

REFLECTIVE TASKS: AN APPROACH TO INTEGRATING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN (FOREIGN) LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

The professional development of foreign language teachers is of growing interest not only for the teachers themselves but also for professionals involved in teacher education and teacher training. One might argue that it had always been known that the quality of the teacher, i.e. his/her teaching competence, as well as his/her beliefs, exercise a high influence on classroom teaching/learning and learners' performance (e.g. Borg 2011, Hattie 2009). In some contexts and countries, however, this deduction is being transferred only now to university or institutional training of (future) language teachers. In other words, quality teacher training and development have a high impact on teachers' competencies and, eventually, on their teaching. Still, many student teachers are critical, especially of university-based teacher training programmes. They ponder on the gap between theory and practice, and the lack of opportunities to apply their acquired knowledge. In order to bridge this gap, reflection—or reflective practice—is often considered a possible solution. However, one might ask whether reflection and reflective practice is (or can be) integrated effectively into teacher training. Is it even possible to achieve higher and deeper levels of teacher reflection in a setting that is theory-laden, and sometimes far away from the reality of the foreign language classroom?

The concept of reflection, or reflective thinking, is not a new one: American pragmatist John Dewey (1993) describes it as a 'state of doubt' and more than 'just' thinking. Instead, it is an active process, which arises from a problematic situation that needs to be solved actively. In his work *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön (1983) closely connects this approach to action. He makes a distinction between 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' in order to show that professional teachers (must) continuously make decisions more or less consciously. This means, however, that there must be knowledge of (teaching) models and possible ways of action to conduct a 'reflection-on-action', whereas experiences predictably play a more significant role during the hectic situations of foreign language

teaching, in action. A modern, prominent model of reflective practice that picks up Dewey's and Schön's main ideas is the cyclical ALACT model (*Action, Looking back on the action, Awareness of essential aspects, Creating alternative methods for action, Trial (Action)*) (Korthagen & Vasalos 2005). Though these sound promising, reflection models are often critiqued for being impractical in the everyday lives of teachers, as they take up too much time, and the alternative actions developed might not even be applied to the same classroom immediately.

In this article, I am interested to find answers to the following questions: How far can reflection be implemented in the education of (future) foreign language teachers, especially (but not exclusively) in university settings? Which forms or contexts of reflection can be used, which ones are required, and which approaches to reflection have an empirical basis? How can they be integrated effectively and sustainably in teacher training? This essay seeks to provide at least a (first) basic response to these questions and to gather ideas by discussing the role of reflective thinking in foreign language teaching, as well as briefly explaining its importance and efficacy. The article is based on studies and foreign language research, and the little existing empirical knowledge, also considering the potential pitfalls of an over-emphasis of reflective practice and issues of practicality. Afterwards, suggestions for the implementation of reflection for foreign language teachers will be presented. This is a task-based approach towards reflective practice that I am implementing in my university seminars and teacher workshops in Germany.

Reflective Thinking in Foreign Language Teaching Research

How certain forms of knowledge influence teachers' decisions is of continued interest in research, especially to the extent to which certain subject teachers make particular didactical or methodical decisions and reflect on them. Research that deals with the reflections of foreign language teachers often shows positive results, as well as aspects that must be considered with the implementation of reflection:

- The enthusiasm for teaching is being newly vitalized through reflective practice, leading to a better learning outcome for the students; at least, this is what is perceived by the reflective teacher (Curtis & Szestay 2005).
- Guided training of critical thinking must be provided over a longer period of time (Liou 2001).
- The videographical analysis and discussion of personal teaching attempts appear to be helpful for the reflection on action (Harford & MacRuairc 2008).
- The level of reflective thinking strongly varies between teachers (Farrell 1999).
- Student and novice teachers undergo a certain development, showing different levels of reflection (Roters 2015).

That reflection can have positive effects on the professional development (and immediate actions) of foreign language teachers seems to be self-evident. In many cases, however, more extensive studies are required to examine teacher reflection, and its direct effects on the quality of teaching and learning (cf. Akbari 2007).

Although group discussions and other forms of cooperative advice often support reflection in teaching, Burton (2009: 303) summarizes the accompanying dilemma very well: '[A] lot of teacher knowledge is being lost to the wider professional community due to the fact that teachers rarely write down their insights.' Therefore, she speaks for a more intensive and written reflection, as well as the exchange and the progression of such written reflections. For instance, portfolio work could ensure this if the collection of works and pieces of reflective writing is initiated collectively—for example, in the context of reflective tasks (see below) in seminars or in professional groups in teacher training—and put into practice as well as unconditionally shared and discussed, and progressed within the group of teacher trainers.

