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MAGDALENA WITKOWSKA

*Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa w Gorzowie Wielkopolskim*

## Reflective practitioners: expectations vs facts

**ABSTRACT.** Over the years of working at school teachers gain experience that is necessary for their professional development. The teaching experience may appear of little value if teachers do not reflect upon it. Reflection is the key to success in teaching. The article presents the results of a questionnaire conducted with foreign language teachers from Gorzów Wielkopolski, Poland schools who were asked about their reflection. Many teachers (95%) reported that they reflected on their teaching and even made notes (50%). The research outcomes provide interesting facts about teachers' reflections.

**Keywords:** experience, teaching experience, practical knowledge, reflection, auto-reflection, self-evaluation, teacher development, reflective practitioners, teacher autonomy.

“Experience is not the best teacher; reflection and analysis is.”  
(Arends 1991: 493)

The experience gained over the years of practice at school plays an important role in the teacher professional development, however, deeper thought, analysis and reflection make the experience meaningful as “through reflection experiences become more valuable” (Arends 1991: 492). Thus, mere experience seems insufficient to develop one's professional skills.

### 1. REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS: EXPECTATIONS

#### 1.1. Experience

“We all learn from experience and we know that experience is a foundation for new concepts and new ways of behaviour”; this experiential learning is also “a way of introducing some innovation” (Arends 1994: 490).

A considerable amount of teacher knowledge comes from experience and is widely used in teaching practice (Pearson 1994) as well as in establishing teaching standards and goals. This experience makes teachers realise what to teach and how; it contributes to the development of both teacher's normative<sup>1</sup> and causal<sup>2</sup> knowledge (Pearson 1994). Experience-based knowledge is beneficial in specific teaching situations (Pearson 1994); it is a particular knowledge for particular contexts and, as Pearson (1994) states, is frequently difficult or unable to be verbalised. Usher and Bryant (1989 in Hiller 2005: 10) call it "practical knowledge" and explain that "when we teach our practice is formed by our experience, by the way we make sense of what we do". We try a variety of techniques and observe their usefulness in the process of teaching; thus the knowledge of how to teach, not teaching theory is developed. Pearson (1994) stresses the importance of "practical experience" since learning to teach in an appropriate way requires practice, the time to learn and develop the teaching skills. According to psychologists, little do we realise the value of experience in our life; its main value is that it leads to learning (Włodarski 1996), and what is more, "experience is the richest source of adult learning" (Richards and Farrell 2005: 19).

## 1.2. Experience and reflection

Valuable as the teaching experience is, it may appear of little value if it is not reflected upon and analysed. "Teaching experience alone is insufficient" (Murphy 2001: 500); "it has to be sustained, analysed, thought over and negotiated so to become knowledge" (Boud 1993 in Day 2004: 88). Teaching requires more than practical experience, there is a need for reflective practical experience (Pearson 1994). Arends (1994: 47 after Schon 1983, 1986) stresses that "one can learn a skill to do a job, however, it is the experience along with careful analysis and reflection that makes this learning possible". This refers to the job of teaching as well; Richards and Farrell (2005: 2) call attention to the fact that "classrooms are not only where students learn but also a place where teachers can learn". According to Schreckenber (1994 in Okoń 1991), the experience teachers gain at school should be constantly analysed and reflected upon. Jasiński (2007: 123) claims that reflection is

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<sup>1</sup> Teachers' knowledge is based on the subject studies, the subject experts' knowledge and his/her own experience, but what is taught in the class is often a matter of the teacher's belief and assumptions of what needs to be taught. Teachers follow the formally established teaching aims which they accept as essential and appropriate (Pearson 1994).

<sup>2</sup> The knowledge of what teaching results in learning. The effectiveness of learning may be a result of other factors, not necessarily teaching (Pearson 1994).

“a necessary part of teaching”, and what is more, a characteristic feature of the teaching profession. In other words, reflection should be a routine activity while teaching; one may talk about “routine reflection in teaching”.

