

Doing reflective practice: a data-led way forward

Steve Walsh and Steve Mann

AQ2

This article makes the case for an approach to reflective practice (RP) that is both evidence-based and data-led. We argue that, while RP within the field of TESOL enjoys a relatively high level of acceptance and status (perhaps even an orthodoxy), it has little corresponding knowledge base that demonstrates how RP 'gets done'. We propose a need for more concrete descriptions of RP in order for teachers and teacher educators to fully engage with its possibilities and in order to establish a knowledge base for promoting and supporting research by and for practitioners. In this article, we focus on the approaches that might be adopted to promote data-led and evidence-based reflection. Such a data-led approach would encourage the use of professional data, alongside appropriate tools (presented below) as a means of aiding and promoting practitioner reflection. In the first part of the article, we briefly outline what we consider to be some of the main challenges facing RP; in the second, we put forward a number of tools and procedures for enhancing RP and making it collaborative, data-led, and evidence-based.

Reflective practice: current challenges

The many differing (and even conflicting) perspectives on what reflection actually means make it difficult for researchers and practitioners to operationalize it in any meaningful way. While reflective practice (RP) occupies a high level of acceptance in the field and is generally well-regarded, what it actually is and how it might be developed are more problematic. We are also conscious of the need to avoid some of the more 'instrumental' interpretations of reflection in which institutional constraints may actually hinder RPs and obstruct teacher learning and professional development (see, for example, [Gray and Block 2012](#)). Much of what we say in this article chimes with one of the key thinkers in this area, [Dewey \(1933\)](#), who emphasized reflection as the 'sole method of escape from the purely impulsive or purely routine action' (*ibid.*: 15). Two aspects of Dewey's early work are particularly relevant to this article: first, its emphasis on serious, active, and persistent engagement with a doubt or puzzle and second, the need for hypothesis testing and a systematic, structured approach, a feature that lies at the heart of the discussion that follows.

For the purposes of this article, we adopt the definition of reflection put forward by [Boud, Keogh, and Walker \(1985\)](#): 3):

[reflection is] a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation.

The choice of this definition supports the main argument of this article, that is the need for further development and emphasis of more concrete, evidence-based, and data-led approaches to reflection. Before considering what these approaches might look like in practice, we offer a brief outline of some of the main challenges facing RP.

Few professionals in the field of TESOL would dispute the value and importance of RP. [Grayling \(2003: 179\)](#) argues the ‘the habit of reflection and questioning’ is central to education itself. The challenge, in our view, is that there is a need to ensure that the current status of RP is supported by detailed, systematic, and data-led description of both its nature and value, accompanied by appropriate tools that practitioners might use to generate and analyse data. We believe that there is a need for more emphasis on:

- data in helping to make RP more concrete so that we can see how reflection ‘gets done’ in practice;
- reflective tools that produce data that might act as evidence for practitioner reflection.

This central challenge can be broken down into four issues that need to be addressed, namely, that RP is:

- insufficiently data-led;
- heavily focused on the individual at the expense of collaborative options;
- dominated by written forms of reflection;
- lacking in detail about the nature and purposes of reflective tools.

Summarizing some of the key points made in [Mann and Walsh \(2013\)](#), each of these issues is now described briefly before we turn to a consideration of a possible way forward.

RP is insufficiently data-led

Most current accounts of RP consist of models, checklists, and series of questions to be used as prompts, yet very few accounts have examples of reflection. Where data are included, they are usually self-reports or short extracts from reflective journals. We are especially concerned about the lack of data featuring spoken reflective processes; [Farrell’s \(2007\)](#) book, for example, includes a chapter on collaborative teacher development but does not include data extracts. What is needed, we suggest, are more ‘insider accounts’ that provide up-close and detailed views of reflection. These accounts will help provide insights, especially for novice practitioners, into the different ways in which reflection might influence classroom practices. Data extracts might include transcripts of spoken reflections or self-report accounts based on reflective diaries, as well as reflexive practitioner commentaries on both the nature of the reflective process and its value and impact. We also think there is an important role for qualitative interviews in helping practitioners to voice the importance of RP. While acknowledging that some of these practices already exist, we would like to make the case for strengthening a data-led approach to

reflection, whereby examples of RP and perhaps corresponding changes to practice are based on actual evidence.

