# Farrell, Thomas S. C. (2015). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice.* London, New York: Bloomsbury.

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## ABSTRACT

EN This book presents a combination of practical suggestions, the latest research findings, and an abundance of case studies concerning reflective language teaching. Moreover, each of the 14 chapters in the volume develops and discusses various aspects of reflective language teaching, providing a well-rounded and comprehensive view of the topic. The first seven chapters illustrate what reflective language teaching entails by means of a number of useful techniques that can be profitably adopted to enhance an individual teacher's self-awareness and to improve his or her teaching practice. The remaining chapters discuss reflective language teaching as an effective tool that can be adopted at an institution-wide level in an effort to guarantee overall improvement in teaching practices, which include monitoring one's teaching style, sharing ideas on critical classroom events and issues, being informed about the latest teaching techniques, and overcoming a sense of isolation.

**Key words:** REFLECTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING, SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING, TEACHER DEVELOPMENT GROUPS.

ES El libro presenta una combinación de sugerencias prácticas junto con los últimos resultados de investigación y una gran cantidad de estudios de caso referentes al enfoque reflexivo en la enseñanza de lenguas. De esta forma, cada uno de los 14 capítulos que componen el volumen desarrolla y analiza diversos aspectos de la enseñanza reflexiva en el aula de idiomas proporcionando una visión integra y comprensiva del tema. Los primeros siete capítulos describen las implicaciones del enfoque reflexivo en la enseñanza de lenguas mediante la presentación de una serie de técnicas que el profesor puede rentabilizar para mejorar su autoconciencia y su práctica docente. Los capítulos restantes se dedican a debatir la enseñanza reflexiva de idiomas como una herramienta eficaz para ser utilizada de forma colaborativa con el fin de garantizar una mejora general de las prácticas docentes. Tales mejoras afectarían, entre otros aspectos, el seguimiento del estilo de enseñanza, el intercambio de ideas sobre los sucesos que acontecen en el aula, la puesta al día en las últimas técnicas docentes y la superación de cualquier sentimiento de aislamiento.

**Palabras clave:** ENFOQUE REFLEXIVO EN LA ENSEÑANZA DE LENGUAS, ENSEÑANZA DE SEGUNDAS LENGUAS, GRUPOS DE TRABAJO PARA EL DESARROLLO DOCENTE.

IT Il libro presenta una combinazione di suggerimenti pratici, gli ultimi risultati nell'ambito della ricerca e molti casi studio che riguardano la didattica linguistica riflessiva. Ciascuno dei 14 capitoli che compongono il volume sviluppa e discute i vari aspetti della didattica linguistica riflessiva e fornisce una visione completa del tema. I primi sette capitoli descrivono ciò che la didattica linguistica riflessiva comporta, con la presentazione di numerose tecniche utili, che possono essere vantaggiosamente adottate per aumentare l'autocoscienza di un singolo insegnante e per migliorare la propria pratica di insegnamento. I restanti capitoli discutono la didattica linguistica riflessiva presentandola come un valido strumento che può essere utilizzato in collaborazione con altri docenti per garantire un miglioramento generale delle pratiche d'insegnamento. Tale miglioramento includerebbe, tra i vari aspetti, il monitoraggio dello stile d'insegnamento, la condivisione di idee su episodi critici e problematiche nella classe, l'essere aggiornati sulle ultime tecniche d'insegnamento e il superamento del senso di isolamento.

**Parole chiave**: DIDATTICA LINGUISTICA RIFLESSIVA, INSEGNAMENTO DELLA SECONDA LINGUA, GRUPPI DI AGGIORNAMENTO DOCENTI.

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## 1. Introductory remarks

Like most areas of work involving a decidedly pragmatic outlook and the communication of practical knowledge (e.g., healthcare and business), the field of education—and language teaching, in particular—must remain informed/aware of new methodologies and practices. Language teaching skills cannot be acquired once and for all, but are part of a life-long learning process. Moreover, an important part of language teachers' knowledge and on-going education should consist in reflecting on their language teaching.

Farrell's volume, *Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice*, deals effectively with reflective language teaching as a vital practice. First published in 2007 by Continuum and, subsequently, in 2008 by Bloomsbury, it appeared in an electronic version in 2015. In 2011, Farrell published (with Cambridge University Press) another text, *Practice Teaching: A Reflective Approach,* which developed various aspects and implications of reflective teaching. The present book proves to be yet another noteworthy and valuable tool for both language teachers and language teacher trainers. In particular, the book's manual-like style and user-friendly presentation make this text a helpful resource for language teachers from different educational and cultural backgrounds, ranging from mother-tongue teachers and experts in applied linguistics, to non-native teachers, to TESOL students and trainers, and graduate students in applied linguistics.