As Roters (2015) shows, the development of a reflective practitioner plays a more significant role in the curricula in the United States (US) than it does in the German system of teacher education. This might be the case because of the general orientation of teaching standards as well as the influence of Dewey and Schön in the US. The sample Roters investigates shows that the teachers in the US have a more advanced reflective competence. Roters recommends—specifically related to foreign language teachers and from a theory-based didactical point of view—a more

intensive implementation of reflection tasks during teacher training. She also calls for clearer role positioning as well as a qualification of trainers in order to initiate and guide reflective thinking and action. Proceeding on research in expertise and comparing the respective reflective competences of American and German teacher students, Roters (2015) empirically deduces certain levels of reflection that become apparent at the novice stage: Novice teacher students start off at a very descriptive level and, at first, focus on self-centred reflection. Only later are student teachers able to reflect on more technological and methodological levels, progressing towards reflection based on subject-related concepts, and even adapt and reflect to a certain extent 'in action'. Only at the last level do foreign language teacher students focus more on productivity and transformation by questioning their own beliefs about teaching and learning.

Forms and Methodical Approaches

With the evidence (and questions) provided by research, the following didactical and methodical question arises: How can reflection be put into practice in the education of (future) language teachers? Wallace (1991) discussed the role of pre-existing beliefs and knowledge of student teachers and the need for a reflective cycle to grow professional competence by reflecting these assumptions against institutionalized knowledge provided by a teacher training institution. Several approaches use action research and develop smaller research questions with reflective features—for example, integrating methods with accompanying evaluation strategies to examine the effects on learners.

Reflective thinking can be initiated and supported in various ways:

- Partner or group discussions (e.g. for a teaching lesson or for teaching preparation) (Farrell 1999).
- Case-oriented analysis of critical incidents and their discussion (e.g. with the help of teaching videos or teaching transcriptions of personal or foreign teaching examples (Harford & MacRuairc 2008).
- (Individual) reflective writing (e.g. with guiding questions, within the context of portfolio work, or teaching journals (examples in Burton et al., 2009; recommendations for practical use in Roters 2012: 280–282),
- Competence- or skill-based approaches of self-diagnosis with repetitive reflective

elements (*The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages: EPOSTL* (Newby 2012)).

The reason for reflection can be a critical incident or a question that is worth reflecting on. The problem or question must be relevant, and, at the same time, motivating to work on. If the question is too mundane, one risks reflecting just for the sake of reflection, which would make the intrinsic opportunity of this approach worthless. At the same time—and especially in new groups of student teachers, for example—one should consider that the chosen starting point might not provide a personal target, since individual participants may need a settling-in phase for the group process (even though some very open or extroverted individuals may directly talk about very personal experiences). For all participants, rather neutral situations—such as analysing the videography of unknown teachers—seem more appropriate at first for new groups, since they can empathize with them and reflect from a more distant point of view.

In each training phase, future teachers should have the opportunity to ask themselves, ‘What do I already know?’ This will help them evaluate their skills together with their instructors’ advice, and discuss the fields and competences on which they can improve. In this case, portfolio work—for example, in teaching practice—can be an advantage, especially because later on it is possible to consult and check again which competencies have actually improved or may have stagnated in order to then reflect on alternative approaches and opportunities (e.g. in the context of EPOSTL, see Newby [2012]).

The question remains as to how reflective thinking in its various approaches can be integrated efficiently in existing, diverse concepts and modules of teacher education.

The Integration of Reflective Tasks in Foreign Language Teacher Education

Owing to the importance of the development of future foreign language teachers, reflection should be a fundamental element of every new education process. It must accompany this process over the long term to have a positive effect on individual progressions. Future teachers should first be sensitized to reflective thinking. They should be ‘trained’ in a certain way, with instructions and assistance, considering Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, in order to reflect, for example, in the context of long-term reflection portfolios, and not merely describe the contents of the training. Richards and Lockhart (2012) as well

as Farrell (2015) offer ideas, approaches, and activities with different focuses, especially for foreign language teaching.

In order to ensure such progress in teacher education, reflection could be made tangible and viable through a didactical concept, such as task-based (language) learning or teaching (Gerlach et al. 2012). The effective and deep integration of task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been one of the most important methodological innovations in recent decades for the discipline of foreign language teaching (Willis 1996; Ellis 2003; Ellis 2009). Given that future foreign language teachers are expected to design teaching practices supported by (complex) tasks, it seemed like a logical conclusion for the author to design and evaluate his own teacher training seminars in the form of ‘reflective tasks’, which are shown in Illustrations 1 (basic structure of a reflective task) and 2 (concrete seminar example). The goal of the reflective task is to integrate competence-oriented experiences of lessons by teachers (in training) into seminars and workshops in teacher training. The approach of TBLT provides a structure (*task-as-work plan*) of specific higher skills achieved by smaller (and often in the context of education, differentiated) situational tasks. The reflective task is, therefore, formulated as a statement of growing (teaching/reflecting) competence on the teacher students’ side, and everything else leading towards the reflective task are seminar activities and support provided by the teacher trainer or cooperatively through the group of student teachers.

