Reflective Practice in American and Taiwanese Classrooms

Po-Yi Hung, Chaoyang University of Technology, Taichung, Taiwan

Abstract:
Reflective practice is important in both American and Taiwanese education, where the focus has changed from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy. Since the early 20th century, the importance of reflective practice in American education has been the subject of thousands books and articles. In this report, the researcher presents four main categories of reflective practice: (a) reflective practice in the traditions of curriculum and teaching studies, (b) reflective practice in foundational literature on American pragmatism, (c) reflective practice in interpretations of John Dewey’s work, and (d) reflective practice as it can inform EFL teaching in Taiwan.

Key words: reflective practice, learning style

Reflective Practice in the Traditions of Curriculum and Teaching Studies

Many educators have critiqued American education. For example, Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) stated, “Too many children are schooled, not educated, and too many school systems focus on organizational goals, economies, and efficiencies rather than meaningful student learning” (p. 1). Apple (2001) said, “Public institutions such as schools are ‘black holes’ into which money is poured—and then seemingly disappears—but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results” (p. 38).

It is important to understand the problems in American and Taiwanese education. Why do some students fail to achieve in schools? Why has the meaning of student learning been ignored in classrooms? Why have schools taken better care of organizational goals and economics than of student learning? Could reflective practice help alleviate these problems?

In fact, the current problems in American education are fairly similar to those in Taiwanese education. Because of exam-centered teaching, Taiwanese teachers and students must concentrate on exam preparation for the students to achieve high scores. The traditions of curriculum in American education have demonstrated the same problem. Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) pointed out that the mainstream curriculum philosophy (MCP) is predetermined skill-based and content-based subject learning. The reliance of MCP is placed on standardized tests, and learning obedience to authority is important. In this context, teachers in mainstream curriculum could not teach differently and creatively even if they wanted to do so (i.e., different approaches, materials, or evaluations) because they must focus on students’ scores on the tests, complete official paperwork, and follow traditional rules. Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) noted that some teachers in mainstream curriculum might always follow the rules: “Do not argue; obey. Do not try to understand; believe. Do not rebel; adjust. Do not stand out; belong” (p. 23).
Many educators face this situation, and it is particularly problematic for enthusiastic teachers who dream of helping every single student. Many educators have noted these problems in American education and tried to change the situation. Dewey pointed out that reflective practice might be useful for teachers to help students achieve, and many scholars have advocated this approach. Dewey (1910) promoted the importance of reflective reaching in his book *How We Think*, organizing his thoughts around the concept of reflective action. He said, “Teachers reflect because they face a surprise, problem, dilemma, or puzzle that calls into question something they thought they already knew”. At the same time, he also argued that when teachers reflect on their work, they should carefully consider the beliefs that underlie their practices as well as the results of their instructional efforts. Dewey called reflection the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). Once educators want to become reflective practitioners, they must seriously consider how to take responsibility for educating students. The goal of reflective practice is to help students achieve, and this should be the purpose of education.

Donahue (2004) supported Dewey’s idea: “When you [teachers] reflect on your own teaching, ask whether the thinking you call reflection is active, persistent, and careful”. He said educators should challenge their core beliefs and question what they know; they should examine the assumptions on which their beliefs rest, and educators should be willing to change those beliefs and the teaching practices if those assumptions turn out to be unwarranted. He said that when educators are open to such questions and change in their practice, then their thinking can be called reflection. This point of view reminds teachers to be open-minded and student-oriented in their teaching. They should not teach like “teaching robots,” following the teacher’s guide and rules and caring little about students’ reactions; instead, the most important thing in that teaching should involve reflection upon students’ learning.

