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Critical incident analysis through narrative reflective practice: A case study

Thomas S. C. Farrell^{a,*}

^a *Brock University, Canada*

ABSTRACT

Teachers can reflect on their practices by articulating and exploring incidents they consider critical to themselves or others. By talking about these critical incidents, teachers can make better sense of seemingly random experiences that occur in their teaching because they hold the real inside knowledge, especially personal intuitive knowledge, expertise and experience that is based on their accumulated years as language educators teaching in schools and classrooms. This paper is about one such critical incident analysis that an ESL teacher in Canada revealed to her critical friend and how both used McCabe's (2002) narrative framework for analyzing an important critical incident that occurred in the teacher's class.

Keywords: incident analysis; reflective practice; narrative framework

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* Corresponding author: Brock University, Canada
Email address: tfarrell@brocku.ca

Introduction

Teachers can reflect on their practice by articulating their stories to themselves or others because these stories reveal the “knowledge, ideas, perspectives, understandings, and experiences that guide their work” (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 7). By telling their stories, teachers can make better sense of seemingly random experiences because they hold the inside knowledge, especially personal intuitive knowledge, expertise and experience that is based on their accumulated years as language educators teaching in schools and classrooms. These self-reflective stories can provide a rich source of teacher-generated information that allows them to reflect on how they got where they are today, how they conduct practice, the thinking and problem-solving they employ during their practice, and their underlying assumptions, values and beliefs that have ruled their past and current practices. The type of teacher story telling discussed in this paper is called ‘Narrative Reflective Practice’ and it is important for language teachers to do this because they can obtain new understandings of themselves as second language teachers when they reflect on their own perspectives of teaching and learning. This paper outlines a case study of one critical incident from an ESL teacher who reflected in a teacher reflection group in Canada.

Narrative Reflection on Critical Incidents

According to Johnson and Golombek (2002, p. 6), teacher narratives tell: “stories of teachers’ professional development within their own professional worlds.” By telling their stories, teachers can not only reflect on specific incidents within their teaching world, but also feel a sense of cathartic relief and it offers an outlet for tensions, feelings and frustrations about teaching. After some years of teaching, many teachers can feel a sense of isolation because they are but one person in a room with twenty or more students and as such many have a difficult time reflecting on their practice. However, the use of narratives for self-reflection offers these teachers “a safe and

nonjudgmental support system for sharing the emotional stresses and isolating experiences of the classroom” (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p. 162). For novice teachers in teacher education programs, McCabe (2002) suggests that stories can set off a dialogue about teaching that can offer strategies for dealing with problems many novice teachers may face as well as the successes they manage.

That said, Bell (2002) has suggested that narrative reflection goes beyond language teachers’ just simply telling stories about general happenings within their teaching world without much of a focus; in other words it is not just sitting around the camp fire telling stories for fun. For narrative reflection to be really beneficial to teachers, it should also feature recounts of specific classroom events and experiences such as incidents that teachers deem critical for their professional development. Thus, narrative inquiry as it is outlined in this paper is grounded in John Dewey’s (1933) notion of reflecting on teachers’ specific (rather than general) experiences, because we must remember that a teacher’s life is itself a narrative of the composite of these critical incidents and experiences. Thus, this paper suggests that teachers’ specific experiences can be captured in critical incident analysis and that these incidents can happen both inside and outside the classroom.

A critical incident is any unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during class, outside class or during a teacher’s career but is “vividly remembered” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 84). Incidents only really become critical when they are subject to this conscious reflection, and when language teachers formally analyze these critical incidents, they can uncover new understandings of their practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Incidents only really become critical when they are subject to this conscious reflection, and when language teachers formally analyze these critical incidents, they can uncover new understandings of their practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Basically, there are two main phases of reflecting on critical incidents: a description phase followed by an explanation phase (Tripp, 1993). In the description phase, some issue is observed and documented and is later explained by the teacher in terms

of its meaning, value or role to that particular teacher. In this paper, in order to capture these two main phases, I adapted McCabe's (2002) framework for analyzing the narrative that the critical incident emerged from as follows:

- *Orientation*: This part answers the following questions: Who? When? What? Where?
- *Complication*: Outlines what happened and the problem that occurred along with any turning point in the story.
- *Evaluation*: This part answers the question: So what? What this means for the participants in the story.
- *Result*: This part outlines and explains the resolution to the problem/crisis.

