Reflective Teaching and the role of Teaching Assistants

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This paper is a short personal essay on the importance of Reflective Teaching, and the role my Teaching Assistant（TA）played in the success of our CORE C writing class. It will attempt to define what reflective teaching is, and it will seek to determine what part the TA plays in the reflective aspect of teaching. It will also examine what the inclusion of a TA had to offer the TA, myself and of course, most importantly, the students.

I will begin this essay by breaking several rules on academic writing that I have observed faithfully throughout my writing career. The first being that I am writing in the first person; a practice I have avoided like the plague to date. Primarily, I have always adopted this stance because it was drummed into me at school and university that such a practice was frowned upon in the academic world; it is, I was told many times, the way of the ill-educated oaf and second rate journalists. In addition to the feeling that I should heed such scholarly advice, I have also held the belief that writing in a 'neutral' manner helped me avoid writing in a subjective tenor, which can of course result in unconsciously, or otherwise, writing with a pre-determined outcome in mind. However, as I go through my regular reflection on what I have/have not achieved this past semester; events this summer have brought about a need for a deeper reflection of what has occurred in the classroom between April and August of this year and a realisation that personal introspection, even with its inherent dangers to subjective academic discourse, can with judicious use, serve our academic aims well.

To those of you who have taken the time to read this article, first, allow me to say thank you for taking the time to do so. Second, allow me to address a question you may well have asked yourself when reading the first paragraph. I used the word 'success.' How did I define success? How dare I assume the class was successful? I could write a paper on this very point, in fact I have done, several times. However, in the interests of brevity and avoiding a very, very long discussion on what constitutes 'success' at the end of an English Language course, I am going to 'go out on a limb' so to speak, because we（the TA and I）feel that the 'proof of the pudding' in this case can be illustrated by the very simple fact that we had the students write essays at the beginning and end of the course and made a simple comparison. In addition to writing an essay they were asked pertinent questions on the structure of sentences and paragraphs. The comparison revealed a vast improvement in their essays much as one might expect; however, there was also plenty of evidence in their answers on the structure of sentences and paragraphs to suggest that they had learned a great deal over the four months of study. Both elements of the final examination were in free form, avoiding any multiple-choice questions, thereby reducing the risk of rote-learning approaches and copying, so we felt confident in declaring this course a 'success.'

Another rule I am about to break is using a famous quote, an adage or a maxim as a lead into a line of reasoning in preparation for a discussion. I don't use them because I find their use trite, hackneyed, unimaginative, clichéd etc. etc. Having stated this, I feel the following quote is so relevant

for any teacher in any given situation that it warrants a change from my normal practice of avoiding such inclusions, thus I give you my favourite:

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." - William Butler Yeats「教育とは知識を詰め込むことではなく、学問への情熱に火をつけることである。」ウィリアム・バトラー・イェイツ《1865-1939；アイルランドの詩人・劇作家・批評家》

　This quote is something I try to keep in mind as I prepare for all of my classes（I have added the Japanese translation for the benefit of any Japanese professors who may be reading this piece）. Keeping this quote in mind when reflecting on what I do/have done in a class helps me remember that my primary role as an educator is one of facilitator. My ultimate aim is to make the students independent of me; I seek to motivate and encourage them; I seek to give them the tools to enable them to nurture their own learning outcomes.
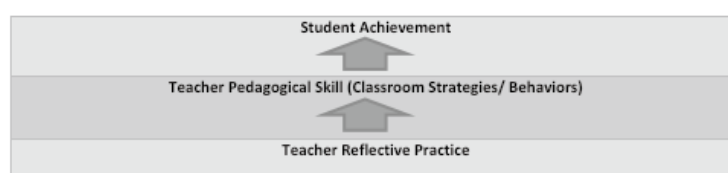
　To continue this discussion I feel a definition of reflection is needed. In essence, it is the practice of looking back at what you have done in a class or course from a critical viewpoint with the aim of improving things. From our analysis, we make changes because we believe that they will bring about enhanced outcomes for our learners. For those of you who prefer more formal definitions, allow me to provide some examples.
　Richards（1996: ix）describes the reflective approach to teaching as being "*initiated and directed by the teacher because it involves instructors observing themselves, collecting data about their own classrooms and their roles within them, and using that data as a basis for self-evaluation, for change, and hence professional growth.*"

　Nunan and Lamb（1996: 120）suggest that "*reflective teachers are ones who are capable of monitoring, critiquing and defending their actions in planning, implementing and evaluating language programs.*"

　The burning question is of course; does reflective teaching produce beneficial results for the students? Common sense dictates that the short answer to this question is yes. An answer in the affirmative is valid because a reflective approach to any human endeavour is always going to improve matters, providing of course, we implement the changes suggested by our analysis. A reflective approach is not only of benefit to the world of teaching; there is barely a business, an institution or a government in the world that does not apply a reflective approach to its endeavours in an attempt to increase the effectiveness of what it does.