### 1.3. Reflection

“Critical reflection [is] a fundamental approach to teaching” (Brookfield 1995 in Hiller 2005: 7). “When we reflect, we not only challenge our assumptions about why we do what we do, we can also help ourselves identify where we feel lacking and why we may be setting ourselves unnecessarily unachievable standards” (Hiller 2005: 7). Reflection lets us both realise what makes our teaching effective and discover what needs improvement. When we teach we form our practice and due to reflection we develop the practical knowledge, which must undergo some critical analysis (Hiller 2005). Murphy (2001 in Celce-Murcia 2001: 499-500) perceives the value of reflection as the fact that it “can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching”, can expand our teaching strategies and enhance the quality of learning.

Teachers are able to work on their teaching skills independently, “with no outside influence and control” which can be conducted through self-monitoring, observation and case studies (Richard and Farrell 2005: 37). The information teachers gain about their own teaching must be critically examined with the use of theories (Richard and Farrell 2005). Hiller (2005: 18 after Schon 1983, 1987) observes that “the combination of theories-in-use and reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action [...] leads us to knowing-in-practice”. The theory and practice become interlinked.

According to Zawadzka (2004), teacher auto-reflection and auto-control are a condition of effective teaching and independent teacher’s work. The need for teacher autonomy is observed in the reflective model of teacher education. Teachers analyse and reflect on their work while teaching (reflection-in-action) and after teaching (reflection-on-action). Only then can they become reflective and independent teacher-practitioners. Wysocka (2003), Łobocki (2005) and Niemiec (2005) agree that the aim of teacher education should be the development of teacher autonomy, self-observation, self-reflection and self-evaluation and their conscious and autonomous professional development. Okoń (1979) finds it important to awaken teachers’ willingness for constant development of professional skills. Day (2004: 95) states that “it is [teachers’] obligation to develop the teaching skills, conduct reflection on the experience and extend the professional knowledge”. Thus, reflection becomes not only a need but also a duty.

Analysing their teaching practice teachers observe the usefulness of theories, and what is more, they create their own informal theories which may contribute to the development of new theories (Zawadzka 2004). Hiller (2005: 17) states that "our informal theories have little likelihood of developing into 'good practice' if they are not critically examined and tested". Teachers may have an impact on the teaching methodology and other theories, which in fact should be constantly questioned. "We need a commitment to the systematic questioning of our teaching as a basis for development" (Stenhouse 1975 in Hiller 2005: 11). Due to reflection on experiences in the classroom "teachers are able to learn more, develop their understanding, try alternatives, innovate and break the routine" (Murphy 2001 in Celce-Murcia 2001: 500).

#### **1.4. Reflective practitioners**

Being a professional practitioner means "doing a professional duty of extending one's practical knowledge, both through reflection and cooperation with others" (Day 2004: 35). Being a reflective practitioner means being an autonomous teacher who makes his/her own decisions about what to do and how to change a teaching situation (Pearson 1994). Being an autonomous teacher means being a modern teacher of the 21<sup>st</sup> century who uses his/her knowledge of teaching, reflection and intuition, and takes every responsibility for what she/he does in the classroom (Niemiec 2005). Thus, one can conclude that being a teacher nowadays is more challenging and demanding. There is a need for a deeper personal and professional development (Kędzierska 2003 in Kwiatkowska 2003). Only by being reflective can one become a fully competent teacher.

## **2. REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS: FACTS. RESEARCH OUTCOMES**

### **2.1. Research setting and aims**

The research took place in January-March 2009, in 13 schools (primary, comprehensive and grammar schools) in Gorzów Wlkp., Poland. It was conducted with 60 foreign language teachers (English, German and French teachers) of various teaching experience (from 1 to 33 years of teaching). When it comes to teacher experience there were: 4 trainees, 15 contract teachers, 21 appointed and 18 chartered teachers. They were asked to fill in the following anonymous questionnaire:

QUESTIONNAIRE

Aim: researching the reflections of foreign language teachers

Date: Language(s) taught:  
 Sex: Work place/school: primary school/  
 Teaching experience: ... years junior high school/high school  
 Education: Teaching rank:

1. Do you analyse the effects of your lesson after it has finished? Do you reflect on what has happened in the class?

YES NO HARD TO SAY

If you do, how often?

ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES RARELY

2. How much do you need to reflect on your teaching? Use a scale from 1 (not at all) - 10 (greatly).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. What method do you use to conduct the reflection?

a. written (circle the right answer)

FREQUENTLY SOMETIMES RARELY NEVER

Where do you write down your reflections if you do? (tick the appropriate ideas and/or write your own)

- in a notebook

- in a diary

- other:

b. oral (circle the right answer)

FREQUENTLY SOMETIMES RARELY NEVER

In what way if you do? (tick the appropriate ideas and/or write your own)

- talking to other teachers

- talking to yourself

- other:

c. in thought (circle the right answer)

FREQUENTLY SOMETIMES RARELY NEVER

d. Other methods; what are they?

4. When do you reflect upon the classes you have conducted? (tick the appropriate ideas and/or write your own)

a. after each class

b. after all classes the same day

c. after a week

d. after a month

e. other:

5. What do you usually reflect on? (tick 1-3 ideas)

a. lesson objectives

- b. methods and techniques used
- c. lesson content
- d. teaching aids
- e. class discipline
- f. rapport with students
- g. other:

6. What advantages of reflecting upon classes can you observe?

7. Do you think you are a reflective practitioner?

YES                      NO                      HARD TO SAY

8. Would you like to take a course in training your reflective skills?

YES                      PROBABLY                      NOT REALLY                      NO

9. What are your reflections after filling in the questionnaire?

Thank you!

The following research was an attempt to learn whether foreign language teachers – practitioners are reflective. The researcher wished to evaluate how reflective teachers of varied teaching experience are and discover what form, if any, of reflection they prefer, when and what they reflect on as well as whether they perceive any advantages of reflecting upon their teaching. It was intended to observe whether the reality differs from what is expected; in other words, whether there exists a space between how reflective actually teachers are and how reflective they are supposed to be.

## 2.2. Research outcomes

### 2.2.1. Need for and frequency of reflecting

The teachers' need for reflecting was measured with the use of scale from 1 to 10, where 10 indicated the strongest need. Most of the teachers (72%) pointed at 8, 9 or 10. Very few of them (6) pointed at 3 or 5. Taking into account teacher experience the biggest desire to reflect (8–10) was shown by the chartered teachers (78%) which provides some evidence that the most experienced teachers still feel the need to reflect. The number of the contract teachers willing to reflect was also high (73%) which also supplies some evidence that young teachers perceive reflection as necessary. The number of teachers with little need for reflecting (1–5) was low, i.e. 6 (10%).

Another important issue was whether the teachers who declared their need for reflecting actually conducted the reflection and how often. Forty six



teachers admitted that they always or often conducted their reflection; only 3 of them did it rarely. Almost all the teachers (95%) declared that they did reflect on their teaching. Most of them (38 teachers) reported that they did their reflection after the day at work or even after each lesson (20 such answers) which indicates they were willing to think about their teaching the same day. Only two teachers declared they reflected on their work after a month. There were teachers who preferred other times, i.e. after finishing a coursebook unit, after a few lessons or just when they “felt the need”. Only one teacher mentioned the fact of conducting reflection while teaching (reflection-in-action).

### 2.2.2. Form of reflection

There were suggested three forms of conducting reflection: written reflection, oral reflection or reflection in thought. The most popular form (indicated by 51 respondents) was the reflection conducted in thought and the least popular was written reflection. Interestingly enough, 25 teachers stated that they rarely or never wrote down their reflections, however, 30 teachers admitted to making notes in their diaries. Oral reflection appeared almost as popular as reflection in thought. This was indicated by 49 respondents who used conversations with other teachers as the most frequent form of their oral reflection. A small number 10% of the teachers liked conducting a monologue about their teaching.

### 2.2.3. Content of reflection

The teachers were asked to specify the content of their reflection by selecting three notions from a list provided in the questionnaire. Most teachers (46) admitted that they most frequently reflected on the methods and techniques used in lessons, half of the teachers considered their relationship with the students, and 26 respondents reflected upon both lesson aims and class discipline. The least number of teachers (15) reflected on the teaching aids. The results indicated that the foreign language teachers value the teaching methods and techniques most and these items can be declared the main topic of their reflection. A more detailed analysis shows that younger teachers focused more on class discipline while for senior teachers the priority was teaching objectives and rapport with students. Nevertheless, one can observe that the reflections concerned important notions, and teachers seemed to realise and remember what makes teaching effective.

