

REFLECTIONS

Are You One of Me? Reflection and Perspective of a Mid-Career Novice Teacher

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After working for 13 years in the corporate sector, exacerbated by the seemingly endless pandemic lockdown, I decided to change how I want to live my life. This decision included a change in career as I realized the importance of living to the fullest with what I had. The pandemic lockdown made me realize that perhaps I had been living the way that my prescribed societal norms expected me to be, instead of what I wanted to be. From a risk-averse person who values stability and security in life, I crossed over to the other end of the spectrum where I set foot in Japan to pursue a Master's degree in TESOL and began my study and living abroad journey as a novice university teacher of English in Japan. I felt that I needed to widen my life perspective and, having studied Japanese for many years in my home country where the language is hardly used or spoken, I felt it was high time to conquer a to-do item that has been on my mind for the longest time.

However, I was not prepared to completely discard the working experiences I had painstakingly accumulated in the corporate sector and believed these experiences could be put into good use in academia. After all, the purpose of education is to seek knowledge and skills so as to gain footing in society and earn a living. As a mid-career novice teacher, I feel I have life skills advantages when compared to other novice teachers in two ways. First, I am already seasoned to handle dynamic or unexpected situations in the corporate world, hence, I believed I could better manage any difficult classroom situations. Second, I could

bring insights and impart soft skills such as effective email and report writing as well as presentation and negotiation skills to my students. As such, I launched myself enthusiastically as I began my first semester of teaching. However, two weeks into the semester, I felt disheartened, frustrated, torn, and crippled. The feeling as I walked out from most of my classes was just one word: messy. At the end of the semester, all I felt was that I had only pretended to teach!

Through this article, I am reaching out to young novice teachers as well as mid-career novice teachers to share how reflective practice has helped me to learn and teach better. More importantly, I discovered some quick solutions that are useful to reduce unnecessary distress and anxiety. Nothing is wasted if we choose to reflect upon the good, the bad and take actions to teach better in the future.

Purpose of the Article

I have two purposes in mind. First, I hope to encourage novice teachers to practice reflective teaching. Novice teachers like myself will, without fail, feel that they have taught terribly in their first semester of teaching. But embrace yourself in critical reflection. Do not spiral down into self-doubt or putting blame on the environment. Professional training does not end once we have obtained our teaching qualification. Actively reflecting on our experiences of teaching is a valuable source of knowledge which we can readily tap into in order to grow professionally. Such knowledge comes from having actual interactions with our

students (people), being in classrooms (physical setting), and working under specific contexts (such as prescribed teaching resources and institutional policies) which are great *teachers* for teachers.

Second, I hope by sharing my struggles with other mid-career novice teachers, we can support one another and be assured that we are normal beings. While we do not belong to the majority in this profession, we exist and face similar but slightly different dilemmas and challenges. I hope that more of our voices can be heard where we share useful coping mechanisms and develop ourselves more efficiently in this new career path we have chosen.

Reflective Practice as Language Teachers

As novice teachers, we tend to focus on applying and reflecting the pedagogical knowledge and skills that work or do not work for our students. Consequently, we often neglect another important aspect of the reflection which is our emotions. A senior teacher once said to me (paraphrased), "If a teacher is emotionally unwell, the consequences could be far greater than a poor lesson plan." In other words, a teacher could potentially say or do something in class that causes irrevocable damage to student learning. Reflective practice is about understanding and reflecting on both the cognitive and affective aspects of teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2011). In addition, Farrell's perspective of viewing reflective practice as a way of life (2013) is what resonates deeply in me. Teaching is a people profession. We are bound to meet different kinds of students and together, we create unique learning environments. To teach effectively, the fastest way is to review and improve our teaching.

Reflective practice can be done during teaching (reflection-in-action) or after teaching (reflection-on-action) (Schön, 1983). For most teachers, especially for novice teachers like me, reflection-on-action tends to be more natural and easier as classroom management often takes up our energy

substantially, leaving us little cognitive capacity to reflect while executing our lesson plans. Reflection-on-action could also remove any strong emotions that we might have during or right after class which could be biased in nature.

My reflections on my first semester of teaching were mainly based on reflection-on-action, and they resulted in the following three key takeaways.

Learn to abandon your plan

As a mid-career novice teacher, I was eager to impart my corporate knowledge and skills to my students. I decided to set aside six lessons, dedicated to teach life skills such as improving communication skills and problem solving. I adopted a life skill framework backed by research, customised the lesson plans based on the English proficiency of my students, and created visuals to scaffold the activity instructions. I also did L1 translation for one of the tasks which were self-assessment questionnaires. I thought I was all ready.

