

Reflective Teaching for ELT

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at presenting what reflection is and how it influences teachers to have a better impact in their daily practice. The main concern is that most teachers in our region have not studied a degree in our area or in pedagogy (Clemente, 2009); however, they are currently teaching, and in some way the lack of pedagogical preparation affects their practice or class management. As an alternative to these teachers, reflective teaching is presented as a retrospective tool or resource to look for options to improve what is being done and taught in the language classroom. Nonetheless, the act of reflecting on teaching does not mean that it brings changes to the teachers' classroom lessons or practice itself, unless both act in consequence. Rodgers' interpretation of Dewey's (1916/1944) work is presented to provide a better insight on how reflection has played an important role in teaching and learning in the past decades. Both Rodgers' and Dewey's definitions are presented and discussed to confirm my own view of reflection 'in' action. A brief report of one of my latest research projects ("How can I improve the fossilized pronunciation of the words "live" and "answer"?") is also presented to link theory with practice. To conclude, reflection is helpful when it is planned ahead. Assessment of experience and beliefs are shown as part of the values that help teachers to grow professionally by gaining experience from reflection-in-action. Time constraints also play the role of a barrier when implementing reflection into classroom settings because the teacher needs to design a tool to gather data for a later analysis to gather insights to improve his/her teaching.

Resumen

En el siguiente artículo se presenta lo que es la reflexión y su influencia en los maestros para que tengan un impacto mayor en su práctica diaria. La preocupación principal es porque muchos maestros de nuestra región no cuentan con estudios en pedagogía (Clemente, 2009); y sin embargo, dichos maestros están actualmente frente a grupo y de algún modo la falta de preparación o formación pedagógica afecta su práctica o manejo de clase. Como alternativa para estos maestros, la enseñanza reflexiva es presentada como una herramienta retrospectiva o recurso para buscar alternativas y mejorar lo que se está haciendo y enseñando en el salón de idioma. De ninguna manera debe darse por sentado que el reflexionar en la enseñanza va a traer cambios a las lecciones de salón de los maestros o a nuestra propia práctica profesional, a menos que ambos actúen en consecuencia. La interpretación de Rodgers del trabajo de las definiciones Dewey (1916/1944) son presentadas y tratadas para confirmar mi propio punto de vista en cuanto al papel de la reflexión en acción. Un breve reporte de mis últimos proyectos de investigación llamado "¿Cómo puedo mejorar la pronunciación fosilizada de las palabras "vivir" y "responder?" es presentado para relacionar teoría con práctica. Para concluir, la reflexión es de ayuda cuando se planea. La evaluación de la experiencia y creencias son mostrados como parte de los valores que ayudan a los maestros a crecer profesionalmente a través de la reflexión en acción. La limitante del tiempo juega el papel de barrera cuando se implementa dentro del salón, ya que el maestro debe diseñar su herramienta de medición u observación para recolectar la información para analizarla después y así obtener conocimiento y mejorar su enseñanza.

Introduction

Reflection has become a recurrent strategy and tool in today's teaching setting to support and enlighten teachers in their practice. It has even helped students in their learning process by using portfolios and reflective practices to be aware of their progress. According to Richards (2006), reflection is to recall, consider and evaluate an experience "...usually in relation to a broader purpose" (p. 1). He adds that the response of such experience is a "source for planning and action" (p. 1). In light of Richards'

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definition, we can see how reflection moves teachers to make different decisions on their teaching setting.

In the last decades reflective practice has grown in initial teacher education (ITE) due to its effectiveness to build “alert novices” who can absorb and link content to their personal experience to classroom practice (Brooke, 2014). As a result of its benefits, reflective teaching was implemented around the world in English countries and due to its rapid growth of teacher education program reforms. Nonetheless, such reflective teaching that leads to students’ critical thinking cannot be achieved because their teachers do not have “a certain amount of reflection” (Choy & Oo, 2012, p. 168) and as consequence it cannot be transmitted to students either.

In this paper I will discuss reflection as a process which can support teacher education, and also its value to teacher education and the challenges it presents.