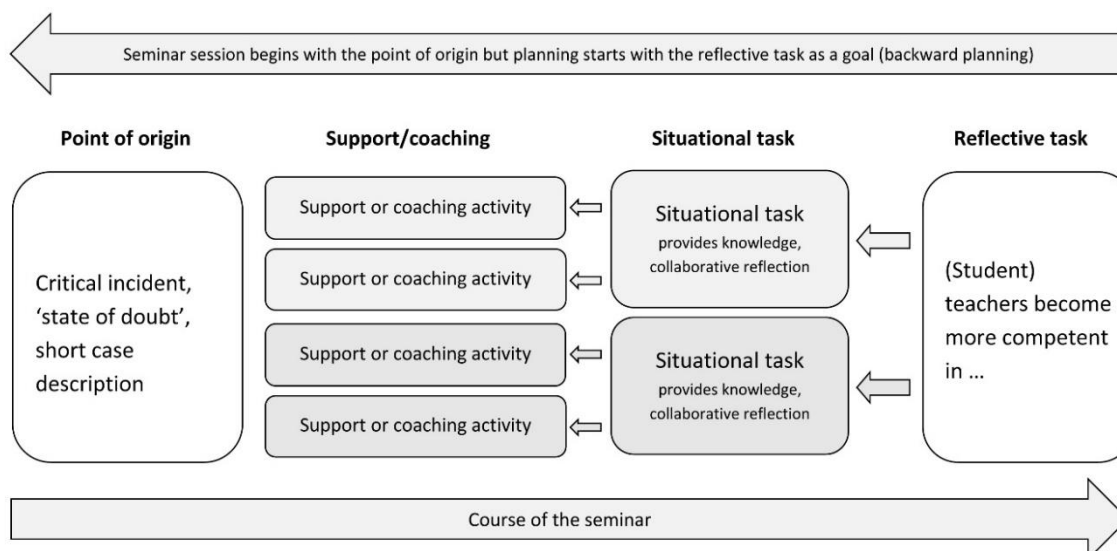


Illustration 1: Sample structure of a *task-as-work plan* diagram showing a reflective task and the backward-planning process which necessitates situational tasks and support/coaching activities that support learning and reflection.

The *point of origin* is a critical incident of one of the participants in the teacher training class and a joint sharing of previous experiences by fellow students; it might also be a third-party critical incident, especially if the group just met, or is at a very early stage, in their teacher training. The role of the instructor in this case is to design a *reflective task* that allows for the reflection on that critical incident in *situational tasks* suitable for the group and provides support through differentiated *support/coaching activities*. The arrows in the illustration indicate the backward planning process

of the reflection through situational tasks and support or coaching activities that the teacher trainer is involved in catering to the different needs of (future) language teachers.

To provide a more concrete example, a reflective task is shown in Illustration 2 from an *Introduction to Language Teaching* course. Herein, a reflective process of ‘oral error-correcting’ as a typical facet of foreign language teaching—a ‘reflective task’—is put into practice in a university seminar.

