The Value for Teachers of Reflecting on Practice: a Case Study for the Gulf

Richard Meech

United Arab Emirates University, UAE

Abstract

Instructors at tertiary-level institutions in the Gulf are increasingly encouraged to reflect on their teaching practice. This article is both a reflection on my own practice and an attempt to demonstrate, through recounting a personal experience, how reflection can contribute positively to any teacher's self-knowledge and consequent performance in the classroom.

Introduction

Instructors at tertiary-level institutions in the Gulf and elsewhere are increasingly encouraged to reflect on their teaching practice. This paper holds that reflection on practice can be of value to instructors in a range of subject areas. It is both a reflection in itself and also an attempt to show, through the recounting of a personal experience, how the act of reflecting can contribute positively to any teacher's self-knowledge and consequent performance in the classroom.

At my institution, the University General Requirements Unit (UGRU) within UAE University, a formal reflection on teaching practice, when presented by an instructor in the form of a reflective essay, can constitute part of that instructor's annual appraisal. I submitted a reflective essay which addressed concerns I, an English Language instructor, had about aspects of my teaching practice during a task-based learning project I conducted with students, and which stated how I resolved those concerns. The process of reflecting was revealing and valuable for me and, here, I would like to present my experience and conclusions for a more general audience.

Rebecca Oxford, eminent in investigating and explaining styles and strategies used by language learners around the world, suggests that, "Teachers ... also need to assess their styles and strategies, so that they will be aware of their preferences and possible biases" (Oxford, 2003:16). This statement formed the starting point for my reflection: was I satisfied with the way I had approached my teaching? Beyond investigating my own teaching practice, I further try to suggest that, while Professor Oxford's research has been devoted to the styles and strategies of second language learners, its principles and conclusions are equally of value in understanding styles and strategies used by instructors in their practice – not only second language instructors, but rather instructors in a wide range of academic disciplines.

After a brief "overview" to set the background, I offer a brief and simplified description of my teaching procedure during a project I attempted with two groups of elementary students. This description may be of interest to both specialists and non-specialists. It is followed by my reflections on what occurred, and I finally offer some conclusions.

The type of lesson I investigated in my reflection was a *Task-Based Learning* (TBL) project and although I was applying this approach in teaching language, many of TBL's principles are applied in a number of other teaching areas. Indeed, Task-based Language Learning's close relative *Problem-based Learning* was the subject of a recent paper in this journal (Bielenberg and Gillway, 2007).

This paper is meant to report as accurately as possible how a real act of teacher reflection took place. In my reflection, I drew heavily on the published work of one particular authority, Rebecca Oxford, mentioned above. When I was in discussion with colleagues after my report or reflective essay had been turned in, and after drafts of this present paper had already been written, a number of other sources or authorities I might have consulted were suggested. As the intention here is not to give a guide to reflection but only to offer an account of one specific reflection and its rewards, I decided not to incorporate consideration of others' work in this area. For the record, however, two texts which were mentioned as being of value to teachers who wished to reflect on their practice were Brookfield's (1995) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* and Gebhard and Oprandy's (1999) *Language Teaching Awareness: A Guide to Exploring Beliefs and Practices.* For a definition of what is meant by "reflection on practice", the reader is referred to Chapters 1 and 2 of Brookfield's book.

Overview

Recently, I was a teacher on an elementary-level English Language foundation course at United Arab Emirates University, in Al Ain in the UAE, teaching the "Reading, Writing and Grammar" component of the semester-long course.

In the area of "Reading", I did a lot of work in class with my groups of female-only students using class sets of beginner-level storybooks. The course encouraged a focus on projects and "fun" activities for the students so, as we neared its end, I decided to revisit and recycle some of the Graded Reader texts that the students and I had worked on, and create a Poster Project. This project would be student-led and student-centred, rather than being led from the front by me, the teacher, and would involve at various points student pair work, small group work and whole class work. It would have the goal of reviewing some target grammar and vocabulary points and it would offer an enjoyable collaborative experience for the students near the end of their first semester at university, in line with the "ethos" of the course.

