How effective is collaborative reflective practice in enabling cognitive transformation in English language teachers?

Jovanna Matilde Godínez Martínez

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

How effective is collaborative reflective practice in enabling cognitive transformation in English language teachers?

Jovanna Matilde Godínez Martínez

Applied Linguistics Department, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, Pachuca, Hidalgo, Mexico

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an action research study conducted in 2015 with five in-service English language teachers from an ELT undergraduate programme of a university in the central part of Mexico over a period of 9 weeks by means of two video recorded classroom observations and different spaces for professional dialogue (a focus group, one on one feedback discussions and personal interviews). Overall, the study revealed that teachers have the ability to be critically reflective about their teaching given the appropriate conditions which Reflective Practice (RP) necessitates such as opportunity, time, and assistance from others, often lacking in everyday teaching scenarios, traditional evaluative classroom observations and conventional teacher education programmes. Hence, by challenging the 'status quo' of classroom observations in this context, the RP processes carried out helped teachers understand and reconstruct their teaching knowledge especially in terms of students' responses to their instructional decisions and the impact this had on how their classes unfolded. It promoted an alternative way to fulfil the goal of teacher development, not through a 'transmission' model of education but through a process in which teachers learn and continue to develop their skill in dialogue within a professional community.

Introduction

Nowadays, there is a longstanding recognition in the field of English language education that teachers must continually reshape their knowledge of teaching and learning and therefore engage in continuing *Teacher Development* (TD) – *Teacher Development* in this paper is seen as an inherent personal, conscious, ethical and moral commitment as opposed to a simple technical responsibility (Mann, 2005). Nevertheless, previous studies have advanced that traditional teacher education models fail to acknowledge the backgrounds, beliefs, stances and teacher experiences that practitioners possess, bring to training courses and permeate in their everyday practices (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). Hence, educational philosophies such as Constructivism and the Social Cultural theory emerged as a reaction to traditional teaching-learning paradigms where learning outcomes were the memorization of mass content that had no further application in students' academic or real life and teacher education models viewed

CONTACT Jovanna Matilde Godínez Martínez ✉ jovannamgm@gmail.com 🖵 Applied Linguistics Department, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, Mexico

practitioners as 'empty vessels' who passively assimilated trending teaching methodologies (Dewey, 1933, 1938; Piaget 1972; Bruner 1990; Vygotsky 1987). Opposite of this view, the philosophical and epistemological position of the constructivist and social-constructivist theorists suggested that knowledge was by no means acquired through instruction; both teachers and students brought their prior knowledge and experiences into the new learning situations. Knowledge was therefore socially reconstructed and co-constructed through personal experiences and experiences with others by continuously testing hypothesis, encouraging thoughtful reflection of events, being *critical reflection* a central factor in the teaching and learning process.

For the purposes of this paper I must now make a distinction between the terms *reflection* and *critical reflection* in education. The first is taken as 'looking back into one's teaching and drawing some general conclusions about the classes taught – 'I had a very productive lesson today' or 'This was not one of my best classes' type of comments. As opposed to *critical reflection*, where teachers reflect on their practice as a way to bring themselves to the level of awareness of what they do and the reasons for this' (Gün, 2010, p.127). It is one thing to *reflect* on your practice and simply move on to the next teaching event as opposed to *critically reflect* on your teaching in order to gain awareness and take action in line with those critical thoughts.

Accordingly, educational research approaches adhered to these proposed theories, advancing new concepts and ways to go about teaching and learning as well as teacher development. This study's interest was on one of these emergent concepts also known as Reflective Practice (RP). RP is a trend approach in teacher development and teacher education programmes that takes into account *input* – evidentiary support from teachers' practices – and *collaboration* – collegial support – as fundamental components of its process encouraging teachers to rely on previous knowledge, experiences, beliefs and personal backgrounds to build on and co-construct new understandings with others (Farrell, 2008; Richards & Lockhard, 1994; Wallace, 1998).

As expected, RP has been much employed in ELT research – since the early 1990s; educational scholars whose attention has been on continuous Teacher Development by means of Reflective Practice have aimed to establish a paradigm that looks at English language teachers as being able to analyse, understand and develop their practice after partaking in research; all of this in the efforts of drifting away from top-bottom traditional teacher education models and evaluative teaching scenarios. However, this prevailing theory on RP assumes that development is largely deliberative and linear enabling an automatic and permanent change in teachers to better their practices (Larrive 2008; Louw, Watson, & Jimarkon, 2014; Vieira and Marques 2012; Vo & Nguyen, 2010). More recent empirical studies have opposed this view and advanced that only given the appropriate circumstances can RP be successful in promoting on-going teacher development (Eröz-Tuga, 2013; Farrell, 2001, 2008, 2012; Gün 2010; Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2014). What is more, after having conducted an extensive literature review on the field as well as a RP pilot study, two main issues affecting the intended purposes of RP for language teacher development surfaced and which this action research has aimed to respond to. Before explaining how this research has tried to narrow this gap, it is necessary to first discuss the observed dilemmas.

Background

According to previous empirical studies, it can be stated that the Reflective Practice paradigm for English language teaching was initially established as an interventionist approach to continuous Teacher Development. It aimed for language teachers to intuitively engage in critical rationalizations of their practice and from their reflections make permanent changes or draw implications for their teaching (Gün 2010; Tomlinson 1999). This 'positivist view' strongly implied that *critical reflection* or *reflective inquiry* was a linear process where individuals could clearly come to terms with their teaching on their own. Hence, I found the need to conduct a pilot study in 2014 to try and put into practice this understanding for English language teacher development.

Recalling on the pilot study experience – which made use of three classroom observations and feedback sessions per teacher as well as three focus group interviews within a twelve week time frame in a higher education context, results revealed that participant in-service teachers superficially changed their practices in certain moments of the investigation as they felt pressured not only to comply with the researcher's expectations but also to position themselves as reflective practitioners in front of their colleagues when group discussions regarding their practice were held. Nonetheless, by the end of the research, participants had all gone back to their known and routine practices and viewed my investigation as one more 'evaluative type' of classroom observation process where good and bad teaching actions were assessed and discussed. I found no evidence in our individual discussions and group interviews to support further rationalization processes or real implications for them as ELT practitioners.