Literature Review

The starting point of this paper consists of the definition of reflection. What is reflection? According to the Merriam-Webster (2015), reflection means:

1. “Something that shows the effect, existence, or character of something else”
2. “A thought, idea, or opinion formed or a remark made as a result of meditation”

If reflection is the result of meditation, it means that a person stops what he/she is doing to meditate through a rational judgment of his/her own actions (Choy & Oo, 2012). On the other hand reflection in action is “examining your own behavior and that of others while in a situation” (Somerville & Keeling, 2004, p. 42). What does meditate mean? Based on the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2015), meditate means: “to engage in contemplation or reflection” and “to plan or project in the mind”. Having explored what reflection is, the word reflection in teaching refers to thinking about something deeply. However, reflection does not bring anything substantial to teaching itself because the individual who does the action does not make any physical changes in his/her environment, but only reflects on his/her own ideas or inner thoughts (Choy & Oo, 2012). Therefore reflection itself does not have a huge impact in teaching. On the other hand, although reflection is essential to both teachers’ and students’ learning, Rodgers (2002) states that there are four problems when discussing reflection in teaching. First, Rodgers believes that reflection in teaching is systematic, but with “unclear differences from any other kind of thoughts” (p. 842). Secondly, Rodgers (2002) adds that “it is difficult to assess a skill that is vaguely defined” (p. 842). Thirdly, it loses its value due to the lack of a clear definition. Finally, she believes that “without a clear definition, it is difficult to research the effects of reflective teacher education and professional development on teachers’ practice and students’ learning” (p. 842). Rodgers (2002) in her study mentions four criteria drawn from those of Dewey (n.d.) specifically on Dewey’s concept of reflection. The following are the four criteria:

1. *Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately society. It is a means to essentially moral ends.*

2. *Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.*
3. *Reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others.*
4. *Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others. (p. 845)*

For the first criterion, Rodgers brings education to the scenario in order to explain the role of reflection as a whole in a community, and she adds that reflection cannot be set apart from education due to the connections it has with others within a society. But one could ask what reflection has to do with education. Dewey (1916/1944) defines education as "that reconstruction of experience or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p. 74). This means that education leads to reconstruction of experience, and an experience brings a change or changes within oneself and the world, affecting the environment where the individual moves in or interacts. Thus interaction becomes an essential element of experience and it links to continuity which according to Dewey (1944) plays an important role in teaching and learning. Rodgers (2006) believes that learning is sterile and passive without interaction. Experience, on the other hand, is for her a value that in the end leads to reflection. She adds that reflection "is to make meaning" (p.848). It can be said then that reflection cannot stand by itself and lacks of meaning in teaching because it needs experience and interaction to bring a change.

In the second criterion, Rodgers (2002) cites Dewey's definition of reflection. In his definition he says that reflection is "a particular way of thinking" but such thinking is "undisciplined" (p. 849). Rodgers also mentions "three kinds of thoughts that Dewey distinguishes from reflection: stream of consciousness, invention and belief" (p. 844). The first two kinds of thoughts make the individual go back to previous experience and then forward to contrast or compare such experience. Drawing from these two, a belief is achieved or created. It is important to note that teachers also based their teaching and learning process on beliefs.

Rodgers (2002) divides reflection into six phases:

1. *an experience;*
2. *spontaneous interpretation of the experience;*
3. *naming the problem(s) or the question(s) that arises out of the experience;*
4. *generating possible explanations for the problem(s) or question(s) posed;*
5. *ramifying the explanations into full-blown hypotheses;*
6. *experimenting or testing the selected hypotheses. (p. 851)*

For the third criterion of Rodgers, the individual shares his/her experience to strength and confirm his/her knowledge and for the fourth criterion, attitudes play an important role in the individual's affective side. The individual's affective side cannot be set apart since his/her attitudes and emotions make possible "a good thinker" (Rodgers, 2002, p.858). Between the criteria and the phases, one can see how they are related to each other.