RP focuses on the individual

RP is often presented as an individual process that does not attach importance to collaboration. This helps perpetuate the suspicion of individual narcissism and introspection that RP suffers from. Many models and accounts of reflection (see, for example, [Brockbank and McGill 2007](#)) concentrate on reflection as an individual rather than collaborative process, which may underestimate the value of learning from ‘others’ experiences’ as well as from our own. The kind of post-lesson group feedback session typical of many initial teacher education programmes is one example of learning from others that has clear benefits to the group as a whole. In fact, collaborating and learning from others is very much in line with Dewey’s original formulation of reflection, which highlighted cooperation and dialogue. Later in the article, we provide several examples of how a more collaborative, dialogic approach to reflection might be organized through the use of stimulated recall procedures, video interaction and guidance, and peer observation of teaching.

RP is dominated by written forms of reflection

While recognizing the value and importance of the broad context of individual written reflective texts, we have serious concerns about the dominance of written forms of reflection (such as diaries, reflective journals, etc.). Firstly, for many practitioners, reflection is an institutional requirement, something that they have to do in order to complete a teacher training course, for example, or to ‘pass’ an assignment (see [McCabe, Walsh, Wideman, and Winter 2009](#)), and this can lead to problems of ‘faking it’ ([Hobbs 2007](#)). In other words, practitioners quickly learn what supervisors/tutors want them to write. Secondly, reflection often involves some kind of checklist or box-ticking exercise. The problem with this practice is that the focus of attention becomes task completion; practitioners become so concerned with completing the task that they fail to adequately capture their own reflections, resulting in boxes being ticked but also producing an inauthentic kind of reflection. Worse, if checklists and pro formas are used repeatedly, reflection becomes even more ‘mechanical’ and ‘recipe-following’. What is needed, then, is a range of tools that are graded according to a teacher’s stage of development and that engage practitioners in deeper reflections culminating in professional growth.

RP lacks appropriate tools

There remain issues with the nature and timing of reflective tools used. First of all, there is the ‘one-size-fits-all’ problem, where the tool is not sufficiently orientated to particular contextual needs. Trainee teachers need to be introduced to reflective tasks gradually and over time. We are not suggesting that this is easy, but as teacher educators we need to be reflective about this process. There are several potential pitfalls; for example, if tasks

- are too complicated, they stifle budding reflection. The focus of attention is on completing the task rather than reflecting on practice;
- become an ‘increasing chore’ and there is a lack of variety, the reflective task becomes an institutionalized requirement that only encourages superficial engagement or inauthentic reflection;

- have a lack of progression (a design problem), they do not promote growth;
- are too problem-orientated (continually asking the individual to identify a ‘problem’ in their teaching), the outcomes will be both limiting and depressing.

The remainder of the article is a response to these issues. To summarize our discussion so far, we have proposed that a more data-led approach to reflection will allow practitioners to find their own level and focus. We have also suggested that a focus on puzzles or interesting issues (rather than problems) is one way of avoiding the association of ‘problem’ with ‘incompetence’. This refocusing on puzzles or issues facilitates a reflective process that emphasizes understanding better, rather than performing well (Allwright 2003). An overly evaluative culture around reflection focuses attention on what is good and bad (a dichotomous view of things) and ignores the more interesting grey areas.

RP: a possible way forward

In this section, we propose a more empirical, data-led, and linguistic description of the nature of RP, presented in three parts:

- 1 data-led RP
- 2 dialogic RP
- 3 appropriate tools for RP.

Data-led RP

Given the complexity of teaching, it is, we suggest, difficult to reflect without some kind of evidence. Data are key forms of evidence and evidence-based decision making lies at the heart of good practice in any organization. If we accept that data are central to reflection, the question then becomes ‘Whose data?’. We could take the position that any form of data can be helpful in providing opportunities for reflection. However, our argument is that a teacher’s own data are a particularly rich resource since teachers are more engaged when they use data from their own context and experience.