These graded readers that the groups had worked on were written in the Present Simple tense (e.g. *she takes*), with occasional, rare, use of Present Progressive constructions (e.g. *she is taking*): as published, they contained no Past tenses. Our project would involve the students as a class transforming a Present tense story into the Past Simple by simply substituting Past Simple verb forms for Present Simple verb forms throughout (a quick read-through of the text assured me that this would "work"). Each individual student would rewrite a small part of the text (one page) and pairs of students would proofread each other's work. Pairs would then form a small group with another pair of students who had worked on two different pages of text to further check grammar and spelling. This group would in turn join a similar group and the larger group would paste the pages of the transformed text onto large coloured sheets of kitchen paper, which would be placed on the walls to form a Poster Project.

What I wished my two classes to attempt was, I felt, a modest form of *Task-based learning* (TBL). Why did I feel this? A major defining element of TBL is that it embraces activities which promote communication and social interaction (Ellis, 2003: ix), and, clearly, my students would need to use such skills to successfully complete their task: at all stages, they would have to work as a team and decide together the order and style in which small contributions should be placed together to create the large-scale posters that would give the full story its coherence. Also, following Willis (1996), TBL typically uses the task itself as the means through which learning is achieved, and I anticipated or predicted that my students' knowledge of the target language point (ability to form and use the Past Simple tense) would increase through their doing the project.

When we came to the execution of the project, however, I twice found myself halting the students' small-group, communicative, task-based learning activity for lengthy presenting or resetting of grammar points from the front of the class because the project was going "off the rails", as I saw it. This troubled me, as I felt that more conventional, teacher-centred, study was not in keeping with the communicative, interactive spirit or the principles of TBL and in fact, was antithetical to it. As we reached the end of our project, I was concerned that any greater and more accurate second language knowledge my students gained came predominantly because of my lengthy interventions, rather than through their involvement in the task itself. I was left with two nagging questions: had the Poster Project truly been task-based learning, when I had interrupted the process so frequently, and, just why did I intervene anyway? Would another teacher have responded to this particular classroom situation in the same way?

Description

The texts I selected were for the project were *April in Moscow* and *Marcel and the Mona Lisa*, both published in the Penguin Readers "Easystarts" series. Since the first class I worked with each day used *April in Moscow* for their project, and as that class was consistently the one which alerted me to shortcomings in my planning and direction of the project, all my examples in this essay are drawn from that text.

At the start of my first lesson devoted to the project, in order to "set" for the students what it was I wanted them to do, I put on the whiteboard three columns, to represent: i) Past Simple inflections of the BE verb (i.e. *was/were*), ii) Past Simple inflections of regular (-*ed*) verbs and iii) Past Simple inflections of irregular verbs (e.g. *took*, *saw*), and asked students to make similar columns in their notebooks. I asked them to reread the seven lines of text on page 1 of *April in Moscow* and, with pencil, to underline the Present Simple verbs. Here is page one, with the relevant Present Simple verbs emphasised:

line 1.   April Fox *is* a dancer. She *works* for the British Dance

line 2.   Company in Leeds. Her boss there *is* Maria Grant.

line 3.   One Monday morning, April *arrives* early. She *sees*

line 4.   Maria at the coffee machine. "I've got some good

line 5.   news," *says* Maria.

line 6.   There *is* an envelope in her hand. "Really? What is it?"

line 7.   April *asks*. Maria *smiles*. "Wait and see," she *says*.

I then asked some students to call out the first example they could find in each of the three verb categories, and to volunteer the Past Simple form of the verb. These – i) line 1 **was**, ii) line 1 **worked** and iii) line 3 **saw** – I placed in the appropriate column on the whiteboard. I then asked students to continue in pairs, completing the columns in their notebooks by writing in the Past Simple forms of the remaining verbs on the page.

In my plan, this should have yielded the results in Table 1 below. (An earlier lesson had covered the spelling and stress rules that determine whether a regular verb is spelled with -*d*, -*ed* or -*ied* in the Past.)