Thus reflection is not as easy as thought, instead it is complex and can lead the practitioner to different levels of understanding and action to improve his/her practice and environment in his/her teaching (Clemente, 2009).

If we see the six phases as a cycle, we can come to the conclusion that it is what we actually do when we experience learning; in other words, the experience comes to us and then we make the interpretation. Then we give it a name and try to generate explanations. Finally, we make hypotheses, and then we test such hypotheses.

Reflection in Practice

In this section I will present an overview of a small scale research project based on reflection to exemplify how it can help us identify some problems about language that need to be corrected, and that it is easier to correct them through reflective teaching. Firstly, I will introduce the issue that led me to carry out the research and the context where the reflection was grounded to begin Rodgers' phases: an experience, interpretation, naming the experience and explanations, and hypotheses.

I carried out a research project ("How can I improve the fossilized pronunciation of the words "live" and "answer"?") in 2011. In this study I wanted to investigate how to improve my students' pronunciation since most of my students already knew some English grammar, vocabulary, and even pronunciation patterns when they came from high school or a technical school. Yet, they still had problems with pronunciation and felt ashamed when they were asked to participate in speaking activities in the class. I also carried out the research because I wanted to help my students to speak more fluently and accurately in the target language by overcoming the fossilized mistakes from previous courses. Having identified the pronunciation issue to investigate, I realized that I had already experienced reflection that motivated me to make some changes in my teaching. I analyzed what was going wrong in my classes as well as the context. Then I reflected on the context as well as my students' background knowledge of the language to see to what extent they could help me understand the problem. In the next sections I will provide information on the context and the participants.

Context

The study was carried out in Universidad Tecnológica de Tamaulipas Norte. It is a state supported medium-size university which is committed to students' success. One of its main concerns is to form professionals who can be hired by the international local companies where spoken English language is needed.

Participants

The participants were 25 (3 female and 22 male) students, randomly selected from 127 students who were from the degree program of Mechatronics. They were all taking the beginner proficiency level of English. Their age range was between 17 and 21 years old. English class was mandatory and they took regular classes from Monday to Thursday, two hours a day.

Instruments and Procedure

The instrument that was used at that moment was a list for the group in Mechatronics (see Appendix 1). The list contained the two categories for the words "live" and "answer", the fossilized mistakes to be researched. Students' samples were recorded

and tallied to see how many times the mistakes were made while the students read the sentences from a list of mispronounced words in context (see Appendix 2). Students were asked to read each one of the sentences while the observer recorded and counted the errors from the group list. It was a two-week research project that covered twelve hours of classes. The following table shows how many times the two words were mispronounced in the first round. It is important to point out that at this stage of the research the strategies (International Phonetic Alphabet/IPA & Color Chart) were not implemented yet.

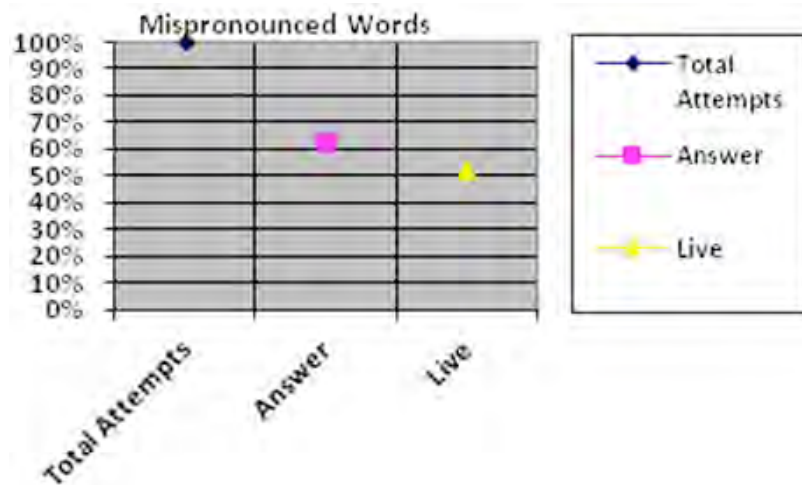


Table 1. Attempts of Mispronounced Words in the Beginning

The following chart shows how students improved their pronunciation of the two words after implementing the direct teaching and the two strategies: the IPA and the Color Chart.