Narrative Case Study

The following teacher narrative, as told (in the teacher's own words) by one of teachers from the teacher reflection group, outlines the details of a critical incident that can be identified as 'negative feedback' (Farrell, 2007). Specifically, the case study details her concerns of the 'negative feedback' she reported to have received from one of her students after one of her classes. The information about the critical incident comes from a combination of teacher journal entries the teacher wrote and what she reported about the incident to the other teachers in the teacher reflection group during a group meeting. The narrative is presented in the teacher's own words so as to provide as much reality as possible.

Orientation

I was teaching a course entitled Socio-cultural Influences on Teaching English as a Second Language. It was in the autumn term; 3 hours per week; most were university graduates who wanted to become ESL/EFL teachers. The survey is called the Key

Performance Indicators (KPI) and it is done across the province by all colleges. It is the primary source of information about the course and we are held accountable for the responses. For example, in previous years, there was a very low part of our KPIs related to college facilities and we, as a department, had to hold a focus group discussion with our students to better understand their responses. We discussed it with our program advisory committee, and the program chair had to come up with strategies for improvement. It asks students to comment on a very wide range of things from the actual learning experience and program quality to college resources, facilities, technology, cafeteria/bookstore, skills for future career, right down to teacher punctuality. They complete it at the end of the program. Not all courses in a program have to do it every term and not all programs necessarily do one every year. Because it is so extensive, they take a cross section of programs in the college (I think). It is the type where a statement is given and the students can mark their answer on a continuum: Agree strongly, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, disagree strongly (something like that).

The student in this incident was one who had repeatedly, from the very first class demonstrated a contemptuous boredom with the program as a whole. He had indicated this in a number of ways to all his teachers. In person, he was tactfully polite, but in his written assignments, he would express his truer feelings. He always seemed to resist or think he was above what we were teaching in the program. We suspected that his fiancée, who was also in the program, had dragged him there so that they could travel overseas together. He had just completed university and seemed to think he was above a college program; although, this is now my own perception, as I seek to understand why someone would stay in a program that he clearly didn't like. Because the negative feedback came from this student, I could have dismissed it more easily... it was predictable; of course he didn't like anything. It was really not a surprise. And yet, I still felt the sting of the negative result and comments and had to reflect upon why.

Complication

When we did our official surveys and I could tell from, you know how they give you the bar graph or the percentages showing, you know disagreed, neutral, and then agree. Seven percent were always that disagree, which indicates out of a class of whatever it was, 19 students or whatever, that one person hated everything.

Evaluation

I was very disturbed by some unsolicited comments from a TESL student at the end of December. Even after all our talk about feedback from students and our ability to take feedback and make changes, and not taking it personally, I was amazed by my hugely, negative, emotional response. Just when you think you're above the fray, bam some negative feedback hits you between the eyes. After doing some thinking on the experience, I have come to realize that it wasn't the comment itself that disturbed me (basically because I knew it was not valid), but the fact that this student felt he had a right to criticize the course content (and indirectly me) despite the fact that he had not attended a significant portion of the course and actually failed the final exam. The fact is that I felt vulnerable. I think I was worried that someone (other teachers???? Not sure) was going to listen to this guy and that judgments would be made about this course and about me.

Result

I'm totally over that. In fact, I think I am probably a more severe critic of myself than anyone else could be. I wasn't concerned by the positives or the negatives or the neutrals. I mean, I looked at them and it was interesting and there were not really surprising things but I knew that was him and it was like, oh well.

Discussion

Critical incidents can be positive and/or negative events and may be identified by reflecting on a 'teaching high' or a 'teaching low' (Thiel, 1999). A teaching high in a language class could be a sudden change in the lesson plan teachers make during class because of their perceptions of the current events. They, then, decide to alter the events and this change, in turn, has some positive overall effect on the lesson such as more student response. A teaching low could be a specific classroom incident that is immediately problematic or puzzling for the teacher, such as one student suddenly crying during class for no apparent reason. The case study reported on here could be classified as a teaching 'low' for the teacher because the negative comments provided by the student went beyond what the teacher was expecting. As such, the self-reflective narrative (in the form of a critical incident) outlined in the above case study demonstrates how real practices (also note the use of the teacher's own words throughout) can conflict with expectations and outcomes. However, as McCabe (2002, p. 83) recommends, when we begin to analyze such critical incidents in which outcomes conflict with our expectations, "we can come to a greater understanding of the expectations themselves—what our beliefs, philosophies, understandings, conceptions (of the classroom, of the language, of the students, of ourselves) actually are." Indeed, by vividly recalling and describing such critical incidents, teachers can begin to explore all kinds of assumptions that underlie their practice.