Similar research findings in the field that show how teachers do not engage in reflective tasks, especially when they understand them as imposed activities can be found in Valerie Hobbs (2007). Her study made use of reflective journal writing in a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) certificate course. However, her participants viewed journal writing as a course task rather than a means for critical rationalization of their practice where strategic responses to comply with the required assignment were employed. Conversely, the teacher mentors after reading the journal entries sustained an 'idealistic view' of the RP approach as they believed the participants' accounts to be reliable and not lightly written.

A similar study aimed to find out the opinions undergraduate ELT students had regarding their experience in becoming language teachers (McCabe, Walsh, Wideman, & Winter, 2011). A second research objective was to examine the students' engagement with the strategies and tools – written journals and focus group interviews – that were believed to enable them to become reflective practitioners. Yet again, the majority of the students in McCabe's study referred to journal writing and focus group meetings as mandatory tasks that needed to be completed after each class. Participants were not able to identify RP as an approach to better understand their practice or that supposed any type of benefit to their continuing teacher development. At most, they acknowledged how discussing teaching matters with peers allowed them to build their teaching repertoires. Tutors on the other hand, viewed RP as a continuous process that aided pre-service teachers in understanding where they stand and the effects on their teaching practice and most importantly as a strong support for continuous professional development.

Aside from noting that imposed reflective tools and tasks had poor results for participants as well as for the intended research purposes of the reviewed RP investigations; I also became aware of other proposed approaches that held a positivist view towards RP. Barbara Larrive (2008) as well as Vieira and Marques (2002) designed grids and reflective practitioner level models as assessment tools to evaluate teachers' practices in order to determine their level as reflective practitioners. They aimed to establish an entry reflective practitioner level that would allow a supervisor, mentor, researcher or even practitioners themselves to develop intervention strategies to facilitate movement towards higher levels of reflection. Through the use of these grids, practitioners would also have control over their development by evaluating their actions while partaking in RP processes. From this positioning in the field, it can be inferred that teachers were viewed as members of homogenous professional communities who shared the same practices across various contexts. What is more, teacher development through the evaluation and classification of teaching practices was still a common assumption.

Nevertheless, the conditions under which teachers carry out their practices are contingent on several aspects at various levels: personal, professional, institutional and even social. Therefore, teachers will have personal needs and positions for engaging in Teacher Development, as is the case for Reflective Practice and will carry out particular actions and tasks that more often than not will belong to several of these descriptors at once making pre-classified grids unfitting and linear to suitably describe any RP process. Teacher behaviours and actions as diverse as they happen to be, cannot be caged, classified or generalized and especially not evaluated when engaging in personal reflection cycles – the reported results presented in the discussion section of this paper sustain this view. Thus, reflective practitioner levels or grids may only serve as a starting point indicating teachers' readiness (Wallace, 1998; Farrell 2012) before engaging in research, as was the case for the participant teachers of this study.

Overall, these empirical studies and others (see Ho, 2010; Louw et al., 2014; Vo & Nguyen, 2010) show that mentors, trainers and researchers understand the fundamentals of RP for language teacher development. That is, they understand that practitioners need to be provided with a time and place to critically rationalize their practice by means of reflective tools and tasks to better understand their teaching and its implications for student learning. Hence, they have made it a point to making ELT practitioners become aware of this view through their research. Yet, the way many RP investigations have been designed and implemented has resulted in oversimplified research processes that expect a generalizable outcome for all participants with the ultimate goal being an apparent change in participants' practices and a homogenized view of what RP entails for their teaching. My position as a reflective practice researcher however, assumes a more socio-constructivist stance. Participants' different types of knowledge, beliefs and teaching stances are contemplated and acknowledged in the co-construction of their own RP processes allowing them to select suitable reflective tools and giving them the liberty to engage in the process according to personal perceived teaching needs.

Hand in hand with oversimplifying RP processes and expecting permanent changes in participants' practices in order to classify them as reflective practitioners or not, I too identified the teaching contexts and research environments under which RP research has been undertaken as a second concern. By my literature review, I was able to observe that many RP studies have been conducted in controlled scenarios such as formal teacher education courses or

with pre-service language teachers where research participants did not comply with regular class teaching schedules, hence, they did not face the many daily contextual circumstances and constraints related to a teacher's daily life. Opposite, researchers' experienced 'ideal' circumstances as participants observed relaxed teaching routines where classes were used only for research purposes and required no further obligations from the study participants. What is more, participant involvement was to a certain extent obligatory as the RP tasks were viewed as part of their educational programmes and expected to serve evaluative purposes. These controlled settings differ in essential ways from naturally occurring everyday teaching contexts where teachers are faced with demanding working schedules and are constrained by varying institutional norms and regulations. Therefore, the implications that RP research may have for continuous teacher development and teaching practices may vary according to the research environment in which a study takes place.

Methodology

(1) The research participants

There were a total of five volunteer teachers for this study, four women and one man, all English language teachers ranging from young adults all the way through mature adults pertaining to the English Language Teaching undergraduate programme of the Humanities Faculty of a state university in the central part of Mexico. These teachers work part time, they make up for the entire ELT staff and respond to the coordinator of the BA. Their English classes are 8 hours a week per group therefore programmes are longer and textbooks are different than those of other undergraduate programmes within the Faculty. Participants are also content teachers in the programme teaching subjects such as discourse analysis, the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, socio-linguistics, and so on. The following table describes these teachers' profiles more in depth; the names given are pseudonyms in order to comply with ethical issues and teachers are presented in a seniority and length in teaching career fashion. (add Table 1)

(2) The research design, research questions, data collection instruments and analysis

The current *action research study* was positioned on a *qualitative, collaborative* and *inter-pretivist research paradigm*. The study first centres on the value of creating a context for professional dialogue by means of a focus group interview, which is non-existent in the participants' current professional community. A second focus is in the effectiveness of using class videos as input evidence to enable a joint critical rationalization of the practices observed in order for teachers to become aware of their teaching or in increasing teaching awareness. Finally, attention is paid to how an increase on teaching awareness leads to new teaching decisions and experiences, thus to a reconstruction of teachers' knowledge allowing teachers to engage in on-going teacher development. Nevertheless, development would occur according to each participant's reflective practitioner qualities and actions as well as to their degree of involvement in the RP process and only in areas consistent with personal perceived teaching needs. This is the central inquiry of the study, which examines the role that RP might play in continuous English Language Teacher Development.