　The authors mentioned above along with many others in the field of second language acquisition recognise the benefits of a reflective approach in and out of the classroom. One such as example can be found in the work of Marzano et al.（2012）. They offer the following chart claiming that the skills teachers use in the classroom are causally linked with student achievement.

Student Achievement

Teacher Pedagogical Skill (Classroom Strategies/ Behaviors)

Teacher Reflective Practice

Marzano (2012:3)

According to Marzano and his colleagues; *"A teacher's pedagogical skill in the classroom can be linked with the quantity and quality of student learning. The relationship between classroom strategies and behaviors and student achievement is very straightforward."*

Reflective teaching requires a methodology. The ways and means of incorporating a reflective approach vary between the simple and the complex. An example of the simple method can be found in the writings of Firestone（2014）in which she advocates the use of class journals in which notes are taken. She recommends taking notes on *"what was taught and how students responded, positive or negative. Did they understand the material? Do you need more prep time to effectively teach the lesson? Reflect on this information at the end of the day, noting what you could do differently, or what worked well."* She also proposes the use of student feedback to elicit from students their descriptions of what they learned, and what, if anything, didn't work well in the lesson. Most if not all teachers most likely do this in an informal way in some way or another, even if they are not consciously aware of it. For those educators who are so inclined, there is the complex way of assessing reflective teaching. Richards and Lockhart（1996）examine teacher development through exploring classroom processes. In their treatise, they suggest teachers and students should collect data about the classes, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices. Richards and Lockhart（1996:1-2）maintain that critical reflection involves asking the following questions:

● How can I collect information about my teaching?
● What are my beliefs about teaching and learning, and how do these beliefs affect my teaching?
● Where do these beliefs come from?
● What kind of teacher am I?
● What beliefs do my learners hold about learning and teaching?
● How do these beliefs influence their approach to learning?
● What learning styles and strategies do my learners favour?
● What kind of planning decisions do I make use of?
● What kind of on-the-spot decisions do I make while I teach?
● What criteria do I use to evaluate my teaching?
● What is my role as a teacher?
● How does this role contribute to my teaching style?
● How do my learners perceive my role as a teacher?
● What form or structure do my lessons have?
● How do I communicate goals to my learners?
● How effectively do I utilise learning opportunities within a lesson?
● What kinds of interaction occur in my classroom?
● What interactional styles do my learners favour?
● What kind of grouping arrangements do I use and how effective are they?
● What kind of learning activities do I employ?
● What is the purpose of these activities?
● What patterns of language occur when I teach?
● How do I modify my language to facilitate teaching and learning?
● What opportunities do learners have for authentic language use in my lessons?

A pretty comprehensive list, I'm sure you will agree. A list one is tempted to say could well form the basis of a helpful reflective approach. If I alone were to go through this list, I'm positive that I could identify areas in which improvements could be made. The ability to do so is increased with another pair of eye and ears; that is where the TA comes in. As an individual, I can go through this list and assure myself that I am being reflective in an effective way. For example, in answering the questions:

● What beliefs do my learners hold about learning and teaching?
● How do these beliefs influence their approach to learning?
● What learning styles and strategies do my learners favour?
● What criteria do I use to evaluate my teaching?
● What is my role as a teacher?
● How does this role contribute to my teaching style?
● How do my learners perceive my role as a teacher

I can comfort myself that I am addressing these particular issues with the fact that I have conducted a fair amount of research culminating in several published papers and textbooks examining these arguments. The evidence for this is concrete in the works themselves. For those of you interested in reading further on this; I have included a small sample of these treatises in the bibliography（Tremarco, 2002; 2003; 2007; 2011; 2013）.

A more complex problem arises in answering the following types of questions:

● What patterns of language occur when I teach?
● How do I modify my language to facilitate teaching and learning?
● What kind of on-the-spot decisions do I make while I teach?
● How effectively do I utilise learning opportunities within a lesson?

One way of finding answers is to simply install a video camera; however, there are inherent problems with cameras. The first one being I don't like cameras in a classroom. It is not that I don't want anyone to see what I am doing within the confines of MY domain, a sort of "keep your snout out" if you will. On the contrary, I operate an 'open door' policy with all my classes. Anyone is welcome to pop in anytime; all I ask is that the observer tales the time to discuss what they have witnessed afterwards. It allows for an explanation of my rationale behind what I do in the classroom and provides for an effective exchange of ideas. My problem with cameras is that people behave differently in front of cameras; they will reveal more about how we feel in front of cameras than it will tells us about normal classroom processes. Furthermore, there is the issue of privacy for students. Depending on the student/class of course, but many will feel uncomfortable about someone filming them doing something that they feel that they are 'not good' at making the teacher's job so much harder when trying to get the students to produce their own work. A discussion with a TA however, can prove much more beneficial, particularly when we have discussed such things before a class. The practice between myself and the TA this year have followed a similar pattern to this.