In addition, Zeichner and Liston (1996) identified five traditions of reflection: (a) academic, (b) social efficiency, (c) developmentalist, (d) social reconstructionist, and (e) generic—each with a different purpose and focus. The academic tradition emphasizes the teacher’s thinking about the subject matter and is concerned with student learning. According to many scholars, this point is the most important of all. The social efficiency tradition stresses reflection on the extent to which one’s teaching aligns with research findings and the ways in which those findings can be put to use in the classroom. The developmentalist tradition focuses on teachers’ reflection on students’ thinking and understanding. The social reconstructionist tradition assumes teaching is a political act, and reflection focuses on social conditions and teaching as a political act aimed toward creating a more just society. Unlike these other traditions, the generic tradition, the most recent one to emerge, argues for the benefits of teacher reflection without specific concern for the topic of teachers’ reflection.

**Reflective Practice in Teaching Studies**

Florez (2001) listed the following steps as integral to the reflective process in the adult ESL setting: (a) collect descriptive data, (b) analyze data, (c) consider how the situation or activity could have been different, and (d) create a plan that incorporates new insights.

Collect descriptive data. Florez (2001) proposed that the first step in teaching should be the collection of descriptive data. She said, “Reflective practitioners need detail and breadth of perspective as they gather information on what is happening in
the classroom. They can achieve this through the data-collection tools they select” (p. 145). She believed collecting descriptive data to be the fundamental step in reflective teaching. Teachers can observe students’ learning, interactive reactions in class, and exam scores to understand the students’ achievement in class. Brookfield (1995) suggested using four possible “lenses” to create a balanced picture of practice: (a) practitioners’ own writings about their experiences as learners and teachers (autobiographies), (b) learners’ eyes, (c) colleagues’ eyes and experiences, and (d) existing theoretical literature (p. 29). These four perspectives could make teachers powerful in their teaching and also contribute to student learning in the classroom.

**Analyze data.** “After data have been collected, the data can be analyzed in terms of the attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, goals, power relations, and consequences that they reveal” (Florez, 2001, p. 148). After they collect their data, teachers might ask several questions: What happened that was unexpected or surprising? What theories about teaching or personal experiences with learning are revealed in the data? How do these theories relate to the practitioner’s stated beliefs and attitudes? What relationships are revealed among the participants? What are the consequences of the practitioner’s actions? (Crandall, 2000; Gebhard, 1996; Stanley, 1998).

Consider how the situation or activity could have been different. Whenever looking at the data, whether in the moment or in retrospect, practitioners need to examine alternatives to the choices they have made as well as the beliefs behind them (Stanley, 1998). Considering how other practitioners address similar situations, generating alternatives and asking “what if?” questions push practitioners to broaden their reflection beyond the data they have collected (Gebhard, 1996).

**Create a plan that incorporates new insights.** Because reflection is conducted not for its own sake but to improve instructional practice, practitioners must link information and insights gained from the reflective process to changes they make in the classroom (Farrell, 1998). The changes need not be massive—small changes can have large impacts on teaching and learning (Gebhard, 1996). The important thing is that practitioners incorporate their new insights into their ongoing planning and decision making, observe the impact, and continue the reflective cycle.

Obviously, Florez pointed out some good points of reflective teaching. It appears that teachers could easily become reflective practitioners by following these four steps; however, some researchers have noted the lack of clarity in the definition of the reflective practitioner. Donahue (2004) said, “As you read the literature on learning to teach, you will find widespread support for the notion of teacher reflection. You will also find that educators mean different things when they refer to reflection”. He said the collection of definitions can seem confusing and even contradictory. Some teachers conceive reflection as any thinking by a teacher, arguing that since it is impossible to teach without thinking, it is impossible to be an unreflective teacher. Some teachers equate reflection with research, whether positivist research, university-based investigations, or teacher-action research. No matter what reflective practice means to teachers, it could be that if students can learn what they want, achieve their goals, be happy to be in class, and interact well in the classroom, then these teachers deserve to be called reflective practitioners. Reflective practice should focus on student performance, and teachers should be facilitators in students’ learning.