## 2. Content and chapter organization

Each of the 14 chapters contained in the book adheres to the same pattern: an introductory section is followed by a presentation of the relevant research and literature, a case study, and a subsection entitled "From research to practice," which provides suggestions for teachers based on the research findings. The text then offers a reflection section, a conclusion, and a concise chapter scenario, in which a further case study is presented and discussed. An additional reflection section follows with questions and main points for the reader to consider. In this way, the text provides a well-rounded picture of reflective teaching, considering research data and offering practical suggestions intended to promote reflective teaching as a habitual and fruitful practice.

Each chapter is devoted to a specific aspect of reflective language teaching and training. In Chapter 1, Farrell offers a concise yet thorough introduction to reflective language teaching. Certainly, there are various definitions of reflective teaching, "however, most of the definitions can be contained within two main stances to reflective teaching, one that emphasizes reflection only on classroom action, while the other also includes reflections on matters outside the classroom" (p. 3). In adopting the first stance, it is up to the teacher to reflect on occurrences in the classroom in light of class dynamics, and to change a given situation in order to attain a desired goal. In taking up the second stance, it is important for teachers to consider the broader community and the cultural context surrounding the school in which they teach. Reflection on teaching can be carried out on three levels: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. The first two levels reflect the two previously mentioned stances. In particular, reflection-in-action occurs in the classroom whenever a problem arises that requires immediate action or on-the-spot experimentation on the part of the teacher. An experienced teacher may be more likely than a novice to use his or her experience to solve problems while in class. Reflection-on-action entails reflection outside of the classroom though the retrospective analysis of events that occurred during the lesson. Lastly, reflection-for-action is "proactive in nature" in that it occurs after the first two phases of reflection, with the teacher deciding what action to take in the classroom.

Chapter 2 addresses a crucial step in reflective teaching, namely, self-reflection. Farrell notes that successful and constructive reflective teaching must begin with a thorough process of self-reflection: the discovery and understanding of who instructors are, what their experiences as teachers have been so far, where they would like to go professionally, and what their priorities are, together with their feelings about teaching, and the rapport and connections they have with colleagues. A useful tool in this initial step of self-reflection is the creation of a teaching portfolio, which records instructors' teaching experiences and accomplishments, including critical periods and "incidents," as Farrell calls them, and the ways in which they were managed. A teaching portfolio favors self-assessment and development and promotes collaboration with colleagues. It provides a sense of empowerment and progress, reinforcing self-awareness, self-esteem, and motivation.

Chapter 3 addresses teachers' beliefs, in other words, those convictions and assumptions about students and classrooms that teachers inevitably develop after many years of activity. These beliefs, which

are also linked to teachers' past experience as language students, tend to influence teaching methods and practical choices. Reflecting on beliefs can help instructors to enhance motivation and coherence in their teaching, while reducing discrepancies between their beliefs and classroom practice.

In Chapter 4, instructors' reflection is transferred to the classroom. Difficult and critical incidents inevitably occur in class, involving both students' and/or teachers' practices. For example, a student may be totally demotivated and may not contribute to classwork, and/or the teacher may feel uncertain as to when a grammar topic should be introduced in a lesson and how. Through teachers' narrative reflection, these incidents can be closely examined and resolved, and teachers can then "consolidate their theoretical understanding of their practices" (p. 53), leading to the adoption of alternative teaching methods and outlooks.

Chapter 5 addresses the crucial need for instructors to be proficient in the language of instruction. This topic should not be taken for granted, as language proficiency is undoubtedly the main requirement for a language teacher—in addition to teaching methodologies, best class management practices, and adequate teaching materials—since it can heavily influence all the other aspects of instruction. While Farrell emphasizes that language proficiency is a must, especially for non-native teachers, he adds that native teachers should also keep their linguistic competence up-to-date and review grammar rules. Undoubtedly, inadequate language proficiency may result in a lack of creativity in class activities and in an over-reliance on the textbook.

Chapter 6, "Metaphors and Maxims," is based on the assumption that, after years of experience, teachers usually develop ideas and mental models concerning their role and that of their students. These perceptions of some aspect of a teacher's world can take the form of images, metaphors, and maxims. According to Farrell, "many teachers may not be aware of the impact these images have on their current teaching practices, because they are held tacitly" (p. 67). Instructors can fruitfully reflect on and improve their teaching practices by probing their personal metaphors and maxims. Teachers should ask themselves such questions as: What is the image I hold of myself as a teacher and of the students? Is the teacher a competitor, a nurturer or an entertainer in my mind? Should language students be self-motivated and self-directed or in need of constant guidance? How much does student accuracy matter in the language classroom? After thoughtful consideration of their metaphors and maxims, teachers can then decide to modify them to match their current teaching practices.