Table 1. The study participants.

Teacher Isabella	Teacher Lucia	Teacher Montserrat	Teacher Monica	Teacher Daniel
Isabella is a 47-year-old English language teacher with 24 years of teaching experience. Throughout her career she has taught in Elementary school, Middle school, High school and College. She obtained her ELT degree while in-service and is currently teaching English 1 group a and content subjects in the ELT undergraduate program. Isabella also teaches English as a Foreign Language in other undergraduate programs within the Humanities Faculty.	Lucia is a 44-year-old English language teacher with 18 years of teaching experience. Throughout her career she has taught in Elementary school, High school and College. She obtained her ELT degree while in-service. Lucia currently teaches English 1 group b in this undergraduate program as well as content subjects in Spanish yet in the Education undergraduate program of a federal university in the state of Hidalgo called 'Escuela Normal Superior de Hidalgo'.	Monserrat is a 38-year-old English language teacher with 12 years of teaching experience. Throughout her career she has taught in Elementary school, High school and College. She has also taught preparation courses for Cambridge language examination certificates such as: KET, PET and FCE. She obtained her ELT degree while in-service as well as Isabella and Lucia. Montserrat currently teaches English VI, French I and French II, as well as content subjects in this ELT undergraduate program.	Monica is a 33-year-old English language teacher with 8 years of teaching experience. She has only taught English at College level and she began her teaching career once she had obtained her ELT degree. Monica teaches only one subject in this undergraduate program, English VII. However, the majority of her classes are English as a Second Language in other undergraduate program if the Humanities Faculty.	Daniel is a 28-year-old English language teacher with 6 years of teaching experience. In his early career, he taught children and later moved on to teach English at College. He began his teaching career once he had obtained his ELT degree. Daniel currently teaches English II and English IV, as well as content subjects in this undergraduate program and has some ESL classes in other undergraduate programs of the Humanities Faculty as well.

Research questions

Q1: What is the reasoning behind participants' teaching practice prior to engaging in a reflective practice process?

Q2: How helpful is feedback from other sources and sharing perspectives with peers in fostering critical reflectivity in teachers?

Q3: To what extent does collaborative Reflective Practice influence participants' cognitive transformation?

The focus group interview

Research question one was answered by means of a *focus group interview*, which was carried out at the beginning of February 2015 in the Teacher's Room of the English Language Teaching undergraduate programme of the Humanities Faculty of this university and lasted 95 minutes. The focus group interview was prompted on theory driven aspects adapted from Barbara Larrive's reflective practitioner survey (Larrive, 2008), Steve Mann's teacher development definition (Mann, 2005) and Richards and

Farrell's Teacher Knowledge concept (Richards & Farrell, 2005). The most salient topics were: *teachers' formative knowledge, experiential knowledge, choice of methodological approaches, choice of resources, current teaching stances and beliefs, current position towards teacher development, sense of agency in their specific teaching contexts as well as the possible teaching constraints they face*. This study aimed to provide a setting by means of a focus group interview where together, the participants and I were able to rationalize how they perceived to carry out their practices enhancing a dialogic space where opinions and standpoints were built on by the beliefs and positions of their peers (Bowen, 2004; Johnson, 1999; Richards & Farrell, 2005).

The focus group interview also served to explore teachers' qualities as reflective practitioners based on Barbara Larrive's 2008 reflective practitioner grid. This allowed me to provide evidence of participants' reflective practitioner abilities, consequently, by showing their RP qualities the *teachers' readiness* before engaging in this research would also be revealed. It has been proven that *teacher readiness* is a main factor prior to engaging in RP, as it is not feasible to force anybody to critically reflect when their personal and professional conditions do not allow them to do so (Wallace, 1998; Farrell 2012).

The focus group interview was carried out in the teachers' and my own first language – Spanish; together, we decided this in order to create a distended, relaxed environment where everyone felt comfortable to express their ideas. It was also recorded with previous written consent from the participants in order to have access to the information afterwards for transcription and analysis.

The video-recorded classroom observations

The focus group data served to gain knowledge about the teachers' practices and to understand the reasons behind these reported practices – the how's and why's. By means of this information I was able to construct a full account of each individual's teaching stance, these stances then served as observing criteria under which two video-recorded classroom observations were carried out. With regard to research question two; it was answered through the collaborative analysis of the two video-recorded classroom observations with each one of the participating teachers, which lasted approximately two hours each over a period of 9 weeks. These video recordings were the main source for discussion during the one-on-one post-observation discussions that took place immediately after the observations were conducted. In order to carry out the second phase of the data collection, the participants of this study and I agreed on the most suitable time, date and preferred group to schedule the classroom observations required.

The reasoning behind the use of video recorded observations was guided by previous ELT studies that used the same approach (Farrell, 2001; Gün 2010; Eröz-Tuga, 2013; Ho, 2010) and whose authors have stated that 'conducting classroom observations and giving feedback to teachers is undeniably useful yet insufficient in itself to help teachers reach a level of reflection that will optimize their professional development' (Gün, 2010, p.127). My role was to enable discussion by *stimulated recall*, 'stimulated recall relies on the videotape of a real situation. The principle involved here – stimulating an individual's recollection of what she or he was thinking at the time of an interaction – is aimed at providing a look into the thought process leading up to an interaction, whether it be teaching, learning or communicating' (Rosenstein, 2002, p.30).

Video reviewing served to collaboratively discuss what took place in the classes according to the teaching stances and beliefs each teacher provided in the focus group interview. This was aimed at answering the question 'what were you thinking when you did or said that?' and gain an evidence based understanding of the teachers' cognitive processes during the classroom sessions. There was no intention to give directive feedback, but to interpret collaboratively with the participants, stopping or freezing the recordings in points of interest to reveal their perceptions at that point and their decision processes. This helped to notice routine practices and discontinuities that otherwise could not be recovered from the simple narratives or field notes allowing for an informed discussion of the teachers' practices and facilitated the gathering of comparative data between my field notes and the participants' stances and beliefs.