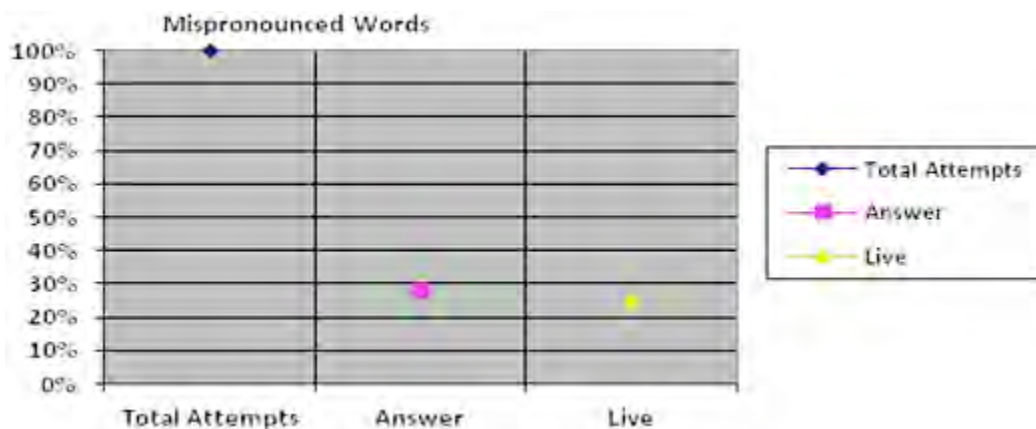


Table 2. Mispronunciation after Implementing the Strategies

The instruments were important to gather information to see if the techniques used were appropriate and helped the students correct their mistakes in pronunciation. They were corrected by 38%. The outcome helped me realized that simple changes in our teaching can increase students’ opportunities to learn the language easily and improve their pronunciation. It also contributed to improving my practice and reinforcing my values as a professional.

Implemented Strategies

The first strategy to correct the mispronounced words "live" (/lɪv/) and "answer" (/ænsər/) was to drill the correct pronunciation of the words, and the rules of pronunciation were explained by showing two charts with similar words that fit the same pronunciation patterns. To reinforce the pronunciation the two strategies used were: International Phonetic Alphabet which consists of symbols (see Appendix 3) and a Color Chart which consists of 58 sounds. The first 23 images represent the vowel sounds and the rest of them the consonant sounds. Each sound is represented by an image which illustrates the first sound of a word. An example is: *i* as in Indian, *e* as in elephant and so on. Another feature of this chart is that each image has a number that can be used to form words numerically; these were used to eradicate the errors. Students were able to see the pronunciation of the words represented by symbols and colors as well as with images (Quick Learning, 2007). These strategies have a great impact in short and long memory because of their aural and visual aid. Students were also able to point on the Color Chart the images that represented the words sounds, for instance the word "live" is formed in the Color Chart by pointing out the images with the following numbers 37 which represents the sound /l/ plus number 3 which represents the sound /I/ plus number 32 which represents the sound/v/. For the word "answer" students were able to point out the images with the following numbers: number 1 for the sound /a/ plus number 30 for the sound /n/, number 27 for the sound /s/, plus number 48 for the sound /er/.

Outcomes

My teaching practice and my awareness of teaching pronunciation was increased after carrying out this small scale research. I learned that pronunciation rules should be taught directly so students can understand and practice such rules to improve their pronunciation. Most of the times teachers have students repeat words, phrases or sentences after them and those drills are forgotten easily because they may be seen as meaningless for students; however, if students learn rules, it is more probable for them to internalize such rules for later usage. Rodgers (2002) mentions in her third criterion, that reflection is a meaning-making process which is clearly demonstrated at this point since I could understand how simple things such as teaching directly could help students and the teacher have a deeper level of understanding of a problem. I also learned that my teaching was more focused on other skills besides the pronunciation rules; for instance, I used to give students much more time to experience the language through pair work (speaking), jigsaw activities (interaction) and student book practices (grammar focus), but I feel I missed the opportunities to correct important pronunciation mistakes. The second and third criteria can be illustrated as the result of my reflection since I concluded that I needed to include one or two practice activities a week to improve my students' pronunciation which eventually led to intellectual growth of both sides: the teacher's and students'.