Furthermore, the results make it clear that teachers were aware of the advantages of their reflection; what they highlighted was the improvement of teaching quality, better planning and discipline, the opportunity to introduce some modifications, an appropriate selection of materials and techniques. What is more, in their opinion reflection gives a chance of evaluating one's work and avoiding mistakes. Twelve teachers (20%) did not provide any advantage of reflecting at all. Possible reasons for this may be that it was either too difficult for them to state or they could not perceive the benefits. This requires some further research.

#### **2.2.4. Reflective practitioners**

When asked whether they are reflective practitioners over 50% of the respondents gave a positive answer, 18 teachers did not know and 7 of them declared they were not reflective practitioners. Thirteen senior teachers (75%) called themselves 'reflective teachers' and so did quite a large number of young teachers (50% of those teaching less than 10 years at school); there were quite many of those who were not sure, 22, which included 14 very young teachers and 8 teachers working 10–11 years at school. This indicates the fact that more advanced teachers are more aware of their reflections, and perhaps they understand the notion of "reflective practitioners" or "reflectioners" (the author's coinage) better.

A large number of respondents (35) stated that they would take part in a reflective skills training course, however, many of them (24) would not enrol in this type of course. Analysing the teachers who did not declare themselves reflective practitioners 15 out of 26 did not show any interest in training their reflective skills; 9 teachers considered it possible and only 2 admitted their desire to participate in the course without hesitation.

#### **2.2.5. Reflection on the questionnaire**

An additional aim of the questionnaire was to induce the teachers to "reflect on their reflection". Twenty three teachers did not react to this aim at all, however, 27 of them expressed their reflection in some form or another. Some positive reactions were: "Such a questionnaire can make a teacher reflect", "Perhaps I will start to think more about what I do in the class", "I feel embarrassed, I've realised my lack of auto-reflection, I must do it more frequently". "It's an important topic. I think I should write down my reflections more often". "The researcher pointed at one of the most significant aspect of teacher work".

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

1. Experience is a source of teacher learning and contributes highly to the development of teachers' knowledge of teaching. Experience itself, however, is of little value if it is not analysed and reflected. There is a need for reflective practical experience, so that reflection becomes an inseparable part of teaching.

2. Reflection makes one understand what teaching is and leads to the improvement of one's teaching skills.

3. Reflection on teaching helps teachers become autonomous. Conducting self-observation, self-evaluation and auto-reflection enables teachers to become reflective practitioners.

4. Reflective practitioners are able to take full responsibility for both teaching and learning in the class. They are the teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

5. According to the research, many teachers (72%) feel a strong need to reflect on their teaching and declare that they actually reflect (95%). What is more, it seems that more advanced teachers constantly reflect on teaching and less experienced teachers are almost equally willing to reflect.

6. Teachers conduct their reflection mainly in thoughts (85%), although a considerable group of them (50%) admit to take notes while reflecting. Oral reflection, especially in a form of a conversation with other teachers, is equally popular (82%).

7. Teachers' reflection seems to take place immediately. Many teachers (63%) reflect after classes the same day or even after each lesson (33%). The reflection tend to be conducted on-action, not in-action.

8. What teachers reflect on is mainly the techniques and methods of teaching. Younger teachers seem to think frequently about discipline problems while older teachers reflect more on the teaching objectives.

9. Teachers find reflecting beneficial for the quality of their teaching, especially planning lessons, selecting materials and teaching techniques as well as solving discipline problems.

10. Half of the teachers declare themselves reflective practitioners. These are mainly senior teachers (75%) while no more than 50% of young teachers admit it. This might be evidence that one needs time and experience to become a reflective practitioner. Many teachers (52%) are eager to train their reflective skills.

### 4. SUMMARY

Doing a job involves facing a number of external expectations, and presumably if the expectations do not become internal as well, the job will not be sufficiently fruitful. Accordingly, growing into reflective practitioners

should not remain an external expectation, it ought to come from within as only through reflecting upon what teachers do or do not do in a class can they grow into real professionals. The unification of teachers' willingness to reflect and the external expectations seems achievable.

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