Semi-structured personal interview

In order to gain knowledge to respond to the last research question, a *semi-structured personal interview* was carried out in the first week of May of the year 2015 with each one of the participants once the classroom observation cycles were over. Together, the participants and I decided on an interview as opposed to a written tool as the whole of the research had been undertaken in a spoken collaborative mode, further it is through social interaction that 'active learning evolves and each participant interprets, transforms and internalizes new knowledge as a result of collective thinking' (Vo & Nguyen, 2010, p.207). Overall the main purpose of the final data collection tool was to have a final account of the participants' perceptions and stances regarding the reflective practice process each one of them engaged in. The interviews were too video-recorded with previous written consent from the participants and were also arranged to be carried out in Spanish with a fairly open agenda, which allowed for two-way communication where both the teachers and I gave and received information.

Data analysis

The aim of this case study was to gain insight and report the cognitive transformation that participants went through while systematically engaging in collaborative reflective practices; therefore, my data, which is mostly in the form of written extracts from oral narratives (transcripts of the focus group interview, the one on one feedback conversations and the final personal teacher interviews) needed to respond to this enquiry.

Narratives in English language teaching are prized as they 'offer insights into people's private worlds, inaccessible to experimental methodologies, and thus provide the insider's view of the processes of language learning, attrition, and use' (Pavlenko, 2007, p.164). Narratives can aim to provide accounts on *subject reality* (findings on how 'things' or events were experienced by the respondents), *life reality* (findings on how 'things' are or were) and *text reality* (ways in which 'things' or events are narrated by the respondents) (Denzin, 1978). This will depend on the researcher's purpose for reading and examining the narratives and the analytical approach one chooses to engage in according to the research aim and objectives. Accordingly, in order to gain insight into the aim of this study, in other words to access participant teachers' subject and life reality a *content analytical approach* was selected. Narrative analysis of subject reality and life reality commonly appeal to some form of *thematic* or *content analysis* in order to examine thoughts and feelings in a lived process but also to examine research contexts

in a historic and diachronic manner when the context plays a key role in the development of research as is the case of this study (Pavlenko, 2007). Further, since analysis in both my research method (Action Research) and my type of analysis (*Content Analysis*) simultaneously occurred as the data collection process began, I was able to highlight the most salient points and themes which proved important in the subsequent data collection phases – in this case for the COs and final personal interviews – . This is one of the main advantages of content analysis, the sensitivity to recurrent themes salient in participants' stories and thus to themes that are important for the following research stages and overall development of the study.

My literature review was also drawn upon to decide on the way the concepts of *teacher development, teacher knowledge, reflective practitioner* and *reflective practice* would be considered within the analysis and later reported in the discussion section of this paper. Hence, the process of data analysis was both data driven and theory driven. An example of such analysis is provided in Appendix 1 where in order to analyse the focus group transcript, the categories and subcategories selected were theory driven and one last category was emergent from the data.

Based on this largely bottom-up inductive analysis approach, the following is an overview of the steps followed in data analysis:

- Transcription of texts (*the units*);
- pre-coding and coding to capture both descriptive labelling and more abstract features of the data by using words and sentences (*the units of analysis*);
- growing ideas by comparing categories and making links between them;
- and interpreting the data by drawing theoretical conclusions from the texts. (Dörnyei, 2007:246)

Further, the use of *methodological triangulation* by means of a focus group, video-recorded classroom observations and semi-structured personal interviews was carried out as a means to strengthen the weaknesses that each one of the data collection methods may have independently and at the same time enable better understanding and outcomes for the whole of the study. I understand with Golafshani that the mere use of 'multiple methods, such as, observations, interviews and recordings will in itself lead to more valid, reliable and diverse constructions of reality' (2003, p.604). Examples of data triangulation are provided in the discussion section of this paper where accounts and extracts from the data analysis are given to strengthen discussion and arguments. The use of internal cross-referencing was also enhanced so readers could find more detail as needed.

Discussion of research results

This discussion centres on the implications revealed by adopting the RP stance described and attending the gap I observed in recent empirical studies. It describes how my research rationale did not only favour participant involvement for the RP processes to run efficiently but it also allowed my research and its results to become of value for participants' practices. The following four aspects will be the focus of this discussion: *the researcher and*

participants' roles, the need to systematize RP in research, the effects of Collaborative Reflective Practice and *how an understanding of RP is developed*.

(1) The researcher and participants' roles

As a traditional teacher trainer, I was used to taking over feedback conferences imposing my views of 'right' and 'wrong' teaching practices not allowing observees to reflect and construct meaning of their teaching. Hence, for this study, I opted for a reflexive researcher and facilitator role refraining from giving directive feedback and providing teachers with evidence and opportunities to rationalize the teaching knowledge, beliefs and stances that guided their practices. This coaching/catalyst role enabled sensitivity and peer support, which combined with a lack of pressure or evaluation allowed participants to openly share failures and mistakes and constructively analyse and criticize practices and procedures, which scholars depict as successful authentic professional interactions that allow for critical reflection to take place (Vieira & Marques, 2002).

Moreover, in assuming a facilitator role, the research participants too realized the need to have an active involvement in their RP processes. They understood that the more they became involved in the process, the more they understood their practice and gained agency over their teaching allowing them to give critical well-founded explanations for any changes in their teaching knowledge and teaching actions along this investigation. The consistency in these roles was key for the reported positive research outcomes.

(2) The need to systematize RP in research

Initially, systematizing RP by having a fixed time, tools and a place for collegial discussions to take place was necessary in order to engage practitioners in the process. Nevertheless, the systematization approach was negotiated; the research agenda, data collection tools and ways of RP implementation for this study were discussed with the participants considering the particularities of this real-life teaching scenario. Hence, the participant teachers, physical spaces, daily teaching schedules and institutional regulations were fully contemplated. A key part of this negotiation were the means by which teachers would be engaging in critical reflection about their practice – oral conversations about their classroom observations (one on one feedback conferences) and personal interviews to talk about their reflective processes. I consider that teachers should be able to choose the reflective tools that best suit them – both personally and academically, research tools that can make them feel more engaged during the whole research process and generate reliable responses (Hobbs, 2007), imposed reflection tools or procedures can most probably obstruct the success of any RP processes.

