REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

"*I Ever Eat At Zizzi: The Importance Of Speaking Popperly*": A Reflection On Beliefs And Actual Classroom Practice

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss a critical reflection on the extent to which two of our beliefs in English language teaching and learning aligned with the actual classroom situation. These beliefs are (a) relevance and practical use, and (b) active learning. We draw from Farrell's (2007, 2018) reflection-*as*-action approach to reflective inquiry, which considers not only the teaching situation but also the beliefs a teacher holds in teaching and learning. Through analysing the lesson, we reflected that the material and lesson were relevant and of practical use. However, we were not as effective in creating an active learning environment for participants to engage in active and meaningful use of the language. We conclude our reflection by underscoring Shulman's (2005) point about the ability to make judgments in managing uncertainties as a crucial aspect of professionalism and the importance of being reflective even during the lesson, termed by Schon (1983) as reflection-*in*-action.

BACKGROUND

The inaugural *Learning on NUS Campus* was organised on 28 September 2018. Mooted by Senior Deputy President and Provost Professor Ho Teck Hua and led by Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education) Associate Professor Chng Huang Hoon, the concept was to have a day for colleagues to showcase a range of knowledge and teaching expertise as well as a day for the NUS community to learn from one another in a fun and accessible manner (H.H. Chng, email communication, July 3, 2018). The intended participants were diverse, comprising everyone in the NUS community—administrative staff, faculty members, and students, although the intended participants were primarily faculty members.

Learning on NUS Campus resonates with teaching or learning festivals that have been organised in a number of universities such as the University of Adelaide, Curtin University, Vanderbilt University, University of Alberta, and University of Edinburgh. The primary objective of these festivals is to celebrate excellent teaching, and specifically to showcase excellent teachers in action. Most of these festivals span across two to five days, with a variety of formats (such as short talks, hackathons, experiential learning 'clinics', *PechaKuchas*, workshops), using a strand- or theme-based approach. In these sessions, the (technical or expert) content is conveyed in an accessible manner for educated participants from diverse backgrounds.

For *Learning on NUS Campus*, we offered a 30-minute lesson focusing on the learning of an aspect of the English language. Specifically, we shared with participants expressions that are commonly used in informal contexts, especially in Singapore, but are considered inappropriate when used in formal contexts.

Unlike the usual undergraduate or graduate classroom setting, the teaching and learning environment was one comprising participants from diverse backgrounds and with different expectations. In this reflection, we discuss our experience in two parts—our approach to this reflective exercise, and our reflection on balancing between didactic and dialogic teaching in a learning environment unfamiliar to us.

APPROACH TO REFLECTIVE INQUIRY

A scholarly teacher must constantly question and reflect on his/her own teaching practices (Farrell, 2007, 2018; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). This process should begin with a teacher's introspection of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1986) in closing the gap between relevance and disciplinary in engaging learners (Hyland, 2017).

In fact, reflecting has been commonly practised among teachers, whether it is publicly shared or kept as a private or individual enterprise. Farrell (2007, 2018), one of the strongest advocates of reflective inquiry in language education, categorises reflective practice into four types.

The first type is what he terms as the Deweyian reflection-*on*-action (Dewey, 1933 as cited in Farrell, 2007, 2018). Such reflections are retrospective and usually on practices that are routine. The focus is on problem solving, in which cognitive processes are engaged.

Building on Dewey's definition, Schon proposes reflection-*in*-action (1983 as cited in Farrell, 2007, 2018). Schon is interested in capturing non-routine occurrences that happen in a routine teaching and learning setting. An example is a teacher's spontaneous reaction to an unexpected or challenging question posed or comment made in the class. Other incidents could be a debate that touches on culturally sensitive issues. In such instances, response or reaction from the teacher depends largely on the teacher's experience as well as on the situation. Schon opines that, in most cases, experienced teachers are more adept than novice teachers in managing situations. Reflection, for Schon, happens during the incident.

The third type is reflection-*for*-action (Killon & Todnew, 1991 as cited in Farrell, 2007), which Killon and Todnew argue is a metacognitive process to reflection. The outcome of the reflective exercise provides a guide for future actions, which they believe is a proactive approach.