The findings from this study contributed to the professional learning of other teachers in my institution. I shared what I did and they could be more aware of the problem and also were able to implement the techniques applied during the research: the IPA and the Color Chart. In addition, my beliefs and the teachers' changed over this period of time since we understood that we cannot take for granted that most of the students already have a basis of the language pronunciation, and that as teachers we should carry out a

needs analysis at the beginning of a course to survey students' previous knowledge and to understand when we should adapt our teaching to provide students with new knowledge.

The outcomes from the research also enhanced my practice and the practice of other teachers because we interacted with each other and with our own students. Reflection was present throughout the whole process of the research and the six phases of reflection. I had to stop and rethink in order to proceed and get answers as well understanding the data.

As we could see, reflection in the present research was of great value to teacher development because it provides the space needed for improving practice. Other teachers can now benefit from the possible used techniques and they can implement them in their practice. All of this is improve our practice.

Conclusions

Richards (2006) states that reflection-in-action is a source for planning and action for teachers and for both teachers and students to reflect on the teaching learning processes. It also contributes to teachers' development. In addition, it helps them to improve their planning skills and makes them abandon their comfort zone to explore other ways in which they can change their teaching and transmission of knowledge. When we reflect, we are analyzing on what works and what does not work, but also looking at changes that can be implemented. Teachers' experience and beliefs are useful when linked to values in reflection to keep moving towards their professional development (Choy & Oo, 2012). However, there is the need in our institution to form a group of teachers who carry out research such as this on the different aspects of the English language teaching (Clemente, 2009). As a final recommendation reflective teaching can be implemented by using any of the following tools suggested by Tice (2004): a teacher diary, peer observation, recording lessons, and student feedback. These tools can help with fomenting reflection and recording our reflections as teachers.

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Appendix 1. Collecting Mispronunciation Data Instrument.



CARRERA: MECATRONICA
 GRUPO: MT1A
 PERIODO: SEPTIEMBRE-DICIEMBRE 2011

07-nov-11

| NUM. | NOMBRE DEL ALUMNO | 07-nov-11 | | Tally | live | answer |
|------|-------------------|-----------|--------|-------|------|--------|
| | | live | answer | | | |
| 1 | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | | | |
| 6 | | | | | | |
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| 25 | | | | | | |

Appendix 2. List of Mispronounced Words in Context

All students are asked to read the following sentences one by one.

| Sentences | |
|---|---|
| Live as a verb is pronounced /lɪv/ | Live as an adjective is pronounced /laɪv/ |
| Where does she live ? | It's a live concert. |
| She lives in the US. | Live TV is fun to watch. |
| Where does he live ? | We saw a live performance at the theater. |
| He lives in Mexico. | There's a live mouse in the classroom. |
| Mauricio lives in Guatemala. | I like to listen to live music. |
| His parents live in Germany. | It is always different when you perform in front of a live audience. |
| Mauricio lives in? | A live radio programme is heard on radio at the moment. |
| What's the answer ? | |
| Is that the correct answer ? | |
| Listen and circle the correct answer . | |
| Read and choose the correct answer . | |
| Which one is the correct answer ? | |
| Is it answer or answers ? | |
| What's the answer ? | |