(3) The effects of collaborative reflective practice

The combination of qualitative tools utilized to promote critical reflection and collect data such as the focus group, personal interviews and video stimulated recollections of classroom observations, resulted positive for this study fostering critical reflection by

means of evidence-based discussions. Hence, this study first suggests that RP is eased if teachers find themselves as part of a reflective community where spaces for sustained discussions about their practices are provided. Secondly, by having perceptible data upon which to discuss teachers' practices supports the comments and opinions given by the observer and the person being observed (Gün 2010: Yürekli, 2013). Discussions do not merely rely on vague recollections of teaching events or on a specific person's perceptions, which increases the value to the discussions taking place and the depth of critical reflection.

In this study, teachers' reports gave testimony of gaining teaching awareness or increasing their awareness as a result of watching their videos and jointly discussing what they observed with the researcher. Teachers either confirmed teaching issues or noticed new teaching concerns they had not become aware of by primarily observing themselves teach. Those issues were then jointly discussed and rationalized enabling participants to take personal further decisions and actions in their practices. Extract 1 illustrated by Map 1 and extract 2 exemplify this.

Extract 1

Researcher: *And for instance… if you observe that you have strong and weak students, why do you let them choose their groups according to their preference? If you observe this affects how your class flows or the time it takes for them to do an activity?*

Daniel: *Well I always ask them if they want me to group them up or if they prefer to group themselves up. I think… I don't know but since the very beginning I tell them that my approach is like this: you're grown-ups, this is college, if you're going to work, you're going to work if you don't want to, it's none of my business. I'm not going to be there to push you to do it. This is important, they have to graduate with a proper language level, they're going to be English teachers and they can't say 'I kind of know', they have to be good. That's why I tell them: if you're going to work then you're going to work and if you don't, you don't have to, it's your decision. I always tell them: it's your call. That's why I always let them choose who they want to work with but I had not stop to think that it may be affecting them and myself.*

Researcher: *Uhum, well it's not the first time I hear this, your colleagues think the same way… (Daniel interrupts)*

Daniel: *But yes, these students here are strong (pointing at the video), right now that I'm watching this… in this group everyone is strong and this other group in the corner most of them are weak. But I think so, now that I'm actually thinking about it, this girl asks for help – the girl with the red hair – she has difficulties but she is intelligent because she sits next to people that help her.*

Researcher: *At the beginning, you mentioned that it was their responsibility too and that this was College and that they had to make their own decisions, right? I remembered what you commented in the focus group interview: 'I have my share of responsibility but they have their share as students'.*

Daniel: *But part of my responsibility is to notice these things.*

Map 1　　　　**Grouping students**
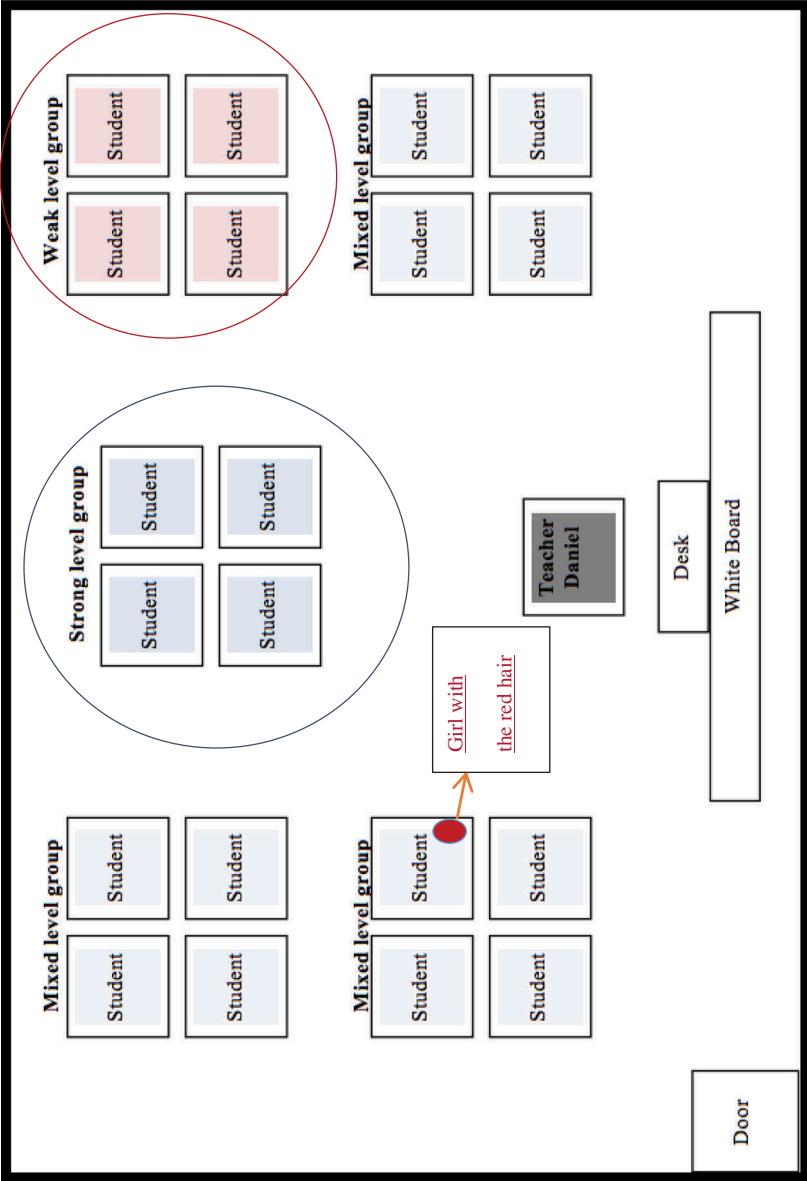
Map 1. shows Daniel's English 4 class where he deliberately allows students to group each other according to their preference yet this has a significant effect on his class pace and outcomes as generally advanced students end up working together finishing tasks faster than the rest of the group.