This was the situation for the teacher reflecting on the critical incident reported on in this paper. By reflecting and analyzing the critical incident outlined above, the teacher gained a greater awareness of herself as a teacher and her practices, which is one of the main goals of reflective practice. She also became more empowered as a result of telling her story and then reflecting on it, as she commented after reading her own story: "So I feel empowered by our PD (professional development)." Indeed, reflecting on and analyzing such critical incidents provides language teachers with further opportunities to consolidate their theoretical understanding of their practices

and can lead to further exploration of different aspects of teaching, and as McCabe (2002, p. 89) has suggested, it can “lead to further exploration of different aspects of teaching through action research.” Research suggests that teachers who are better informed about their teaching are also better able to evaluate what aspects of their practice they may need to adjust because they are more aware of what stage they have reached in their professional development (Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

Recommendations

The results of the case study presented in this paper can lead to the following recommendations that experienced language teachers can incorporate into their reflective practices (Adapted from Farrell, 2007).

Teachers can first be encouraged to write a narrative of two ‘incidents’ that they consider critical from their practice. One should be a teaching high (because teachers tend to focus only on what goes ‘wrong’ and forget to focus on what goes ‘well’) and the other a teaching low. They should avoid writing explanations and interpretations at this first stage and just include all the details as contained in an *orientation* as outlined in the case study above (e.g., focus only on the *what, where, when, who*).

On a separate page, teachers can attempt to explain and interpret the incident. Incidents only really become critical when they are subject to this conscious reflection, and when language teachers formally analyze these critical incidents, they can uncover new understandings of their practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Thus, when a critical incident occurs, it interrupts (or highlights) the taken for granted ways of thinking about teaching, and, by analyzing such incidents, teachers can examine the values and beliefs that underpin their perceptions about teaching (Farrell, 2007). Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest that teachers may want to consider what happened directly before and after each incident as well as the teacher’s reactions at the time of the incident. In this way, they suggest that teachers may be able to unpack their underlying assumptions about teaching and learning English language.

Of course, teachers can also fully adapt McCabe's (2002) framework as outlined in this paper as a means of analyzing their incidents: orientation, complication, evaluation, and result. In order to follow this framework, teachers should be fully aware of the importance of each stage of the framework and not to try to skip any stage. Regardless of the exact method of organizing critical incidents, Thiel (1999) suggests that the reporting of critical incidents (written or spoken) should have at the very least the following four steps:

1. Self-observation—identify significant events that occur in the classroom.
2. Detailed written description of what happened—the incident itself, what led up to it and what followed.
3. Self-awareness—analyze why the incident happened.
4. Self-evaluation—consider how the incident led to a change in understanding of teaching.

In order to get the most out of this reflective process, teachers should team up with another teacher, sometimes called a critical friend. A critical friendship is where a trusted colleague gives advice to a teacher as a friend rather than a consultant in order to develop the reflective abilities of the teacher who is conducting his or her own reflections. As Kumaravadivelu (2012, p. 95) has noted: "Teaching is a reflective activity which at once shapes and is shaped by the doing of theorizing which in turn is bolstered by the collaborative process of dialogic inquiry." They can thus exchange the first page details of the incidents with each other and then suggest interpretations for the incidents. The critical friend's interpretations can later be compared with the interpretations already constructed by the teacher who experienced the incident and any new meaning to the original incident can be added. Reflecting on critical

incidents in this manner with a critical friend (or with a group of teachers) can be a good example of the old adage of “two heads are better than one.”

Conclusion

Narrative reflection as discussed in this paper suggests that language teachers can choose from various different means of “imposing order” (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 4) on their seemingly disparate practices such as analyzing critical incidents that occur in their practice and this can also cultivate the habit of engaging in reflective practice in general. In addition, the case study outlines how teacher-generated critical incidents can offer a rich source of information about how experienced ESL teachers actually conduct their practices: the thinking and problem-solving they employ, and their underlying assumptions, values and beliefs. By detailing, analyzing and interpreting important critical incidents, ESL teachers (both experienced and novice teachers) are provided with further opportunities to reflect on and consolidate their philosophical and theoretical understanding of their practices and if they desire, can even lead to further and more detailed exploration of different aspects of teaching through detailed action research projects.

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Thomas S. C. Farrell is a professor in applied linguistics at Brock University, Canada. He has been involved with ESL and applied linguistics for the past 27 years and has written extensively on topics such as reflective practice, language teacher development, and language teacher education. His recent books include *Reflective Practice in Action* (2004, Corwin Press), *Reflecting on Classroom Communication in Asia* (2004, Longman), and *Professional Development for Language Teachers* (2005, Cambridge University Press, coauthored with Jack Richards).