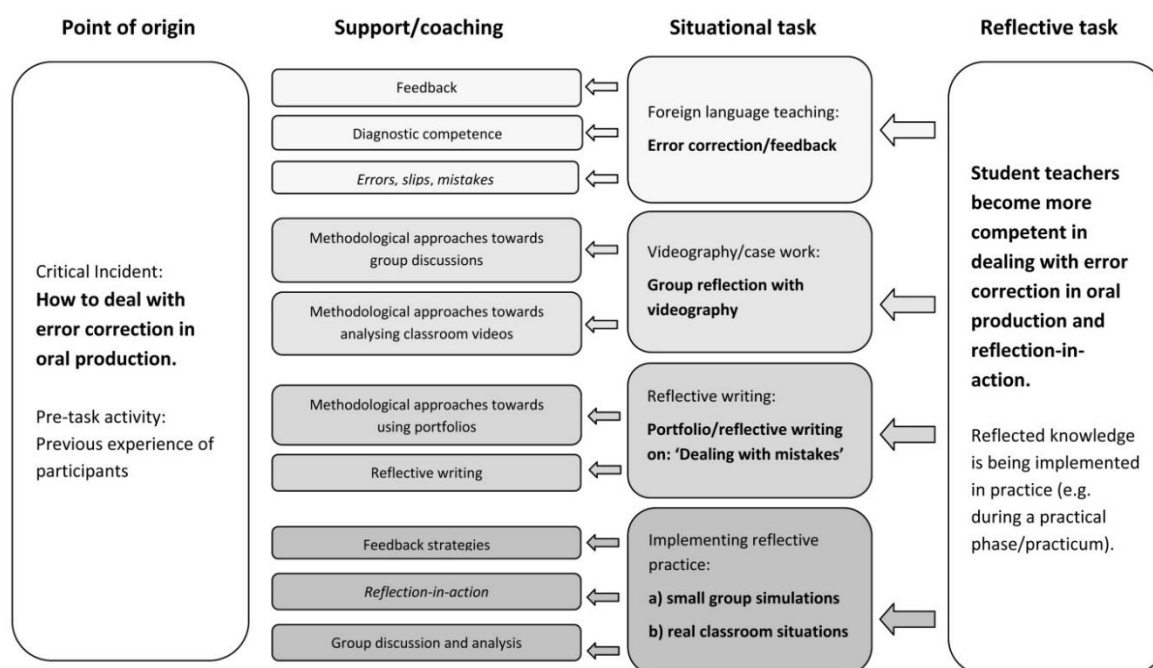


Illustration 2: A *task-as-work plan* diagram showing a reflective task on error correction.

With the help of this sample task of oral error correction, the *point of origin* for a *reflective task*, in this case, is a critical incident in a practicum—a state of doubt, in Dewey’s words. In order to deal with the issue competently and to deal with it in action in future situations (*reflective task* on the right), several contents of the seminar (in this case an *Introduction to Language Teaching* course) are treated in *situational tasks* (on action; e.g. didactical content and methodical approaches, but also concrete group discussions about foreign teaching records). These, however, have to be prepared on the basis of advice and inputs from the teacher trainer or through the self-guided learning of the students or novice teachers. Such a thematic structure—which can also be made available to the participants in order to be more transparent—allows for a highly goal-oriented coordination catering to the needs of the future teachers. It also helps the teacher educator to structure his/her classes and make requirements transparent. However, reflection and specific topics should not be dealt with just for the sake of the topic. Instead, they should be based on the practical experiences of the students in the seminars or might be based on case studies in the beginning. In order to address one of the criticisms against reflective thinking in teacher training and education, a reflective task always requires the application of theoretical knowledge and its distribution and sharing in the group of (future) teachers. Moreover, aspects of *support/coaching* do not need to be worked through completely for every *situational task* given. Rather, they have to be understood as options for the teacher trainers to implement these aspects to a greater extent at the beginning of seminar work and may be repeated later to emphasize key concepts. This allows for a high level of differentiation within the work plan and the needs of the individual teacher trainees, based on their individual levels of reflection.

In particular, if the process of reflection is supposed to last and become part of the reflective cycle and professional development, it should be documented, for example, via the use of teacher portfolios or the EPOSTL, which allows the documentation of teaching skills and their learning. Such documentation may be introduced in one seminar, but it also needs to be constantly coordinated and used continuously. This may be an organizational challenge within teacher training institutions which can only be mastered locally through the

cooperative exchange of staff involved in teacher education and development. Nevertheless, this endeavour might prove fruitful for teacher trainers and trainees. For example, in the course of implementing reflective tasks in my own seminars, I have noticed substantial changes in the levels of reflection in participants’ written works that implemented elements of the reflective tasks, which became apparent through a deeper analysis. As the data is part of an ongoing research project that tries to investigate reflective practice on a longitudinal level, much of these results are preliminary, difficult to assess, and still superficial. Yet, what becomes apparent (and, in hindsight, is not that surprising) is the fact that the reflective task, or rather the growth in teaching and reflective competence connected with it, becomes more productive if (student) teachers are given the chance to apply the knowledge they have gained immediately in practicums or classroom situations.

Conclusion and Outlook

This article discussed the basic tenets of reflective practice and its importance for foreign language teaching from a theoretical basis. Very little is known about the impact that reflective practice can have on teachers’—and, ultimately—learners’ performance in foreign language classrooms. However, research has identified some promising approaches towards reflective practice and sustainable teacher development that can address certain levels of reflection. The concept of a reflective task was introduced as an approach towards the implementation of different methods and techniques of teacher reflection in teacher training.

With the instructions of the teacher trainers, and in the cooperative advising and coaching process about the necessary and tangible progressions of future foreign language teachers, reflective thinking and action, substantiated by reflective tasks as a structuring element, could integrate reflection more intensively in (foreign) language teacher education. Thus, it could support the sustainable professional development of language teachers. However, one should still be aware of some pitfalls of an over-emphasis of reflection in teacher education that might lead to a substantial lack of (theoretical) knowledge if the teaching of essential teacher knowledge is reduced for the sake of integrating more reflection. A balanced

way that also emphasizes the role of teacher knowledge—which, only then, can lead to productive and theory-based reflection—seems to be a sensible approach.

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