Researcher:	Well… yes… because when they affect how your class unfolds, well what do you do then? What happens?
Daniel:	Yes, I get it… I understand.
Researcher:	I noticed this and I wanted to know why you thought that way?
Daniel:	Well it's just that I have noticed that if you make the teams, it could be positive but negative as well. Because I have noticed that sometimes they feel more comfortable when they pair up or group up with certain class-mates, so if I make the groups, for instance Kelly with someone stronger, I know how she's going to react… When I tell them to group up I also know who will end up together, I know. I also know their reaction when I make the groups, everybody says: no! So now I don't know how to do this… or balance it.
Researcher:	Yes, balance it.
Daniel:	You know, you're right I have to look into this situation because I always allow them to make their groups and some teams are benefitted for instance this one right here (pointing at the video) she is weaker but Ricardo is strong and they're friends so there is no problem there. The problem is for example in this team where Christopher and Alba are at, they take longer and they hold back the rest of the class… yes… I get it.

Daniels' strong perception of making students responsible for their share on the teaching and learning process is evident throughout his teaching. In his opinion, students should be 'mature' enough to choose whom they work with and if they work in class at all. However, there are students who possess this **learner autonomy** Daniel refers to, 'a freedom of action in learning' (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, & Thwaite, 2001), while others sit and work next to their friends irrespective of their learning outcomes. Nevertheless, after scrutinizing group work in his class video he began to notice that this strict perspective of how things should be in college was affecting the outcome of his classes, specifically in the time it took for the entire group to complete tasks. Together, we observed that the stronger students usually finished first and the weaker ones took longer than planned, which then allowed the stronger students to get distracted and drift away from the class topic to talking about personal matters. This also led to classroom management problems as students began to walk in and out of class and it was not easy for the Daniel to gain control back.

Extract 2

Researcher:	Is there something you want to mention or should I start?
Lucia:	Well yes, I think in the focus group interview I stated that your group should be new and your classes should be new even if it's the same level every semester. But no! I said it but I'm not doing it. I try to include new material, different activities to not merely focus on the book and bring a new topic, a topic from their everyday life but I don't do it as frequently. It was until this semester that I said, every week I'm going to bring something different to class so students also feel different and that I'm not just following the book structure because regardless of how many new exercises you bring, you're still following the book so it's basically the same thing. But I have been doing

> *this for a very long time, class after class and I'm like stuck in this routine. This is because I'm in a comfort zone and this comfort zone impacts my whole performance, everything, right?*

Researcher: *Yes! And, how did you get to this point? I mean, how did you come to realize this?*

Lucia: *When I read the… after watching the class video I went back to the focus group transcript that you sent us and I read what I had said. Then I read your comments from the class observations and I noticed those inconsistencies. I believed that I was being innovative and when I saw my class, I said no, not really! This has really stricken me but for the positive. I want to become better; I think everyone works to become better. I have been observed before and they tell you what you want to hear, the good things. But what I saw is not right. Because I have classes where I already have my lessons planned and material to go with the plans. So, I go home and just re-read the lesson and look for one or two new exercises but I'm basically doing the same thing and it's not right. It should not be this way. This is why I accepted more groups, 7 this semester, because I know I don't need to invest my time on some of my classes. I mean, I know I have to better my practice but I'm in this comfort zone and you leave becoming better for later, for next semester, for next month. All of a sudden 2 or 3 years went by and your practice remained the same, then Jovanna comes along with her study and points out some things, things I already knew ha, ha, ha but that I pretended not to notice or listen to, right?*

Lucia's example illustrates one more founding notion of this study, where it is suggested that teachers should move away from **routine thinking** where actions are guided by impulse, tradition, or authority (Dewey, 1938, p.35), to continuously engaging in critical reflection in order to increase awareness of their practice. In other words, to thinking carefully about what teachers do in class and the reasoning behind it, this can lead to better future actions for their practice, also called *reflective action* (Dewey, 1938).

In our second post-observation discussion, Lucia commented that she had formerly participated in other classroom observation practices yet the feedback she had received was mainly condescending, focusing on her positive teaching qualities strengthening her view that she was carrying out her practice appropriately and in accordance to her teaching beliefs and stances. However, in those past observations the main feedback had been a written report where colleagues or supervisors had ticked off teaching factors – methodological teaching issues – that were observed or not. Complementary to the observations, Lucia had been also required to hand in a written reflective report yet she stated that there had not been any real reflection on her behalf. Researchers in the field support Lucia's remarks, stating that by 'simply asking teachers to complete a "post observation reflection sheet" after a classroom observation and expecting them to think *"critically"* about their teaching has resulted in no significant change for the teachers or their practice' (Brandt 2008; Gün 2010).

Conversely, after Lucia was provided with the opportunity to observe her practice in this study with the help of different types of evidence, she was able to critically reflect on her teaching and increase her awareness. The impact of this raised awareness was

noticeable, as Lucia was able to explain and differentiate the lack of a critical approach on her former classroom observations, which only addressed 'good' things from her practice and not the challenges. Further, I was able to observe some implications to her teaching in her second classroom observation. For instance, Lucia chose to exclusively use the course book for language structure practice, she still followed the program yet the way she presented the topic was different from how it was suggested in the textbook. Her physical position in the classroom also changed as well as her physical appearance; she decided to dress younger and engage more with the class. By her students' reactions I was able to notice that they were enjoying the class and so was Lucia. When I asked, what had encouraged her to take these actions she said '...*becoming aware was the key, before you only do things as a routine, you're not conscious. I observed myself and now I have to think before I act but I also needed to do something about it*'.

However positive the participants' teaching accounts were, it is important to mention that teaching awareness did not lead to permanent or immediate change in this study, yet it did lead them to begin a transformation on their teaching perceptions, which impacted their subsequent teaching actions and decisions. Extract 2 is a clear example as Lucia individually reviewed her class videos and compared them to the focus group transcript becoming aware of a discontinuity between how she perceived to carry out her practice and what occurred in her classes. After her discovery, Lucia decided to make specific adjustments to her teaching and shared the experience with the researcher critically comparing her actions and results.