Table 1: Past Simple tense verbs to be derived from page1, *April in Moscow*

BE verb	regular (-ed) verbs	irregular verbs
line 1 *was*	line 1 *worked*	line 3 *saw*
line 2 *was*	line 3 *arrived*	line 5 *said*
line 6 *was #1*	line 7 *asked*	line 7 *said*
	line 7 *smiled*	

As I monitored the students working in pairs in the class, I saw that they got these, but they also frequently produced such errors as "*British Danced*" (line 1); "*gotted / goted*" in line 4; a second "*was*" (#2) in line 6 and "*Waited*" and "*saw*" from line 7. Clearly, I had erred on the optimistic side in my assumptions about my students' ability to correctly identify relevant Present Tense forms and transform them to the Simple Past. I interrupted my lesson plan and the students' pair work and briefly addressed these learner errors as well as I could from the front of the class.

During the break, I hastily considered how verbs behave when we are transforming a text from Present Simple into Past Simple. The student errors had seemed to fall into a number of categories, amongst which might be included:

- failure to recognise that a verb can sometimes have an identical noun form (e.g. line 1, *Dance*), which should not be transformed.
- failure to understand that if a word is formed with a capital letter, it is probably a title and should not be transformed (e.g. line 1, *Dance*).
- misidentification of a verb form as a Present (e.g. line 4, *got*).
- failure to understand that, to retain sense, verbs in Direct Speech should remain untransformed (e.g. the second *is* in line 6).
- failure to understand that Imperatives do not go into the Past Tense (e.g. line 7, *Wait* and line 7, *see*).
- failure to understand that the Base Form after a Modal verb should not be transformed (e.g. *can see* transforms to *could see*, not **could saw*.) (Whilst this error did not occur, I foresaw that it might.)

I decided that I should present these six principles, and devoted the next part of the lesson to stating them before allowing the student individual and pair work to continue. This was my first teacher-centred intervention.

In my second lesson devoted to the project I discovered a second unexpected area of student misunderstanding, and felt the need to intervene again in my students' small group task-based learning. Each page of text had an abundance of third person singular Present Simple verbs. (See Table 3, below, for a listing of the verbs in this form found on pages 2 and 3 alone of *April in Moscow*.) Of course, I wanted my students in their pairs to identify and transform these items. However, as I monitored my class I found that students, in their eagerness to detect third person "s"-inflected singular Present Simple verbs, were exhibiting a tendency to misidentify and underline other words ending in "s" in this way. Examples of the resultant errors, drawn from students working on different pages of *April in Moscow* included:

"... and I want to meet **lots** *of people." (page 4)*	>	*loted*
Then they watch the Russian **dancers**. *(page 6)*	>	*dancered*
"The Pushkin **Museum's** *near here," she says. (page 7)*	>	*Museumed*
She can see some red and yellow **boxes** *on a table. (page 8)*	>	*boxed*
"Some friends are going with **us**." *(page 9).*	>	*used*

I pondered again. Looking at pages 2 and 3 of *April in Moscow* (the fourteen lines of text are set out below), I found that there were four types of inflected or contracted words ending with the letter "s". Rather neatly, I thought, two were verbal forms and two were nominal forms. It was further neat, to my mind, that one nominal form and one verbal form took an apostrophe + "s", while one nominal form and one verbal form took a non-apostrophised "s". There was, in addition, a fifth category, that of non-inflected/contracted words that just happen to have "s" as their final letter. To state this simply, the five-fold distinction within words ending with "s" was as follows:

- plurals of regular nouns (+s) (e.g. line 1 *dancers*; line 8, *weeks*)

- third person singular present tense verbs (+s) (e.g. line 3, *says*; line 4, *asks*)

- possessive nouns (+'s) (e.g. line 4, *April's*)

- contractions of the verb form "is" (+'s) (e.g. line 4, *What's*; line 14, *It's*)

- words that simply end in "s" (e.g. line 1, *class*; line 7, *us*; line 10, *Mrs*.)

