actions in the classrooms.

Works Cited

- Bailey, K.M. and Nunan, D. (Eds.). *Voices from the language classroom*. NY: Cambridge University Press. 1996.
- Buckmann, M. "Role over person: morality and authenticity in teaching", *Teacher's College Record*, 87, 529 - 543, 1986.
- Clarke, C.M. "Educating the good Teacher", Address to the I.S.A.T.T. (International Study Association on Teacher Thinking) Conference, September, University of Survey, 1991.
- Dewey, J. *How we think*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1933.
- Farrell, T.S.C. " Teachers talking about teaching: Creating conditions for reflection." *TESL-EJ* 4, 2. 1999.
- Johnson, K.E. and Golembek, P. (Eds.). *Teachers' narrative inquiry as professional development*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Liston, D.P. and Zeichner, K.M. "Reflective Teaching and Action Research", in Pre-

- service Teacher Education", *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 16(3), 235 – 254, 1990.
- Mead, G. *Mind Self and Society*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1932.
- Moon, J.A. *Reflection in learning and professional development: Theory and practice*. London: Kegan Page, 1999.
- Pereira, L., Taylor, P. C. and Pereira, C. *Rewriting history: A poetic approach to the moral transformation of leadership practice*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australasian Association for Research in Education (AARE). The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria. 2004.
- Piaget, J. *Structuralism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
- Schön, D. *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. NY: Basic Books, 1983.
- Schon, D.A. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, New York: Basil Books, 1987.
- Stevens, V. Multi-literacies for Collaborative Learning Environments. *TESL-EJ*, Vol. 9, No.2. 2005.
- Stein, D. Teaching Critical Reflection, <http://ericave.org/fulltext> 2000.
- Socketl, N. "Has Schulman got the strategy right?" *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(2), 208 – 219, 1987.
- Van Manen, M. "Reflectivity and the Pedagogical Movement: the normality of pedagogical thinking and acting", *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 23(6), 507 – 536, 1991.

Copyright of Nawa: Journal of Language & Communication is the property of Department of Communication, Polytechnic of Namibia and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.