I do not disregard the possibility of teachers becoming aware of their practice by means of other methods yet teachers also reported that some of the teaching practices they observed were already known to them. It was by observing themselves on the videos that they were able to confirm their inner thoughts, which they openly discussed with the researcher and at times with other colleagues. Further, after together critically reflecting upon their practices, teachers were also able to propose changes to improve their practice in the future (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987). However, teaching modifications were conducted only in the areas teachers perceived as necessary, experiencing ownership over their practice and development.

For the second cycle of video recorded classroom observations more critical reflections were verged including more descriptive and contrasting information. Participant teachers had become more critical of their practice and initiated feedback discussions asking the researcher to play the video in certain moments to provide evidence of their rationalizations. My interventions also lessened, as my role was to listen and confirm the majority of their thoughts with video-input and the use of my field notes.

All in all, having teachers become aware of a need to change resulted effective in this study as opposed to telling them they should change as it commonly happens in traditional evaluative classroom observations. The reported cognitive transformations in this investigation and the further actions conducted as a result of cognitive transformation were self-regulated assisted by the collaborative RP process participants engaged in.

(4) Developing an understanding of reflective practice

Finally, this study illustrates how by teachers being active participants of their development process was fundamental in helping them understand their practice and

consequently establish experience based stances of what RP entails for on-going ELT development.

Teachers' new standpoints regarding their teaching and RP in this context were reported in the final study interviews. Every single teacher gave an account of how they thought about their teaching before their participation in this collaborative RP study and why; accordingly, they also reported what made them change previous perceptions to new teaching stances and the reasoning behind them. A key finding was that participants' understanding regarding Classroom Observation practices was reconstructed going from a teaching assessment point of view to seeing classroom observations as a means for teaching awareness and development. Moreover, teachers realized the need to have an active role in their development such as being their own feedback providers as teacher Monica states in Extract 3 as opposed to relying on external agents (observers, supervisors and teacher training programmes) to point out issues or changes to their practice.

Extract 3

Researcher: *How would you describe a RP process according to your personal experience?*

Monica: *It's a process that helps the teacher obtain immediate feedback ha, ha, ha… But first you need to allow someone to help you reflect because I am not sure I could have started the process alone. I did need someone to tell me, hey you need to be observed and video recorded, that's the first step. The next step would be to observe what happened, discuss it and accept it, right? Because a lot of times people can tell me that I'm wrong, but if I don't accept it, I won't be able to move from my comfort zone, I believe that it is another important step. First you need to be observed, second, you need to see which were your issues and allow for comments and critiques, third you need to take action. And start with one issue at a time because you cannot correct everything at the same time. It's not magic! It's a process! You can start with the easier things to change and maybe that will help you to change the more difficult things, right? Big things happen when you start with the little changes. You can implement changes little by little, step by step, it's not going to be an overnight change. You need to be conscious about what you are doing because maybe you'll fall back to the same practices but if you're conscious you'll also be able to notice and next time you'll be more aware.*

Monica describes Reflective Practice as a process that requires input and collaboration in order to ease *critical reflection* and hence allow for teaching awareness or in her words 'automatic feedback' of one's practice to take place (Dewey, 1933; Wallace, 1998, 1998; Johnson and Golombek, 2002; Johnson, 2006). She further points out that becoming aware then leads you to make manageable changes and to be attentive while teaching as there is an existing possibility of falling back to old practices. Nevertheless, she takes this as a natural step of the gradual change that RP involves, according to Monica; gaining teaching awareness is the main goal. Researchers support her position and state, 'reflective practitioners learn from setbacks and continue the reflective process' (Copeland, 1993, p.354). Often, an action or a solution sets a teacher

back or redirects related teaching issues enabling the cyclical reflective process to begin once more.

By gaining teaching awareness and enhancing their ability to critically think about their practice, the participants of this research experienced empowerment over the changes in their perceptions and actions in the classrooms and were able to critically give foundation for that transformation. I consider this to have been the most beneficial and salient outcome for teachers and was only possible as teachers responsibly confronted their teaching in a critical and collaborative way.

All in all the participant teachers coincided that RP is a cyclical and gradual process that requires input and collaboration in order to ease *critical reflection*. It further requires teachers to be 'ready' to break with routine thinking and fixed paradigms in order to take action according to what teachers may become aware of as a result of partaking in RP. However, engaging in reflective action is not equivalent to immediate change. Every teacher has the prerogative to decide what to do with his or her gained awareness. Let us remember that regardless of participants pertaining to a same professional community, each of these teachers represents a particular practice. Hence, according to their lived RP processes teachers may decide to search for alternative teaching approaches, change styles, meet contextual needs, question their strategies and so on, yet a reflective action is necessary to complete the process. Murphy states, 'teachers need to take action when possible, on whatever they might be learning or becoming aware of about themselves as teachers, about others and about students' responses to their practice, for the purpose of enhancing the quality of learning opportunities they are able to provide in their classrooms' (Murphy, 2001, p.500).

Study conclusion

As described at the beginning of this paper, this study has attempted to drift away from a positivist top-down approach to reflective practice where participants are viewed as members of standardized professional communities who share the same expectations, concerns and professional aims. RP research within this view has been of an interventionist nature with generalizable and linear conclusions and implications for participants' practices.

Conversely, with an interpretivist view towards RP research, my aim was to observe the reconstruction and co-construction of participants' realities – in this case of English language teaching – through the direct experience of teachers and my own experiences and interpretations as the guiding researcher while partaking in this study. Accordingly, different types of transformation occurred as a result of conducting RP research in this context and challenging the status quo of evaluative classroom observation and conventional teacher development as well as evidencing the complexity embedded in RP processes. By complexity, I refer to the nonlinear way RP procedures develop at different times and modes for each participant according to personal teaching stances and beliefs, thus enabling individual results for each person involved regardless of teachers pertaining to a same professional community. As a researcher, understanding this complexity and extrapolating it to the research design resulted positive and enabled the favourable results obtained.

Accordingly, by systematizing RP into practitioners' everyday teaching provided them with tools, opportunity and support to become aware of their practice and critically

analyse it to properly deal with issues and discontinuities in benefit of their teaching and students' learning. These tools and opportunities had not become available to teachers before this study thus confirming that RP as well as RP research are essential components for on-going language Teacher Development.