Of course, the collection and analysis of data are often associated with ‘research’ and the publication of large-scale public or generalizable findings. However, the kind of research we are describing here differs from ‘big R’ research, as it is small-scale, localized, context-specific, and private and conducted by teachers for their own ends. Any form of data can be useful (for example narrative accounts, critical incidents), but we are making a particular argument for the value of recorded data and transcripts of these recordings for use and analysis by practitioners.

We would emphasize at this point that this kind of data-led reflection is just as important for teacher trainers as it is for novice teachers. Indeed, a teacher educator who practises what he or she preaches is more likely to show commitment to, and therefore promote, RP.

For example, Extract 1(a) is taken from a pre-sessional English course at a UK university. The teacher is eliciting responses about school memories from a group of eight adult intermediate learners. (Both Extracts 1(a) and 1(b) are taken from Walsh 2006; see Appendix for transcription conventions.)

Extract 1(a) (T = teacher; S1 = student)

- 1 T what was the funniest thing that happened to you at school (1) Tang?
- 2 S1 funniest thing?
- 3 T the funniest
- 4 S1 the funniest thing I think out of school was go to picnic
- 5 T go on a picnic? So what happened what made it funny?
- 6 S1 go to picnic we made playing or talking with the teacher more closely because in the school we
- 7 have a line you know he the teacher and me the student=
- 8 T =so you say there was a gap or a wall between the teacher and the students so when you=
- 9 S1 if you go out of the school you went together with more (gestures 'closer' with hands)=
- 10 T =so you had a closer relationship [outside the school]
- 11 S1 [yeah yeah]

In Extract 1(a), we see a fairly typical IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) exchange structure, where the teacher (T) elicits and responds to contributions made by one of his students (S1). What is perhaps less typical is the way in which the teacher feeds back on each response. Rather than following the 'standard practice' of error correction, this teacher ignores errors, choosing instead to reformulate the student's responses, recasting each one in a more appropriate and more accurate form (lines 5, 8, and 10). In addition, the teacher co-constructs meaning with S1 by clarifying and checking that his understanding is correct (lines 5, 8, and 10).

Reflecting on this extract in a conversation with a colleague, the teacher subsequently discusses the importance of 'shaping' a learner's contribution and of the need for scaffolding and seeking clarification so that other members of the class understand what is being said. His reflective comments can be found in Extract 1(b):

Extract 1(b)

Basically he's explaining that on a picnic there wasn't this gap that there is in a classroom—psychological gap—that's what I'm drawing out of him. There's a lot of scaffolding being done by me in this monitoring, besides it being managerial, there's a lot of scaffolding because I want to get it flowing, I want to encourage them, keep it moving as it were. I'm clarifying to the class what he's saying because I know in an extended turn—a broken turn—and it's not exactly fluent and it's not articulate—I try to re-interpret for the benefit of the class so that they're all coming with me at the same time and they all understand the point being made by him.

The teacher's commentary indicates that the process of shaping a learner's contribution is quite deliberate in order to both encourage the learner and to ensure that his contribution is understood by the rest of the class. The comments also highlight the value of scaffolding and clarification; rather than occupying the learner's interactional space and using his own words, the teacher supports and facilitates each contribution. Arguably, this reflection shows a high level of awareness of the importance of feedback and of the need for co-construction in classroom interaction. Both in his classroom practices and reflective comments, this teacher demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the value of clarifying and scaffolding in open class work.

From this, the value and relevance of data-led RP is self-evident: they help teachers to focus on issues or puzzles in their own classrooms and are desirable from the position of both professional development and learning. Improvement in awareness and teaching performance can be facilitated by the collection and analysis of a small amount of data. Here, 'data' are things like: recordings of a teaching session, a set of test results, feedback from a colleague who has observed a teaching session, a conversation with a group of students, minute papers,¹ and so on. In short, collecting data means collecting evidence, which will help a teacher address a particular issue.