Chapter 7 represents an important shift in the book. From chapters 1 to 6, reflection on teaching is mainly dealt with at the personal level, whereas in the rest of the book it is discussed in the context of external elements, such as the classroom, colleagues, and teaching development groups. Chapter 7 discusses classroom communication, considering the established, highly regulated communication patterns that teachers tend to follow, largely unconsciously, to communicate messages about language rules and use. Most of the time, teachers correct students, evaluate their production, give instructions, provide feedback, and ask questions. However, they also communicate who they are as teachers. Farrell makes a relevant distinction between two distinct talk modes: *exploratory talk* and *draft talk*. By adopting exploratory talk, teachers are hesitant to provide a definite answer on a given topic, thus leaving more room for discussion and students' participation. In contrast, teachers tend to affirm their authority as experts on the topic at hand through final draft talk. By means of careful reflection on these two modes of talk, teachers could choose that which best suits a particular group of students.

Chapter 8 tackles action research, which involves observation in the classroom by other teachers and/or by means of information collected on teaching (i.e., via interviews with teachers and students, questionnaires, or the video-recording of an entire lesson). Such observation is intended to promote reflection on one's teaching practices. The notable advantage of action research is that it can lead to practical results and improvements in teaching and class management, as teachers can implement changes and make adjustments both in their own techniques and in the way in which students participate in classwork.

In order to document their teaching results, it is highly advisable for instructors to keep a teaching journal. As suggested in Chapter 9, "teaching journals provide teachers which a written record of various aspects of their practice such as classroom events and enable them to step back for a moment to reflect on their work" (p. 108). Apart from reflecting on one's own practice, writing a teaching journal provides an opportunity to collaborate with other teachers by sharing ideas and providing feedback to address problems and difficulties.

Chapter 10 presents a further tool for the discussion of classroom practices: teacher development groups. Such a group need not be large, and can include both teachers and other members of the school, or

"even teachers from different schools" (p. 121). Working together with other teachers promotes empowerment and confidence while at the same time providing invaluable opportunities and outcomes that teachers could not achieve by working alone.

In Chapter 11, both self and peer classroom observations are discussed. As a premise, it is useful to remark that, "because classes are such busy places, with many things happening at the same time, much of what is really happening in that classroom for the most part actually remains largely unknown to the teacher" (p. 133). Thus, peer classroom observation could help teachers to get an overall picture of what is going on in class and change less successful teaching practices; for example, teachers could decide to favor learners' autonomy by adopting a more indirect teaching style. Moreover, classroom observation should not be viewed as an evaluation tool; rather, it should be considered an instrument for professional development, which helps teachers to consider what works and what does not for a given class.

The notion of classroom observation is further developed in Chapter 12, which deals with critical friendships. Establishing critical friendships with colleagues helps teachers monitor each other's work in the classroom, obtain advice, and engage in peer coaching. It goes without saying that such friendships should be based on mutual trust and a collaborative attitude—which usually develops naturally once a teacher is already accustomed to reflecting on his or her teaching—and also require time to evolve. Critical friendships enhance teamwork while helping to reduce the sense of isolation that teachers often feel.

Chapter 13 introduces the notion of *concept mapping*, which can be used by both teachers and students as a tool to reflect on teaching and learning. Originating in the field of cognitive psychology, concept mapping involves the graphic representation and hierarchical ordering of concepts and the links that can exist between them. Drawing a concept map before and after a course could effectively convey a picture of the learning process and facilitate the assessment of students' acquisition of new knowledge.

The last chapter (14), "Professional Development Through Reflective Language Teaching," adopts a practical outlook as it discusses "how second language teachers engage in self-renewal and professional development through reflective language teaching" (p. 175). Traditionally, refresher courses for language teachers were taught by external experts, thus following a top-down approach. While they undoubtedly provide sound teaching theories and effective tips, the information presented in such courses may not reflect a teacher's actual classroom situation. To counteract this drawback, reflection on one's specific instructional environment could produce relevant solutions and fruitful knowledge. Since, generally speaking, teachers are the best judges when it comes to establishing what they need to improve and adjust, a bottom-up approach seems to best promote reflections on language teaching. Teachers could organize themselves in small groups and reflect on crucial issues concerning their teaching practices (e.g., encouraging students to speak in the language of instruction in the classroom, rather than in their native language). Bottom-up professional development combined with self-reflection enable teachers to develop a better understanding of instruction in general, evaluate their professional growth, become proactive at decision-making in the classroom, and build more confidence.

## 3. Conclusion

Thanks to its manual-like organization, Farrell's book serves as a convenient reference for teachers, allowing them to consult those topics they most need in connection with their work. Although the volume presents both research and practical examples, the practical outlook of the book predominates. However, those who wish to further investigate the field of reflective language teaching may access the comprehensive bibliography in each chapter and at the end of the volume.

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