● We discuss the aim of the day/course pre-class

● We discuss the type of class with regard to their strengths and weaknesses
● We discuss how to overcome weaknesses and/or exploit strengths
● We carry out the class, with regular consultations on how things are going
● We make any appropriate changes that need to be made
● We conduct an after class discussion in a mode similar to that of Firestone（2014）above
● We plan and implement the changes for the next class/course

I am going to make a confession at this point before continuing this paper. I did not want a TA in my class; I saw it as another bureaucratic interference, one in which I had no wish to partake. After giving the matter some thought however, I came to the conclusion that it might prove to be of benefit to the students and thus, it was worth giving it a try; if nothing else he could help with assignment marking. After one semester working with the TA, my mind is completely changed. It has been a pleasure working with him. He presence in the classroom has been very good for the students providing a helping hand with individual and group problems. It should be noted of course, one's opinion on the efficacy of a TA depends very much on the individual, but at the risk of sounding like his mother, I have no hesitation in recommending him as a TA.

The TA in question is not a native speaker, his competence in the English language however, is extremely good; much better in fact than many native speakers. He is comfortable with both academic English and colloquial English in equal measure. He is a speaker of five languages, including Japanese which is of great help with the weaker students. As a student of languages he can readily empathise with students both strong and weak. The fact that is studying now on a PhD programme helps build a kind of 'student to student' bond with the class. Coupled with his competence in talking to me about formal and informal matters in class acts an incentive for the students; it gives them something to aim for. Having someone who is studying and has studied （Japanese） at Kagoshima University really helps the students because he can relate to them when it comes to dealing with problems of communicating in a second or third language. Seeing things from their perspective helps him in discussion with me in terms of how we help them in future classes.

What's in it for the TA I hear you ask? Well financially, not a great deal to be honest, but there are other concrete benefits. One obvious one is the teaching practice the TA gets in both English and Japanese, but perhaps one of the most important benefits of being a TA is that of being mentored. It is not something that was at the forefront of our minds when we discussed the course back in March of this year, we saw it merely as a beneficial side effect of what we planned to do. However, from our post class/course discussions it is obvious that it is one of the major benefits of this scheme. Classroom management and teacher methodology are amongst the most important factors in creating a good learning environment and for TAs and others who have received no formal training or education in these very important 'tools of the trade,' working alongside an experienced teacher can prove instrumental in forging good tertiary teachers.

To pick up on the last point of the previous paragraph I want to explore this idea of mentoring further. The training of teachers at the primary and secondary level is very formalised, teaching at the tertiary level not so. Some teachers at the tertiary level have little or no training/education in 'teaching methodology' thus the kind of teacher a student can face at this level can vary

enormously. That can be a both a benefit and a detriment to students. One way to alleviate such problems would be for experienced university professors to pass on this knowledge through the mentoring of a TA. It is important that such a scheme not be foisted on unwilling participants as a good ‘chemistry’ between the professor and TA is vital if it is to produce effective results for the students. Such suppositions of course would need to be empirically proven before going ahead with such a scheme. However, in the interim, allow me to provide you with a little anecdotal evidence that mentoring of TAs can provide benefits for professors, TAs and again, most importantly, students. My TA also teaches part-time on Wednesdays at the university.　Quite often during the last semester, my TA would often say to me that he would put into practice on Wednesdays what he learned on Fridays（our CORE C Writing class day）. This is proof that the effects of mentoring can be felt by other students in a very short space of time. Whether or not those effects are good or bad remain to be seen, we can say with a fair degree of confidence however, that in this case, they were good as the results of his Wednesday class were very similar to ours.

Conclusion

　I think there can be little argument that a reflective approach is of great value to both educators and students alike. The plethora of evidence; a tiny fraction of which was referred to earlier shows this to be incontrovertible. How best to go about this is a very subjective matter however. The way shown in this essay was to use the questions posited by Richards and Lockhart（1996:1-2）. The questions are indeed relevant and thought provoking, providing an excellent basis on which to implement a reflective approach to our teaching.　However, because of the wide-ranging questions it becomes obvious that some questions are best tackled alone in a nice quiet library with no distractions, whereas some questions are best answered in consultation with another party. In this case my TA was used. The input before, during and after a class/course proved to be invaluable. The inclusion of a TA is beneficial to the TA because they get practice in teaching, evaluation, teaching methodology and classroom management.　The TA is also provided with a mentor, someone to help guide the TA through the minefield of teaching in the tertiary area. It benefits the students by providing another teacher in the classroom, one in which they can bond with more easily because they are ‘culturally’ closer to the TA in an educational context than they might be to the professor. Finally, the TA helps the professor by providing a second pair of eyes and ears in the classroom. The TA provides a valuable source of evaluation of the classes and in the way they help facilitate a reflective approach. Without an effective reflective approach to our teaching, our classes are surely the poorer for it.

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