Dialogic RP

This section combines two of our central concerns: that RP is typically conducted in a written form and that it is often an individual enterprise. Our argument is that we should be embracing a dialogic/collaborative view of reflection that allows potentially richer articulation and analysis (see also McCabe *et al.* op.cit.). Developing experiential knowledge is best supported by collaborative discussion where thoughts and ideas about classroom practice are first articulated and then reformulated in a progression towards enhanced understanding. In this approach, reflection on practice does not occur in isolation, but in discussion with another practitioner. An example of such a process would be cooperative development, which involves a 'Speaker' and an 'Understander' and where the goal is for the Understander to reflect back to the Speaker what they consider to be the main issues. The advantage of this approach is that the Speaker gets a chance to listen to and adjust their comments based on the feedback they receive from the Understander (see [Edge 2002](#)).

Extract 2 exemplifies how dialogue might enhance reflection. Two teachers (T1 and T2) on an in-service teacher education programme are discussing their use of 'teacher echo' (repetitions) in an ESL context involving a group of multilingual adult learners (Walsh op.cit.). Both teachers had agreed on this focus, and then individually made a short (15 minute) video recording of their teaching. The next step was to watch both recordings together and use this as a basis for discussion, part of that is shown below.

Extract 2 (T1 = first teacher; T2 = second teacher)

T1 I was struck by how much echoing I did before and sometimes there was a justification for it ... but a LOT of the time ... it was

just echo for the sake of echo so I was fairly consciously trying NOT to echo this time.

T2 And what effect did that (**reduced echo**) have on the interaction patterns or the involvement of learners in the class, did it have any effect that you noticed?

T1 I think that it made them more confident perhaps in giving me words because it was only going to come back to them if the pronunciation WASn't right rather than just getting ((t)) straight back to them. When you're eliciting vocabulary if they're coming out with the vocabulary and it's adequate and it's clear, there's no need for you to echo it back to the other students ... you're wasting a lot of time by echoing stuff back.

Here we see very clearly the value of dialogue in promoting closer understandings. T1 is reflecting on her use of 'echo', the repetition of student contributions, a common feature of classroom discourse. Her realization that echo can become a kind of habit ('echo for the sake of echo') is probed by T2 who asks about the effect of echo on learner involvement. T1's response is pertinent: she says that reduced echo makes learners more confident and that a lot of echo is unnecessary. Arguably, this realization may not have occurred without an opportunity to discuss echo and reflect on its effects. T2's contribution allows her to think about her language use and give reasons, possibly for the first time. It is this kind of 'light bulb moment' that professional dialogue can create. Through talk, new realizations and greater insights come about and get their first airing. A dialogic approach to RP addresses the need for more spoken forms of reflection and for a collaborative, rather than individual, approach.

Appropriate tools for RP

One of the challenges facing RP at present is a lack of appropriate tools that foster reflection in a systematic, structured, and graded manner. While Extracts 1 and 2 (above) exemplify the kinds of tools we are advocating (for example the use of teachers' own transcripts and the use of video recordings), in this section, we present two further examples of tools that teachers might use to facilitate a process of RP and make it more data-led.

***Ad hoc* self-observation**

The earlier sections of this article argued against the wholesale adoption of frameworks or models for RP. Rather than using such generic frameworks, we would advocate the use of *ad hoc* instruments, designed for specific tasks in specific contexts (cf. [Wallace 1998](#)). Such an approach permits up-close self-observation and allows for the emergence of a detailed understanding of professional practice, without the need for a transcription or recording.

One example of such an instrument was devised by [Walsh \(2006\)](#). The Self Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) framework was designed in collaboration with a group of university TESOL teachers and used to help teachers gain closer understandings of the complex relationship

between language, interaction, and learning. Essentially, it is an adaptable instrument comprising four micro-contexts (called modes: managerial, classroom context, materials and skills, and systems) and 14 interactional features (such as clarification request, display question, teacher echo). By recording their classes and then completing the SETT grid, teachers establish a ‘snapshot’ of their verbal behaviour while teaching.

In Extract 3 below, the teacher, Joy, has analysed her teaching using the SETT framework and is talking about her evaluation with a colleague, Mike (pseudonyms are used throughout). The focus of the reflection is scaffolding.