Notes on contributor

Jovanna Matilde Godínez Martínez has been involved in ELT since the year 2000. Aside from being an English language teacher, in 2009, she became a Teacher Trainer/ Educator conducting teacher development programs in central Mexico and Costa Rica. She hold a Masters degree in ELT from the University of Southampton, UK; most recently in May 2017, she obtained a doctorate research degree from the same university. Her research interests concern Continuous Professional Development, Reflective Practice in ELT and Cooperative Action Research in ELT.

ORCID

Jovanna Matilde Godínez Martínez 🔗 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8010-0989

References

Bowen, T. (2004). Continuous professional development. The Onestop Magazine. http://www.onestopenglish.com/News/Magazine/Archive/continuous.htm Accessed: 03 03 2014 20:13

Brandt, C. (2008). Integrating feedback and reflection in teacher preparation. ELT Journal, 62(1), 37–46.

Breen, M.P., Hird, B., Milton, M., Oliver, R., & Thwaite, A. (2001). Making sense of language teaching: teachers' principles and classroom practices. Applied Linguistics, 22(4), 470–501.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Copeland, W.D. (1993). The reflective practitioner in teaching. Toward a research agenda. Teaching In Teacher Education, 9(4), 347–359.

Denzin, N.K. (1978). Interpretative ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century. London: Sage.

Dewey, J. (1933). How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Dewey, J. (1938). Experience and education. New York: Macmillan.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eröz-Tuga, B. (2013). Reflective feedback sessions using video recordings. ELT Journal, 67(2), 175–183.

Farrell, T. (2001). Critical friendships: colleagues helping each other develop. ELT Journal, 55(4), 368–374.

Farrell, T. (2012). Reflective Practice: (Re) Visiting Dewey and Schön. TESOL Journal, 3(1), 7–16.

Farrell, T.C. (2008). Reflective Practice in the Professional Development of teachers of Adult English Language Learners. CAELA NETWORK p. 1–3.

Gün, B. (2010). Quality self-reflection through reflection training. ELT Journal of Education, 65(2), 126–135.

Ho, B. (2010). Carrying out collaborative action research in a practicum. TESOL Journal, 4(2), 295–311.

Hobbs, V. (2007). Faking it or hating it: can reflective practice be forced?. Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives, 8(3), 405–417.

Johnson, D.W. (2006). Reaching out: Interpersonal effectiveness and self-actualization (9th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Johnson, E.K. (1999). Understanding Language Teaching: Reasoning in Action. Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.

Johnson, K.E, & Golombek, P. (2002). *Teachers' narrative inquiry as professional development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Larrive, B. (2008). Development of a tool to assess teachers' level of reflective practice: International Multidisciplinary perspectives. Routledge, 9(3), 341–360.

Louw, S., Watson, R., & Jimarkon, P. (2014). Teacher trainers' beliefs about feedback on teaching practice: negotiating the tensions between authoritativeness and dialogic space. Applied Linguistics. Oxford University Press., (2014, 1–21.

Mann, S. (2005). State of the Art: The language teacher's development. Language Teaching, 38, 103–118.

McCabe, M., Walsh, S., Wideman, R., & Winter, E. (2011). The R Word in teacher education: understanding the teaching and learning of critical reflective practice. International electronic journal for leadership in learning, 13(7). Calgary, Alberta, Canada: University Calgari Press.

McDonough, J., & McDonough, S.H. (1997). Research methods for English language teachers. London: Arnold.

Murphy, J.M. (2001). Reflective teaching in ELT. In Marianne Celce-Murcia (Ed.), Teaching as a Second or Foreign Language, 3rd edition (pp. 499-514). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Pavlenko, A. (2007). Autobiographic Narratives as Data in Applied Linguistics. Applied Linguistics, 28(2), 163–188.

Piaget, J. (1972). *Intellectual evolution from adolescence to adulthood*. Human Development.

Richards, J.C., & Farrell, T.S.C. (2005). Professional development for language teachers. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J.C., & Lockhard, C. (1994). Reflective teaching. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rosenstein, B. (2002). Video use in Social Science Research and Program Evaluation. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 1(3), 22–43.

Schön, D.A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Schön, D.A. (1987). Educating the reflective practitioner: Towards a new design for teaching and learning in the profession. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Slimani-Rolls, A., & Kiely, R. (2014). We are the change that we seek: developing teachers' understanding of their classroom practice. Innovations in Education and Teaching International. Routledge Taylor and Francis Groups, 51(4), 425–435.

Tomlinson, J. (1999). *Globalization and culture*. The University of Chicago Press.

Vieira, F., & Marques, I. (2002). Supervising reflective teacher development practices. ELTEJ, 6(1), 1–18.

Vo, L.T., & Nguyen. (2010). Critical friends group for EFL teacher professional development. ELT Journal, 64(2), 205–213.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1987). Thinking and speech. In R.W. Rieber & A.S. Carton (Eds), The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky, Volume 1: Problems of general psychology (pp. 39–285). New York: Plenum Press. (Original work published 1934).

Wallace, M.J. (1998). Action research for language teachers. Cambridge.

Yürekli, A. (2013). The six-category intervention analysis: a classroom observation reference. ELT Journal, 67(3), 302–312.

Appendix 1 Focus group coding map

Teacher Development	Teacher Constraints	Teacher Knowledge			

		Skill learning	Cognitive Process	Personal Construct	Reflective Practice
Formal training	Lack of time	Diagnostic exam	Beliefs about teaching		
Teaching experience	Teaching practice	Context	Teacher preferences		
Apprenticeship of observation	Teacher development	Focus on grammar	Students' opinoins considered		
Open-minded view	Teacher's role in student learning outcomes	Student level	No student left behind		
Institutional training courses	Job pressure	Focus on communication	Follow up lesson		
Lack of training opportunities available	Health issues	Use of same activities	Reflection in action	Open-minded view	Sharing experiences with peers
Training courses with own funding/ resources	Frustration	Own designed materials	Finish lesson as it is		Self-reflection is difficult
Sharing experiences with peers	Discredited profession	Use of the books	Positive side to a class		Self-criticism
Collaboration is limited	Institutional constraints	Dislike the book			
Challanges as language teachers	Proud and comitted to their profession	Complement the book			
		Follow the program			