Many scholars have emphasized the importance of reflective teaching. Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) said, “Reflective teaching is a major focus of curriculum work in both schools and colleges of education. It is an umbrella term, covering related ideas such as thoughtful instruction, teacher research, teacher
narrative, and teacher empowerment” (p. 38). Donahue (2004) said, “Reflection changes the nature of relationships between teachers and students. In reflective teachers’ classrooms, students are not the only ones gaining knowledge. Instead, students and teachers together create new knowledge about what, how, and why students learn…Reflection allows teachers to become theory builders”.

Moll and Greenberg (1990) described reflective learning as a “fund of knowledge” in which no one member of a community knows everything; each member [teacher or student] needs what others know, and each member contributes to the development of others’ new knowledge. In the reflective learning environment, teachers should create an open environment for each member to learn. Teachers are not the leaders in classrooms but the helpers and good friends of students.

Donahue (2004) said:
Although reflection is important to sustaining thoughtful teachers, it is no panacea. For reflection to nurture the intellectual side of teaching, foster a sense of democracy in the classroom, and provide a sense of hope, teachers’ inquiry must be based on important questions, questions where knowing the answer would make a real difference in what, how, or why you teach.

He pointed out that teachers should be very careful in teaching and designing the questions that they would teach in the class. The best questions focus on student learning, not teaching practice. For example, “How do students learn to pronounce new English words?” is a better question than “How I should teach students to pass the vocabulary test?” Student-oriented questions could focus on students’ learning, and teachers could also discover the best teaching theory for students at different levels to meet their needs. Donahue (2004) said:

As you [teachers] formulate your questions to focus on specific students and their thinking, learning, experiences, and beliefs, you will find yourself moving from a teacher-centered way of thinking about a classroom to a student-centered one. Reflective teachers think critically about pedagogy, subject matter, and the needs and backgrounds of all students.

Accordingly, they choose appropriate content and adapt their teaching approaches as needed, while maintaining high standards. Successful teachers are committed students of the disciplines they teach. They remain current with professional ideas and use these to guide instructional decisions and are constantly assessing their instructional effectiveness.

**Reflective Practice in the Foundational Literature on American Pragmatism**

Since the 1930s, reflective practice has been influenced by various philosophical and pedagogical theories. Four main theories have affected American education. One influence is constructivism, in which learning is viewed as an active process wherein learners reflect on their current and past knowledge and experiences to generate new ideas. A humanistic element of reflective practice is its concern with personal growth and its goal of liberation from values that can limit growth (Kullman, 1998). Critical pedagogy, espousing the examination of underlying power bases and struggles, and American pragmatism, emphasizing active implementation, testing, and refining of ideas through experience, have also shaped the concepts of reflective practice, particularly in the United States (Brookfield, 1995). Pragmatism, however, has been the most influential philosophy in American education.

What defines the notion of American pragmatism? Menand said:
If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, they [the pragmatists] had with one another, we can say what [they] had in common was
not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves... They [the pragmatists] believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals—that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and irreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability.

The notion of reflective practice is, therefore, based on the fundamental of American pragmatism because the ideas of pragmatism are to be discovered and social. I think teachers, as reflective practitioners, should find out how to teach well from students’ reflections and communicate with them in the classroom. From the view of American pragmatism, teachers might recognize the importance of student-teacher interaction and collaboration in the classrooms; this notion is very different from the traditional teacher-centered theory.

Pragmatism, a philosophical movement, was developed in the United States and holds that both the meaning and the truth of any idea are functions of its practical outcome. Fundamental to pragmatism is a strong anti-absolutism: the conviction that all principles are to be regarded as working hypotheses rather than as metaphysically binding axioms. A modern expression of empiricism, pragmatism was highly influential in America in the first quarter of the 20th century. Pragmatism has tended to criticize traditional philosophical outlooks in the light of scientific and social developments. Three philosophers in particular have always been considered icons of early American pragmatism, namely, C. S. Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), and John Dewey (1869-1952).