Extract 3

Mike Is scaffolding something you think you do more of in that type of mode for example you’re in a skills and systems mode here. Do you think it’s something that happens more in some modes than others or is it maybe too difficult to say at this stage?

Joy My first feeling would be yes because it’s so focused on language that anything they give me that might not be correct and not clear then I’m going to re-formulate it or anything they don’t understand I’m going to give them a lot of examples so that’s all scaffolding isn’t it?

This is perhaps the first time that Joy has had an opportunity to reflect on her use of scaffolding. Her comments indicate that she is trying to both understand for herself and explain to Mike how scaffolding occurs in practice (‘I’m going to re-formulate it [...] I’m going to give them a lot of examples so that’s all scaffolding isn’t it?’). Joy explains that scaffolding occurs more in skills and systems mode because this is the mode where the main focus is the language itself (‘it’s so focused on language’). Mike plays a key role in this extract in helping Joy to clarify her own reflections, understand when a particular practice occurs, and explain why.

Here, the teacher is reflecting *through* dialogue, based on an earlier analysis of her own interactions with students. We suggest that this is a far more effective means of promoting RP than simply asking people to reflect on their practice. Not only are teachers able to discuss particular aspects of their teaching, but they are also able to give reasons for a particular strategy and make observations about its appropriacy at a given moment.

Stimulated recall

One of the most powerful means of promoting RP is for teachers to make a video recording of their teaching and then discuss it with a critical friend or colleague. This procedure, known as stimulated recall (see, for example, [Lyle 2003](#)), has the immediate advantage of allowing both parties to watch something and comment on it together. It is an excellent means of raising awareness about specific features of a teacher’s professional practice.

In its purest form, it is used to encourage practitioners to recall specific incidents and comment on them, but it can also be used as a stimulus to provide ‘talking points’ and promote discussion.

In Extract 4 below, the teacher, Mary, is explaining how she clarified a piece of vocabulary that had been elicited. (Note that the classroom interaction is presented on the left, the teacher's commentary on the right.)

Extract 4 (M = Mary/teacher; L1 = learner)

The teacher is eliciting vocab items and collecting them on the board. Learner 1 is trying to explain a word.

- | | | | |
|---|----|--|---|
| 1 | L1 | discographics= | <i>I was going to say it's a false friend but I decided not to because I thought that might confuse her ...</i> |
| 2 | M | =ooh what do you mean? | <i>maybe I misunderstood her now when I look back at it ... I understood at the time that she meant that this was a particular industry but maybe she meant a business ... but I wasn't prepared to spend a long time on that because it didn't seem important even though there was still a doubt in my mind ...</i> |
| 3 | L1 | the people who not the people the (4)
the business about music record series and= | <i>at it ... I understood at the time that she meant that this was a particular industry but maybe she meant a business ... but I wasn't prepared to spend a long time on that because it didn't seem important even though there was still a doubt in my mind ...</i> |
| 4 | M | =is this a word you're thinking of in Basque or Spanish in English I don't know this word 'disco-graphics' what I would say is er (writes on board) like you said 'the music business'=
=the music business? what is the name of of er industry?=
=the music industry as well it's actually better | <i>at it ... I understood at the time that she meant that this was a particular industry but maybe she meant a business ... but I wasn't prepared to spend a long time on that because it didn't seem important even though there was still a doubt in my mind ...</i> |
| 5 | L1 | =the music business? what is the name of of er industry?=
=the music industry as well it's actually better | <i>at it ... I understood at the time that she meant that this was a particular industry but maybe she meant a business ... but I wasn't prepared to spend a long time on that because it didn't seem important even though there was still a doubt in my mind ...</i> |
| 6 | M | =the music industry as well it's actually better | <i>at it ... I understood at the time that she meant that this was a particular industry but maybe she meant a business ... but I wasn't prepared to spend a long time on that because it didn't seem important even though there was still a doubt in my mind ...</i> |

Mary's self-reflections and insights offer a detailed analysis of a repair strategy that may have backfired and caused more confusion. She is able to rationalize the whole process and take stock of the different courses of action taken and alternatives rejected ('I was going to say it's a false friend but I decided not to because I thought that might confuse her'). Mary is also able to accept that she may have understood L1's explanation and that she possibly could have allowed more time. By her own admission, and as evidenced in line 5, there was some uncertainty about the outcome of this repair being successfully achieved. There is doubt both in Mary's comments ('there was still a doubt in my mind ...'), and in the questions asked by L1 ('the music business? what is the name of ... industry?').