I decided I would attempt with my students a categorization of words ending with the letter "s". I felt that this exercise, while perhaps ambitious and rather overly pedagogical, would serve as a consciousness-raising exercise, and I hoped it would demonstrate that not every word ending with the letter "s" is a third person singular Present Tense verb.

Here are those fourteen lines of text on pages two and three of *April in Moscow*, with words ending with "s" emphasised:

line 1. At ten o'clock the *dancers* are finishing their first *class*.

line 2. Suddenly, Maria *walks* into the room. "Can I have a

line 3. word with you all, please?" she *says*.

line 4. "*What's* this about?" *asks April's* friend, Laura.

line 5. "I don't know," April *answers*. The music *stops.*

line 6. "I have a letter here from Moscow," *says* Maria.

line 7. "The *Russians* want *us* to dance there next month."

line 8. Six *weeks* later, April *is* at Heathrow airport in London.

line 9. "You're going to have a very good time," *says* her

line 10. father. "Of course she *is*, George," *says Mrs* Fox. "Now,

line 11. have you got everything? Ticket, passport,

line 12. money ... ?" April *smiles*. "*Yes*, Mum."

line 13. She *says* goodbye to her *parents*. Then she *sees* Laura

line 14. and Maria. "Come on," *says* Laura. "*It's* time to go."

At the start of my next lesson I drew a grid on the whiteboard, asked the students to look at pages two and three of *April in Moscow* and invited them to say which part of the grid the words ending with "s" should go in, putting in the first few words as examples (Table 2, below).

Table 2: Semi-completed grid for categorization of words that end in "s" on pages 2 and 3, April in Moscow.

NOUN + s (plurals of regular Nouns)	VERB + s (He / She / It + Present Tense Verbs)
line *dancers* 1	line *walks* 2
NOUN + 's (possessive Nouns)	VERB *'s* (contraction of BE Verb (is))
OTHER WORDS THAT END IN "s" *class* (line 1)	

This, then, was my second intervention. The students responded enthusiastically and with reasonable accuracy (the completed grid is to be found in Table 3 below), and then returned to the pair work and small group work. After these two rather large-scale detours and interventions on my part, my Poster Project turned out a success: enjoyable, satisfying and accurately realized by the students.

Table 3: Completed grid for categorization of words that end with "s" on pp. 2-3, *April in Moscow*.

NOUN + s (plurals of regular Nouns)	VERB + s (He / She / It + Present Tense Verbs)
line	line
dancers 1	*walks* 2
Russians 7	*says* 3, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14
weeks 8	*asks* 4
parents 13	*answers* 5
	stops 5
	smiles 12
	sees 13
	is 8

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NOUN + 's	VERB 's
(possessive Nouns)	(contraction of BE Verb (is))
line	line
April's [= *Her*] *friend* 4	*What's* 4
	It's 14
OTHER WORDS THAT END IN "s"	
Class *this*	
Us *Mrs*	
Yes *is*	

Reflection

So, my Poster Project transpired finally to be a success. Nevertheless, I was left with my two questions: had it been necessary to intervene in the way I did, and had my interventions disqualified the project as Task-based learning? I needed to understand more, so that I could either justify some aspects of my approach to teaching or attempt to modify them.

While considering the first question, I found myself remembering a workshop I had attended on learning styles and strategies. Much of Rebecca Oxford's work has been an attempt to understand, categorize and explain learning styles and learning strategies of students. For her, learning styles are "overall approaches to learning and the environment" (Oxford, 1989: 2), whereas learning strategies are behaviour which is deployed or intended "to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall and use of new information." (Oxford, 1989: 3.)

Professor Oxford addressed a workshop at UAE University in February 2004 and, in a listing of learning styles, referred to "analyzing-style learners", who "like details and accuracy." Among the learning strategies she associated with the analyzing learning style were inclinations to, "Make lists of facts [and] ideas [and] take detailed notes." (Oxford, 2004.) Looking back on this talk and rereading my handout from it, I now wondered: was I an analyzing-style teacher?