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)

Considered the founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce developed it as a theory of meaning in the 1870s, holding that an intrinsic connection exists between meaning and action—that the meaning of an idea is to be found in its “conceivable sensible effects” and that humans generate belief through their “habits of action.” In a paper entitled “How to Make Your Ideas Clear,” contributed to the Popular Science Monthly in 1878, Peirce first used the word pragmatism to designate “a principle put forward by him as a rule for guiding the scientist and the mathematician.” Peirce considered pragmatism to be a method of clarifying conceptions. The basic principle is that the meaning of ideas is best discovered by putting them to an experimental test and then observing the consequences.

William James (1842-1910)

William James gave a further direction to pragmatism, developing it as a theory of truth. True ideas, according to James, are useful “leading”; they lead through experience in ways that provide consistency, orderliness, and predictability. James is generally considered not only the most influential of all American philosophers but the very representative of American thought.

In his famous work The Principles of Psychology (1890), James developed the view, in opposition to the more traditional associationism, that consciousness functions in an active, purposeful way to relate and organize thoughts, giving them a stream like continuity. This may have been the beginning of the reflective practice. In the history of psychology, James’ theory of mind is called functionalism. He
elaborated his theory of pragmatism in works such as Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking (1907) and The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism (1909). He considered pragmatism to be both a method for analyzing philosophic problems and a theory of truth. Therefore, he developed the notion of truth as a “leading” that is useful: it can change as human experience changes. He appears to have believed that if teachers would change from the traditional teacher-centered approach to a reflective student-centered approach, then students might learn more and better. He tried to explain that tradition does not always represent the truth, and that people should experience more to find out the best way to live.

James believed that knowledge is an instrument existing for the sake of life, existing as practical utility; true ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. “Truth is, therefore, useful because it is true; it is true because it is useful.” James’ empiricism opposes classical rationalism and traditional empiricism. He denied that whatever is rational is real. This could be very useful for addressing the notion of reflective practice. On the one hand, because of changes in society, teachers should not necessarily believe that the traditional approach is suitable for teaching their students today. Although it might have worked in the past and it seems rational to follow traditions to teach, the traditional approach might be inappropriate. Students need to do more than simply earn higher grades on exams, and teachers should try using various teaching approaches to meet different students’ needs. On the other hand, teachers should not fully trust scores to represent student achievement. The emphasis in traditional education has been placed on the importance of scores in students’ learning; however, students should be taught that they are active interpretive agents, not obedient followers of authority (Palmer, 1998). Independent critical thinking is much more important than achieving high scores on exams, and students and teachers should realize that different students have talents in different fields.

John Dewey (1859-1952)

John Dewey is the most distinguished representative of modern American pragmatism. Contributing two additional factors to pragmatism—the psychological and the logical—Dewey strongly emphasized the social aspects of his philosophy. Throughout his long life, he not only applied his experimental methods to social philosophy but also actively participated in disputes and struggles of political, social, and cultural relevance. Political, social, cultural, and theoretical motives enhanced Dewey’s interest in education. He recognized the importance of education in the survival of democracy and the importance of democratic thought and action in the improvement of education.

After World War I, pragmatism grew into a social philosophy. Pragmatists have since applied their doctrine to every phase of social theory. Dewey equated theory and living, applying his philosophy to economic, political, and pedagogical questions. Reality is declared to be changing, growing, and developing in things. A real philosophy, according to Dewey, must abandon absolute origins and finalities and explore specific values in practical, moral, and social life. He believed “man continues to change his ideas until they work” (Dewey, 1938). I think this view of Dewey is similar to James’ notion of truth.

Dewey’s ideas remain important in American education, bringing increased human interest into school life and work, and encouraging pupil initiative and responsibility.

Peirce, James, and Dewey all argued about the traditional identification of Truth. People tend to believe traditions because they do not want or are afraid to
change. These pragmatists reminded all the educators that change could be good in teaching. In fact, the successful reflective practitioner should always contemplate change, focusing on how to improve and how to enhance their teaching. American pragmatism deeply affected the nature of reflective practice.