It is clear, from this extract, that stimulated recall is a particularly useful data-led reflective tool, offering as it does an opportunity for teachers to use data to inform their reflections and then engage in dialogue to fine-tune their thinking. Even without the transcripts, much can be learnt by participants and it is a methodology that brings together very nicely the various elements that, we have argued, are necessary for RP to work effectively: tools, data, and dialogue. Stimulated recall is relatively easy to organize, inexpensive, and unobtrusive, and has considerable potential for influencing professional development.

Conclusion

In this article, we have outlined some of the challenges facing RP and proposed a number of ways in which RP might be reconfigured to make

it more evidence-based, data-led, and practitioner-focused. Our main argument is that RP should be rebalanced away from practices that are written, individual, and that highlight assessment towards processes that are data-led, collaborative, dialogic, and that use appropriate tools.

A more data-led treatment of RP will help in achieving greater understanding of professional practice, especially if the data involve those doing the reflecting. This might help avoid the situation prevailing on many teacher education programmes, where reflection is left to the individual who lacks clarity about what reflection might actually 'look like'. In avoiding vague understandings for RP, we need to design teacher education materials that integrate data-led examples of RP so that choices, decisions, puzzles, incidents, and scenarios are foregrounded. This not only gives a more concrete idea of what reflection looks like, but it encourages a view that teachers are always engaged in a process of becoming a better teacher.

One element of a move towards data-led RP is the need for appropriate reflective tools. The two examples featured above (*ad hoc* self-observation and stimulated recall) are not presented here as uniquely reflective. We consider there to be range of other viable reflective tools (for example critical incidents, use of portfolios, cooperative development, narrative inquiry, staffroom talk, and critical friendships). The point we seek to make is that we need more data-led accounts of both reflection and any interaction involved, and also the outcomes and value of these tools. One of the challenges facing both teacher educators and practitioners is to identify, formulate, and share tools that promote dialogic, engaged, and evidence-based practice.

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Note

1 'Minute papers' are short written evaluations by students of a teacher's teaching. They are quick to complete (hence 'minute' paper) and give useful feedback on specific teaching sessions.

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The authors

Steve Walsh is Professor and Head of Applied Linguistics in the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University, UK. He has been involved in ELT for more than 30 years in a range of overseas contexts.

His research interests include classroom discourse, teacher development, and second language teacher education.

Email: steve.walsh@ncl.ac.uk

Steve Mann is Associate Professor at the Centre for Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. He is Director of MA ELT programmes and has experience in Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe in both English language teaching and teacher development. Steve supervises a research group of PhD students who are investigating teacher's education and development. The group's work considers aspects of teacher development, reflective practice, and teacher beliefs.

Email: steve.mann@warwick.ac.uk

AQ3

Appendix

Transcription conventions

T:	teacher
S:	student (not identified)
S1:, S2:, etc.	identified student
LL:	several students at once or the whole class
/ok/ok/ok/	overlapping or simultaneous utterances by more than one student
[do you understand?]	
[I see]	overlap between teacher and student
=	turn continues, or one turn follows another without any pause (latching)
(.)	pause of one second or less
(4)	silence; length given in seconds
((4))	a stretch of unintelligible speech with the length given in seconds
::	A colon after a vowel or a word is used to show that the sound is extended. The number of colons shows the length of the extension
(hm, hh)	These are onomatopoeic representations of the audible exhalation of air

- .hh This indicates an audible inhalation of air, for example, as a gasp. The more h's, the longer the in-breath
- ? A question mark indicates that there is slightly rising intonation
- . A period indicates that there is slightly falling intonation
- , A comma indicates a continuation of tone
- A dash indicates an abrupt cut-off, where the speaker stopped speaking suddenly