

# Book Reviews

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## **Reflective Practices in ESL Teacher Development Groups: From Practice to Research**

*Thomas S. C. Farrell*

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 162 pages, ISBN 978-0-230-292255-0

In his new book, Thomas S. C. Farrell discusses the findings from a longitudinal multiple case study *with* (rather than *on*) teachers about the benefits of participating in reflective groups. Over a two-year period, three experienced ESL teachers formed a teacher development group, kept individual reflective journals, and participated in a series of interviews with the author. Using this bottom-up approach to professional development, the teachers' experiences make clear principles of L2 teaching that "can significantly enhance knowledge on what counts for professional development of ESL teachers and can promote ESL teacher-initiated professional development that is more focused towards classroom realities" (p. 8).

In the first two chapters, Farrell explores bottom-up professional development opportunities and reflective teaching practices. In education, teachers commonly experience top-down models for professional growth. These prescriptive approaches tend to overlook teachers' actual needs and may even diminish interest in learning about ways to improve and expand their knowledge base, competences, skills, and teaching effectiveness. In extreme cases, in-service teachers may resent or reject the entire idea of professional development. Farrell advocates for the inclusion of bottom-up development models where "teachers examine their beliefs and practices about teaching and learning so that they can better understand these" (p. 22). Further, he highlights the importance of seeking out professional development opportunities at all stages of a teaching career. This point is well taken, as it may attenuate the phenomenon of plateauing that many teachers encounter later in their careers.

In Chapters 3 and 4, we are introduced to the major themes that emerged from teacher development groups and teaching journals. Through an iterative analysis of their discussions and reflections, this group of teachers focused on (a) their context of teaching, (b) teaching methods, (c) their roles as educators, and (d) their learners. In Chapter 5, Farrell reports on the specific experiences that tended to shape their pedagogical beliefs. One key finding is the shaping of their teaching practices in harmony with their own personalities. Farrell therefore argues that "teachers should reflect on whose needs there [sic] are fulfilling when they are teaching: their own by choosing methods that suit their personality only, or their students' learning needs and

styles" (p. 89). This finding is of utmost importance for teacher educators. Pre-service teachers undeniably have unique personalities, and teacher educators need to embrace this plurality as a means of encouraging diversified ways of teaching, even if these differ from the teacher educators' personalities. In Chapter 6, Farrell addresses teacher identity. Discussions pertaining to ESL teachers' roles are often reported anecdotally, and substantiation of these through empirical data is useful. Teacher educators can share this taxonomy with future teachers, who in turn can imagine ways to enact their roles in their professional environment.

In Chapter 7, we are introduced to the notion of narrative reflection and the use of critical incidents as a vehicle for reflection. Farrell illustrates how teachers can explore critical incidents via four dimensions: orientation, complication, evaluation, and results. He argues that this practice may help teachers gain a deeper appreciation of their own approaches and, importantly, reflect on their long-term outcomes. In the next chapter, Farrell turns to the topic of plateauing and the experiences of the three participants. After a brief discussion of this phenomenon, he advocates for the development of reflective groups. Referencing his 2007 publication, Farrell provides a framework for setting up such groups. Finally, Chapter 9 serves to connect this study's findings to the literature on teacher expertise. Teacher expertise encompasses the *quality* of knowledge that teachers possess, as well as their actions. Drawing on the data from these experienced teachers, he notes salient characteristics of experts, including having knowledge of learners, engaging in critical reflection, accessing past experiences, working toward informed lesson planning, and maintaining active student involvement outside of class.

Overall, the contents of this book include very familiar topics for those who have read his previous works (see, for example, Farrell, 2007, 2008; Richards & Farrell, 2011). We are reminded of the benefits of engaging in reflective practices for professional development and of useful considerations when setting up reflection groups. A novel contribution of this book, however, is the exploration of reflective teaching from the viewpoint of experienced teachers. This bottom-up approach offers a refreshing perspective that may convince more skeptical readers of the benefits of adopting a reflective stance for personal professional development. Teachers interested in such opportunities may become motivated to explore group reflections and, in order to facilitate their discussions, can draw on the numerous useful reflective questions offered throughout each chapter.

The findings from this study can also benefit teacher educators and their students. One challenging task for new teachers is the identification of constructive ways to evaluate teaching performance. In this setting, we learn that even experienced teachers worry about how their learners perceive their teaching. A practical consideration for both new and experienced teachers is lesson evaluation in a systematic way, such as informal questionnaires during the semesters. Another useful topic for discussion is finding balance between

teachers' professional and personal lives. Novice teachers may not consider this during their first years of teaching—they are eager to learn and energized by the novelty of their profession. However, burnout and plateauing are real and pervasive phenomena in our field, and it would be helpful for younger teachers to think about the potential impacts on their health and morale if they are unable to find a balance.

Although the publication may be of interest to teacher educators and language teachers, some limitations should be noted. The major sources of data collection include both discussion groups and written journals. These sources of data led to the identification of overlapping themes. It is unclear as to why Farrell opted to present the findings in isolation (separate chapters) rather than reporting the themes as they emerged from the two data elicitation techniques. This would have led to less repetition in terms of the themes and would have enabled the author to incorporate a wider range of quotes to illustrate the themes. Another important limitation is the text itself, including numerous language-related issues (spelling, syntax, duplicate quotes within a few pages). This was distracting and could lead readers to question the overall credibility of the work. Finally, Chapter 8 focuses almost exclusively on forming reflection groups. This discussion relies extensively on previous published work and could instead have focused exclusively on the topic of plateauing. Despite these limitations, the author engages with his readers and offers a new perspective on ESL teacher development. I would recommend this book to teacher educators who are less familiar with Farrell's work and/or teachers interested in exploring ways to resist plateauing during their careers and in growing professionally with colleagues.

*Caroline Payant*

### *The Reviewer*

Dr. Caroline Payant is an assistant professor in the MA TESL program at the University of Idaho. Her areas of interests include cognitive and sociocultural aspects of language acquisition and L2 teacher education. Her work can be found in the *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *TESL Canada Journal*, *SSLA*, and *IRAL*.

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