Unexpectedly, after conducting two life skills lessons with three different classes, I decided to abandon my plan. The lesson plans consisted of an overview on the purpose and benefits of learning life skills. Students were then asked to complete self-assessment questionnaires on their speaking and listening skills in general which were adapted from The Universal Framework (Skills Builder Partnership, n.d.). The main activity was for students to work in pairs where they would describe a picture orally without using gestures to their partners, who would try to reproduce the picture in exact accordance. As a round-up activity, students were to reflect on the difficulties of describing the picture (speaking) and listening to their partners to reproduce the picture as they switched roles. Most students struggled to describe the picture as they lacked the vocabulary as well as the familiarity of describing shapes, lines, and directions even though the necessary

vocabulary was provided as part of the scaffolding.

The decision to abandon was painful but necessary. First, I began to realise that some parts of the life skill framework were not relevant to Japan. For example, Japanese rarely interrupt their interlocutors in discussions and conversations as part of their cultural norms. As such, raising such an awareness to the students was irrelevant within the context of a Japanese setting. Second, students were not ready for critical thinking, especially when such reflection was made in L2 which meant more scaffolding was required before the students could work on the main activity.

In summary, the class time needed to teach life skills was way beyond my expectations and students did not achieve the intended learning goals. I needed to re-examine the life skills syllabus to find the right balance to match the readiness and context of my students.

Your words can be powerful

During my practice teaching, one of the comments that my cooperating teacher said was that I once said, '*Do you understand me?*', to my students. Upon reflection, the question was not said out of anger, but, to some extent, the frustration I had for not getting any response from my students. I needed cues to assess if my students understood me or needed more scaffolding. However, my cooperating teacher highlighted that the question might sound daunting to the students, especially to Japanese who uphold a strong culture of being implicit when responding or making requests to others. Putting a direct request to students to respond is also likely to be fruitless as students would just nod their heads.

Learning does not stick in the head unless repetition is made. In one of my classes, I did it again, asking the students, '*Do you understand me?*', only to realise during reflection-in-action what I had said.

Perhaps, this was the only time where I could do reflection-in-action because there was already some awareness of the issue. Although this time, even though the question was asked without anger or frustration, the outcome was the same. Some students appeared 'paralysed' while most simply nodded their heads. In the end, none of the students performed the task correctly. In the corporate world or while having conversations with highly proficient English speakers, asking, '*Do you understand me?*' would be almost harmless even though the tone and context with which the question is said does matter. However, given the power relationship between teacher and students, novice teachers, especially mid-career novice teachers, have to be mindful with the words we choose and the cultural context we are working under. Certain phrases may turn out to be powerful swords that can move us away from our goals and even hurt the teacher-student relationship we have painstakingly built up along the way. Instead of asking the students, '*Do you understand me?*', a better approach may be to ask Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs) or instruct students to discuss and check their understanding with one another collectively.

Read extensively

I often find myself feeling stuck in teaching and research. I feel that my repertoire is very limited, yet building up the repertoire is a chicken-and-egg problem. A teacher needs to first gain opportunity to teach in order to gain experiences, yet academic institutions do not hire teachers with no teaching experience. Even after landing in a teaching job with much effort, a novice teacher often lacks ideas to create activities that expand learning from the textbook; activities that are more authentic, interactive, and engaging. While a quick solution may be to talk to fellow colleagues or senior teachers, I personally find this approach not readily accessible as everyone is busy and I often experience the lurking

fear from others that their ideas may get stolen. To make the situation worse, I was assigned to take over another teacher's classes in my first semester of teaching which meant that the challenge to break the ice and create a (new) learning momentum was harder.

Eventually, I realised the way around was to read extensively. I began to read language teaching and research journals that cover various topics and different continents. I also made a point to read self-development books to improve general skills such as speed reading and improve my memory skills. I learnt to let go of my ego that I have in order to start afresh as a young teacher even though I am much older than most of my colleagues. My conclusion as to why I often feel stuck is that I have not read enough. When I read more, ideas begin to sprout, and I begin to find myself busy organizing ideas to make them work for my context – which is a happy problem. When reading extensively, it is important to check and ensure that the resources are well-accredited, and always be critical in assessing the suitability of the approaches to your current teaching context.

Conclusion

“Knowledge alone does not produce wisdom. Transforming knowledge into wisdom requires input from the heart” (Ikeda, n.d.). If we do not reflect on our teaching, our teaching experiences would just be knowledge and not wisdom. By reflecting on the cognitive and affective aspects of my teaching, I transformed my knowledge into wisdom where I no longer feel stuck or frustrated when student learning does not go by plan. I learnt to admit to my failed plans, be more aware of my oral instructions, and to continue my professional development through lifelong learning. The initial phase of teaching is no doubt challenging and what we feel is absolutely normal. Especially for mid-career novice teachers, making a career change is already tough and the path just gets tougher as you learn more about the field and what it takes to excel. However, by focusing on areas where we can receive positive energy and continue to offer our best, our students will definitely be able to feel our sincerity and together, learning happens.

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