Appendix 3. International Phonetic Alphabet

vowels

| IPA | ASCII | examples | listen |
|-----------------|--------|---|---|
| ʌ | ^ | c <u>u</u> p, l <u>u</u> ck | Amer |
| ɑ: | a: | ɑ <u>r</u> m, fɑ <u>th</u> er | Amer / Brit |
| æ | @ | c <u>a</u> t, bl <u>a</u> ck | Amer |
| e | e | m <u>e</u> t, b <u>e</u> d | Amer |
| ə | .. | ɑ <u>wa</u> y, c <u>i</u> ne <u>m</u> a | Amer |
| ɜ:r | e:(r) | t <u>u</u> rn, l <u>e</u> arn | Amer / Brit |
| ɪ | i | h <u>i</u> t, s <u>i</u> tt <u>i</u> ng | Amer |
| i: | i: | s <u>e</u> e, h <u>e</u> at | Amer |
| ɒ | o | h <u>o</u> t, r <u>o</u> ck | Amer / Brit |
| ɔ: | o: | c <u>a</u> ll, f <u>o</u> ur | Amer / Brit |
| ʊ | u | p <u>u</u> t, c <u>o</u> uld | Amer |
| u: | u: | b <u>l</u> ue, f <u>o</u> od | Amer |
| aɪ | ai | f <u>i</u> ve, <u>e</u> ye | Amer |
| aʊ | au | n <u>o</u> w, <u>o</u> ut | Amer |
| eɪ | ei | s <u>a</u> y, <u>e</u> ight | Amer |
| oʊ | Ou | g <u>o</u> , h <u>o</u> me | Amer |
| ɔɪ | oi | b <u>o</u> y, j <u>o</u> in | Amer |
| eə ^r | e..(r) | w <u>h</u> ere, <u>a</u> ir | Amer / Brit |
| ɪə ^r | i..(r) | n <u>e</u> ar, h <u>e</u> re | Amer / Brit |
| ʊə ^r | u..(r) | p <u>u</u> re, t <u>o</u> urist | Amer / Brit |

consonants

| IPA | ASCII | examples | listen |
|-----|-------|--|----------------------|
| b | b | b <u>a</u> d, l <u>a</u> b | Amer |
| d | d | d <u>i</u> d, l <u>a</u> dy | Amer |
| f | f | f <u>i</u> nd, <u>i</u> f | Amer |
| g | g | g <u>i</u> ve, fl <u>a</u> g | Amer |
| h | h | h <u>o</u> w, h <u>e</u> ll <u>o</u> | Amer |
| j | j | y <u>e</u> s, y <u>e</u> ll <u>o</u> | Amer |
| k | k | c <u>a</u> t, b <u>a</u> ck | Amer |
| l | l | l <u>e</u> g, l <u>i</u> tt <u>l</u> e | Amer |
| m | m | m <u>a</u> n, l <u>e</u> mon | Amer |
| n | n | n <u>o</u> , t <u>e</u> n | Amer |
| ŋ | N | s <u>i</u> ng, f <u>i</u> ng <u>e</u> r | Amer |
| p | p | p <u>e</u> t, m <u>a</u> p | Amer |
| r | r | r <u>e</u> d, t <u>r</u> y | Amer |
| s | s | s <u>u</u> n, m <u>i</u> ss | Amer |
| ʃ | S | s <u>h</u> e, cr <u>a</u> sh | Amer |
| t | t | t <u>e</u> a, g <u>e</u> tt <u>i</u> ng | Amer |
| tʃ | tS | ch <u>e</u> ck, ch <u>u</u> rch | Amer |
| θ | th | th <u>i</u> nk, b <u>o</u> th | Amer |
| ð | TH | th <u>i</u> s, m <u>o</u> th <u>e</u> r | Amer |
| v | v | v <u>o</u> ice, f <u>i</u> ve | Amer |
| w | w | w <u>e</u> t, w <u>i</u> nd <u>o</u> w | Amer |
| z | z | z <u>o</u> o, l <u>a</u> zy | Amer |
| ʒ | Z | pl <u>e</u> as <u>u</u> re, v <u>i</u> si <u>o</u> n | Amer |
| dʒ | dZ | ju <u>st</u> , l <u>a</u> rg <u>e</u> | Amer |

[Cambodian Education Resource Centre (Cambosastra)
<http://www.cambosastra.org/international-phonetic-alphabet>]