A fourth type of reflective inquiry proposed by Farrell (2018), reflection-*as*-action, is a holistic approach which involves not only teaching situations but also the teacher. Farrell's critique of the three types of reflection mentioned earlier is that the teaching situation usually foregrounds the

reflective inquiry. While the problem or context is important, Farrell argues that reflective inquiry must also consider who the teacher is as a person and his⁄her beliefs about teaching and learning. In short, Farrell posits that

> "(r)eflective practice means that teachers must subject their own beliefs of teaching and learning to critical examination, by articulating these beliefs and comparing these beliefs to their actual classroom practices to see if there are any contradictions between practice and underlying beliefs." (Farrell, 2007, p. 9)

Farrell further challenges teachers to question embedded assumptions at each level of reflective practice. This concept of interrogating beliefs about teaching and learning has been similarly articulated by Shulman (1986), and Shulman and Shulman (2004) who encourage teachers to test and reflect on their beliefs about how they teach based on different types of knowledge. For Shulman, "reflection and analysis are as essential for the scholarship of teaching as for any other kind of scholarly work." (Shulman, 2000, p. 99)

Following this line of thought, we approach this reflective exercise through an examination of our beliefs about language teaching and learning (that is, what Farrell refers to as the teacher); and we do a self-assessment of the extent to which our actual classroom practices (that is, what Farrell means by teaching situation) are a manifestation of our beliefs.

OUR BELIEF AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE 1—
RELEVANT AND OF PRACTICAL USE

Consistent research (Bloom, 1956 as cited in Forehand, 2010; Lea *et al.*, 2003) shows that deep learning is more likely to occur when the learning content has relevance to students, and students have opportunities to apply their understanding of the taught knowledge⁄skills. In other words, seeing the connection between what is learned in class and how knowledge can be applied beyond the lesson is one way for students to be interested and engaged in learning. Hyland (2017), in sharing the recent curricular change in Hong Kong and how it has impacted the teaching and learning of English, argues for disciplinary specificity within the context of English language learning in addressing relevance. Citing findings of studies conducted by Kember, Ho, and Hong (2008), Malcolm (2013), and Woodrow (2013), Hyland affirms that specificity would narrow the gap between teacher expectations and student motivation. It would further enable students to build competencies expected of them in order to be part of the disciplinary community.

This resonates with what Shulman (1986) posits, namely that the effectiveness of teaching in achieving the intended learning outcomes depends to a large extent on a teacher's pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). PCK is defined as a teacher's ability to convey a subject matter in a way that is comprehensible to the learners, which include analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations.

Cognizant of the relationship between relevance and disciplinary content in engaging learners (Hyland, 2017) and considering the diverse participants that we had, for our 30-minute lesson, we intentionally chose to highlight the use of "ever", "got", and tag questions "is it?" and "can". As these expressions are commonly misused in the Singapore context, they should be of close relevance to the participants. The objective of the lesson was to highlight to participants why the misused expressions were grammatically incorrect. We were mindful of setting the materials at a level suited for participants who might be competent users of the language but might have limited knowledge of the linguistic features we discussed. Therefore, although the expressions that we covered were ones that were commonly used in Singapore, we did not expect the participants to have the language or linguistic knowledge to explain the appropriate and inappropriate use of the common local colloquial usage of "ever" (e.g. "I ever eat at Zizzi"), "got" (e.g. "NUS got many hills"), and final sentence tags such as "Is it / can" (e.g. "I very tired can.").

In engaging the participants to relate to how they used the expressions in formal and informal contexts, we got them to answer a scenario-based pre-lesson quiz. This was followed by an explanation and illustration of the forms and functions of these linguistic features. Before the lesson ended with another scenario-based post-lesson quiz, we showed Straits Times cartoonist Chee Chew's illustration on the local use of English (see Figure 1), linguist Dr Gwee Li Sui's (Tedx Singapore, 2015), and comedian Hossan Leong's (Today Online, 2016) perspectives on the use of expressions in different contexts. The intent was to get participants to discuss their responses to these perspectives.

Figure 1. Use of English in different contexts.

On reflection, what we did in the lesson was consistent with Shulman's (1986) assertion that the subject matter must first be made comprehensible and explicit. At the same time, the participants were engaged to think about how they would use the features *versus* how these features should be used in formal and informal contexts, so that they could see how the "taught" knowledge was relevant and of practical use to them.