In her earlier, fuller, classification of types of learning styles, one personality type was the thinking learner:

> Thinking learners are oriented toward the stark truth, even if it hurts some people's feelings. They want to be viewed as competent and do not tend to offer praise easily – even though they might secretly desire to be praised themselves. Sometimes they seem detached. (Oxford, 2003: 5)

In this paper, she also used a notion of a "desired degree of generality" to find a distinction between "global or holistic" students, who "focus on the main idea or big picture ... and avoid analysis of grammatical minutiae" and, on the other hand, "analytic students", who "tend to concentrate on grammatical details and often avoid more free-flowing communicative activities." (Oxford, 2003:6.)

My point is that, rereading this and thinking about my performance as teacher in many classrooms over many years, I realized that if I were to substitute "*teacher*" for "learner"/"student" in the above set of

quotations, I would find a very close approximation to a description of myself: of all of Oxford's learning types, this is the one which is most "me". That is, to adopt and adapt her view, I am a thinking teacher, or analytic teacher or analyzing-style teacher.

When Oxford moves from considering styles in the learning environment to considering learning strategies, she places the strategies into six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective and social (Oxford, 2003: 5). In the area of "strategies", I understand now that I probably (though not exclusively) favour using cognitive strategies, since Oxford again offers analysis and note-taking as examples of this strategy (Oxford, 2003: 16) and my intuitive response when seeking a way to address my students' learner errors was to ask them to analyse a text and take notes.

So, I had the answer to my first question: I had to make those interventions into my students' pair work and group work because I am a thinking/analyzing type, rather than being global or holistic. I value grammatical detail and accuracy and wish to encourage grammatical analysis and correct spelling and punctuation in my students, possibly at the expense of sometimes not allowing valuable but more free-flowing activities to run. That I made the interventions in the manner I did (asking my students to use "cognitive" learning strategies) is because a major way I structure my own learning is through deploying cognitive strategies. I decided that this is the way I am, and that I can only hope that my students can perceive and understand and value this.

The second question remained: was what my students achieved properly to be considered Task-based learning, despite my limiting student communication and social interaction and not fully allowing the task itself to be the means through which learning was achieved?

A "task" in TBL is somewhere between a real-world task and a classroom drill. Rod Ellis, in *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*, is of the view that sometimes, "production ... results from unfocused tasks" (Ellis, 2003: 103). He, however, favours the "focused activities" that TBL can provide; and he distinguishes these on the other hand from grammar drills. To quote a reviewer of Ellis' book:

> The author states that there is a difference between focused activity and grammar drill ... While the first aims to the content or message ... the second just aims to the form in itself being the message. (Garcia Laborda, 2003: 2)

To me, this means that in a grammar lesson students may do a grammar activity or drill, wherein the form alone (for example, the Past Simple tense) is the message. My students, however, in, for example, classifying different kinds of words that end in "s", were clearly performing Ellis' "focused activity", rather than any discrete drill: overall they were focused not on the grammar point but on the larger picture or goal, the creation of the posters, before, during and after - that is to say, in spite of - my interventions. Transforming a succession of verbs from Present Simple to Past Simple was also, therefore, more than a grammar drill for them: it was a part of a larger, focused activity, and hence that larger activity was TBL.

As I was completing my original reflective essay, a seemingly unrelated teaching experience confirmed this feeling for me. Informally, a student I didn't know or teach asked me to check her grammar worksheet. The grammar area was the third, or unreal, conditional, and the topic was a classic Hollywood film of the 1940s that I happen to know very well. I sensed that knowledge of the film's story would help greatly in completing the worksheet and I asked the student if she knew the film. She replied that she didn't: in other words, she was doing an uncontextualized worksheet in isolation, as a grammar drill or "unfocused task", and only "the form in itself" (the third conditional) was the message. I reflected and realized afresh that my groups, having done a range of prior activities which had familiarized them with their texts, and having a context or reason for making the grammatical

transformations and lexical analyses I insisted on, were focused on the content or message rather than on the form itself.