**Reflective Practice in Interpretations of John Dewey’s Work**

Dewey maintained that reflection is an important aspect of teaching and learning from experience. He wrote in *Experience and Education* (1938) that reflective thinking leads educators to act in a "deliberate and intentional fashion" rather than in a "blind and impulsive" manner. Dewey emphasized the importance of reflecting on practices and integrating observations into emerging theories of teaching and learning, believing that this helps educators become both the producers and consumers of knowledge about educational practices.

Historically, Dewey (1933), who himself drew on the ideas of many earlier educators, such as Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Solomon, and the Buddha (Houston, 1988), is acknowledged as a key originator in the 20th century of the concept of reflection. Dewey’s theory was actually derived from the ideas of Western and Eastern philosophers. He considered reflection to be a special form of problem solving: thinking to resolve an issue that involved active chaining and a careful ordering of ideas linking each with its predecessors (Adler, 1991; Cutler, Cook & Young, 1989; Calderhead, 1989). His basic ideas indicated that reflection could be seen as an active and deliberative cognitive process, involving sequences of interconnected ideas that take account of underlying beliefs and knowledge. Reflective thinking generally addresses practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity before possible solutions are reached.

Dewey believed in “no such things as pure ideas or pure reason. Every living thought represents a gesture made towards the world, an attitude taken to some practical situation in which we are implicated” (Dewey, 1933). This belief could be why the student-oriented approach might be better for students’ learning: Student-centered theory could completely reflect what students find necessary and difficult in learning. For example, the low learning aspirations of students might reflect teachers’ incapability, impatience, or unwillingness in teaching.

Dewey (1910) identified the reason for reflection in puzzles and predicaments, and those problems became not only the motivation for but also the content of reflection. The problem may be located in a teacher’s current practice, in past experience, or in future concerns. Undoubtedly, reflective practitioners face and struggle with many problems in their teaching, and they must solve those problems from different perspectives. This view of Dewey encourages teachers to do research and find the best solutions by themselves, and training in ways to do so is very useful for reflective practitioners.

Based on Dewey’s ideas, Schon (1983) asserted that all educators engage in a developmental process as “reflective practitioners.” In his book, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*, Schon explained that reflective practitioners use the knowledge they gain through continual inquiry and analysis to refine instruction. He clearly wrote about reflection, which is intimately bound up with action. He stated that professionals should learn to frame and reframe the often complex and ambiguous problems they are facing, test out various interpretations, and then modify their actions as a result.

Dewey’s conception of reflective practice was highly significant in American education. Based on this theory, teachers know how to enhance their teaching,
communicate with pupils, and help students achieve their goals. Dewey encouraged teachers to observe things from different perspectives, not merely to follow traditions. He believed that teachers’ teaching deeply affects student learning, and that teachers should realize they may have to solve many puzzles before they become successful reflective practitioners. Dewey’s theory appears to be quite sound. Being a teacher is difficult, and being a reflective practitioner is even more difficult; however, some strategies could help teachers become involved in reflective practice. Dewey’s reflective practice gave teachers a hint of how to play their roles in classrooms, and this provides a path for teachers to become successful reflective practitioners.

How to Inform Reflective Practice in EFL Teaching in Taiwan

In Taiwan, many scholars have discussed Dewey’s theories—especially reflective practice. Every Taiwanese teacher is taught that “Learning by doing” is Dewey’s main contribution to education. Dewey described the importance of experiences in students’ learning and teachers’ teaching, and this view has deeply affected curriculum reform in Taiwan. In transforming the English curriculum, educators in Taiwan have added activities and discussions to every lesson. These changes indicate that they want students to engage in more than just rote memorization. Obviously, reflective practice has played an important role in English education in recent years. Educators in Taiwan realize that the exam-centered approach in teaching English cannot effectively improve Taiwanese students’ abilities in English, especially their listening and speaking abilities; as a result, they apply the student-centered approach, interactive activities, and subject matter for daily use in current EFL teaching in Taiwan (Wang, 1999).