OUR BELIEF AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE 2—
ACTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

As language and communication teachers, our classroom practice is grounded in principles underpinning English language teaching and learning. It therefore follows that our practices should be a representation of these theories. Additionally, as teachers, it is critical to arouse students' interest and motivate them to learn the language by providing not only the fundamental rules and forms of English, but also practical usage in diverse written and oral communication situations. It is equally important to ensure that lessons are designed in a way that students can clearly see how individual concepts are interrelated as they learn and how such concepts are used in real life. As Shulman (1986) notes, teaching is only effective when content knowledge is taught in a way that learners can comprehend.

Interpreting this in the context of language learning in an active-learning classroom environment, our belief is that students are more likely to engage in learning when materials specifically target an approximate level of their competency and are challenging enough for them to increase their competency. This corresponds with the constructivist view of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). We also believe in ensuring a supportive, student-centred classroom (Roman, 2015). A teacher in a student-centred classroom must be able to scaffold materials, provide a balance between actual teaching, and give students opportunities to practise so that input is noticed (Schmidt, 1990) and comprehensible (Krashen, 1991). There should also be a continuous dialogue between teacher and students and students-students (Roman, 2015). Pérez-Sabater *et al*.'s (2011) study shows students who experienced the active teaching-learning approach had greater success in improving and retaining linguistic competence than those who were exposed to the passive teaching-learning approach. Students in the active teaching-learning approach would be in a learning environment where they feel challenged yet with necessary support and confidence to move beyond the current state. Students in an active-learning environment would, for example, be constantly engaged in a dialogue throughout the lesson.

To maintain a balance between frontal didactic teaching and opportunity for practice and interaction, we had intended the lesson to start with a pre-lesson quiz based on a scenario with an inappropriately used expression. This would then be followed by explanations on the respective grammar points and finally checking of students' understanding. Ideally, in our 30-minute lesson, we intended to spend at the most 30% to 40% of the time on frontal teaching, and at least 60% to 70% on allowing participants time to interact and practise.

Despite this purposeful intention, the actual classroom reflected an approximately 70% frontal teaching and only about 30% for participants to do a quiz and discuss a prompt given to them. On reflection, we attributed this to our oversight in reacting to this timely and appropriately during the lesson itself. This exemplifies Schon's assertion of the importance of reflection-*in*-action. The result of conducting too much 'frontal teaching' was that we were not able to ascertain whether the participants were able to understand the concepts in the pre- and post-lesson quizzes. Also, the participants were not able to gauge how much they learned, and we were not able to gauge for ourselves how much of what we shared was 'comprehensible' to the participants, not to mention how much the participants would be able to apply and transfer the skills to other contexts in this short learning session. Therefore, the lesson did not proceed as planned, it was not reflective of our beliefs in teaching, and it was not delivered in a manner that fostered dialogue or active learning, as we had envisaged.

In summary, the manifestation of our first belief of relevance and of practical use was successful to a certain extent as the participants could relate to the expressions. However, there was so much content that we overloaded our participants with too much information, and there was opportunity lost for some learning moments that could have been captured and further explored. This seems to be the opposite of a "teach less learn more" model and a mis-alignment with our belief to provide an active learning environment. There was little or no opportunity for the participants to practise, check their understanding, and apply the content shared during and after the presentation.

CONCLUSION

This reflection-*as*-action exercise (Farrell, 2018) has helped us recognise that while we might have made every effort in our preparation to ensure a lesson that is reflective of our beliefs, unwittingly, the actual lesson might not work out as intended, as reflected in our session at *Learning on NUS Campus*. Also, for a session such as this where repeats are unlikely, it probably calls for us to have heightened awareness of the situation during the lesson so that we would be able to respond promptly and appropriately, reflection-*in*-action as posited by Schon (1983 as cited in Farrell, 2007, 2018).

In addition, as teachers, we need to reconcile this in light of what Shulman argues—managing uncertainties, both students and teachers, "models one of the most crucial aspects of professionalism, namely, the ability to make judgments under uncertainty." (Shulman, 2005, p. 57).

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