Conclusions

What implications does a fuller understanding of student learning styles and strategies have for a teacher's practice?

Let me first discuss my own practice. As I remarked, Oxford suggests that teachers should assess their own styles and strategies, "so that they will be aware of their preferences and possible biases", and I would contend that I have become more aware of my own teaching style and strategies - and thus my preferences and possible biases - through my reflection. I have also learned to accept my style rather than wishing to change or exchange it for another style.

Oxford feels that, "Skilled teachers help their students develop an awareness of learning strategies and enable them to use a wide range of appropriate strategies." (Oxford, 2003: 9.) She also advances a case for what she terms "strategy instruction", saying, "There is growing evidence that L2 teachers can and should conduct strategy instruction in their classrooms." (Oxford, 2003: 17.) I am not sure that at any point in my interventions I was conducting explicit instruction in strategy, but I did have a conscious goal of raising student awareness of learning strategies through an exercise in analysis, so I was heartened when I read this, as it gives some theoretical underpinning to what I tried to do.

Moving on to broader concerns, what happens generally when any 'analyzing' teacher in any subject area meets a global/holistic set of students, or vice-versa?

Oxford comments that, "The global student and the analytic student have much to learn from each other. A balance ... is very useful for L2 learning." (Oxford, 2003:7.) It occurs to me that it might again be informative to use the term "student" interchangeably with the term "teacher" here. (In fact, it occurs to me that everything that Oxford says about styles and strategies of learners might fruitfully be applied to teachers' styles and strategies: that it might be informative to go through her work and replace every occurrence of the word "learning" with "teaching" and every instance of the word "learner" with "teacher". The results might be suggestive to and helpful for teachers in all disciplines understanding styles and strategies used in the classroom**.**)

For the moment, if we can posit that, at the start of the Poster Project, my students were, by-and-large, positioned somewhere towards the "global/holistic" end of the "desired degree of generality" scale of learning styles (they threw themselves with relish into a socially-interactive, communicative project, while being "comfortable even when not having all the information" (Oxford, 2003:6)), and if we accept Oxford's prescription that one of the roles of a teacher is to make students aware of a range of appropriate learning strategies, then I think that the intervention of an analytically-inclined teacher, demonstrating a set of cognitive learning strategies, may have had the positive effect of adding some "balance" to my students' outlook.

Turning to those students, when they were focused on producing posters to put on the classroom wall, how, precisely, did they gain from being asked to break off and perform a precise analytical linguistic exercise on two pages of text?

Concerning TBL theory, Rod Ellis provides evidence that, "Explicit knowledge through focused activities leads to language acquisition by activating the language and fluency, constructing knowledge ... and developing explicit linguistic knowledge" (Garcia Laborda, 2003: 2). Or, to put it more simply, "Linguistic knowledge contributes to language acquisition" (Garcia Laborda, 2003: 2). I conclude therefore that in

this regard the interventions I made were justifiable and helpful, as I believe they and the students' analyses that followed them helped the students to understand better learner errors that they had been making.

One of Rebecca Oxford's conclusions is that

> "in evaluating the success of any strategy instruction, teachers should look for individuals' progress toward L2 proficiency and for signs of increased self-efficacy and motivation." (Oxford, 2003: 17)

Here, I would tentatively say that my suggestive use of strategies and focused activities, aimed precisely at developing explicit linguistic knowledge, paved the way for my students' future greater L2 proficiency and self-efficacy and motivation as learners.

As a final word, I should say that I found the reflection I engaged in greatly helpful in clearing my mind and giving me renewed confidence to teach, and I would commend a similar undertaking to others.

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Author

Richard Meech presently teaches writing in the University General Requirements Unit at UAE University. After graduating from the Applied Linguistics department of Edinburgh University, he taught EFL in high schools in Japan and at universities in the UK and Thailand before arriving in the UAE six years ago. He is a Writing and Speaking Examiner and a Reading and Listening Marker for IELTS.