The notion of reflective practice is both practicable and impracticable in some areas of Taiwan EFL education. Because of cultural differences between American and Taiwanese education, it may not be appropriate for Taiwanese EFL education to copy America’s entire teaching and thinking mode. Instead, Taiwanese teachers should acquire some skills of reflective practice. One particularly useful theory could be that from Florez (2001). She listed four steps of the reflective process: (a) collect descriptive data, (b) analyze data, (c) consider how the situation or activity could have been different, and (d) create a plan that incorporates new insights. Employing this step-by-step approach could allow both experienced and inexperienced Taiwanese teachers to implement reflective teaching easily.

One major academic issue in EFL education in Taiwan is that the students have low proficiency in spoken English. It is likely that reflective practice could be used to improve this situation. Reflective teaching in English classes would allow students more chances to practice speaking English with their classmates and teachers. At the same time, students could also develop their listening, thinking, grammar, and sentence-construction skills in a reflective English-learning environment. It seems evident that English teachers should use reflective practice theory to teach English in listening and communication classes. If speaking and listening are taught reflectively, the relationships between students and teachers may also be strengthened.

However, the theory of reflective teaching may not be applicable to all English classes in Taiwan. In many schools, the classroom culture is still traditional, especially in those located outside urban areas. The traditions of classroom culture in Taiwan dictate that students respect teachers, that teachers know everything, and that teachers cannot be criticized. Although the traditions have been changed to some degree, moving closer to western educational principles, most Taiwanese teachers still
think they should hold the power in the classroom, and they believe the teacher-
centered approach is useful and necessary in English classes (Wang, 1999). In fact,
Taiwanese students, trained to follow every rule from their earliest days in school,
tend to remain quiet. Taiwanese students barely discuss issues with teachers, even if
they do not agree with what the teacher says. Taiwanese students also accept whatever
is printed in a textbook at face value. Because the learning and cognitive styles of
Taiwanese students differ so greatly from those of American students, reflective
practice may not be completely practicable in grammar and reading classes.

It appears that it is still too early to abandon entirely the exam-centered
approach in Taiwan, for teachers have to teach students effectively in a limited time,
especially in grammar and reading classes. Because of time pressure, the
responsibility of teachers is to teach students strategies for choosing the correct
answers in the shortest time. Sometimes teachers simply ask students to memorize
everything without questioning the content. Despite the lack of reflection in exam-
centered teaching, the approach appears to help students to succeed on the National
Joint Entrance Examination (NJEE). Two important components of the English
section of the NJEE are grammar and reading comprehension tests, wherein students
have to answer 60 to 70 questions in 70 minutes. Consequently, the exam-centered
approach to teaching students in grammar and reading classes will remain a necessity
until the approaches to outcome measurement are reformed. Students must memorize
grammar rules and vocabulary to achieve high marks on the rigorous examinations.

Many scholars have suggested that teachers become reflective practitioners in
order to enhance students’ learning; however, it should not be overlooked that
Taiwanese students become reflective practitioners as well. Henderson and
Hawthorne (2000) pointed out the three Ss of learning in progressive education:
subject, self, and social (p. 4). In self-learning, students become cognitively,
emotionally, physically, aesthetically, and spiritually attuned to themselves
(Henderson & Hawthorne). Self-learning could be very important for Taiwanese
students in studying English. Because of the traditional classroom culture, Taiwanese
students are passive in learning English; they do not express their opinions, they do
not question, and they do not argue in class. Consequently, even if teachers want to
create a reflective English-learning environment, sometimes students will not engage.
Instead, Taiwanese students should be active in and passionate about learning
English, and reflective practice is perhaps the best method for students to use in their
English learning. By learning as reflective practitioners, students will think about
what they have learned, what is useful for them, how to apply English in daily life,
and how they can learn effectively while simultaneously preparing for exams and
practicing their conversation skills. It might be difficult to change the tradition in the
beginning, but once students are educated about the notion of reflective practice, they
may change their learning attitudes and cognitive styles in learning English. After
that, the goal of improving Taiwanese students’ English ability will be easier to attain.
Reference:


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Correspondence:
Po-Yi Hung (hung_poyi@cyut.edu.tw)