The Role of Supervisor in Creating the Supporting Conditions for Teachers' Self-Reflection: Action Research

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Abstract

For teachers to change their practices and improve their performance, they need to reflect upon their actions consciously and continually. Understanding the self-reflection tendencies of teachers would provide a realistic starting point for making recommendations for teachers' professional development and creating the supporting conditions for teachers to reflect. The role of the teachers' supervisor in this process is instrumental in order to provide teachers the time needed to exercise reflective practice and to adequately guide them. This action research measures the self-reflection tendencies of 13 foreign language teachers. Data were collected via two instruments: (a) a survey (quantitative data) and (b) a focused-group discussion (qualitative data). Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to describe teachers' self-reflection tendencies and frequency of reflection. Findings showed that teachers reported higher self-reflection tendencies on the survey than what they reported in the focus group discussion. The findings guided the development of the action plan to explain the role of the teachers and teachers' supervisors in increasing teachers' reflective teaching tendencies to improve students' learning.

Introduction

Teaching foreign languages in the twenty-first century has undergone a paradigm shift to equip learners with the necessary critical thinking and language skills to meet-world challenges with professional language proficiency, autonomy, and problem-solving skills. Such demands require a distinguished degree of teachers' awareness of what students can and cannot do, intentionality in planning lessons to address students' needs, implementation of meaningful assessment tools to measure students' learning, capability to adjust instruction in response to students' learning, and high frequency and quality of self-reflection. The challenge is that while teachers attend the credential teaching programs and acquire the essential knowledge and skills to support students' learning, the importance of embracing insightful, recurring self-reflection through the course of their professional career is often not emphasized enough. However, self-reflection should not be overlooked. It is vital to teachers' and students' advancement as it aids in teachers' continued learning, professional growing. Subsequently, self-reflection leads to a better understanding of students' needs and instructional strategies. Therefore, a different type of thinking is needed to address this issue. Danielson (2009) explained that difficult choices require teachers to practice a high-level of self-reflection. Teachers would need to reflect on their role in the classroom to improve performance.

Dewey (1910) reminded practitioners to step away from routine actions in their daily work. He explained that, over time, individuals, who do not reflect on their practices, become trapped in a routine as their actions are driven by impulse and traditions. He added that these individuals would be blinded by their routine actions and would not see that their actions are just an option of many possibilities. They become agents of others in the decision-making process. They would not innovate in their practices or initiate a change to improve students' learning.

Being a reflective teacher means more than having logical and rational problem-solving skills. Reflective teachers engage their intuition, emotions, and passion. They practice conscious and continuous reflection upon their actions (Mezirow, 2000).

When teachers practice reflective teaching, they need time to self-ass their own teaching and the content they teach, consider students' feedback in instruction, and revise content and instructional strategies to improve students' learning. Self-reflection is not a simple task and is most effective when implemented with the support of colleagues and mentors. Benamor and Guerroundj (2018) recommend that mentors guide through the self-reflection process and provide how-to models. Through discussions with peers, supervisors, and more experienced mentors, teachers are empowered and encouraged to reflect and modify their teaching. Also, teachers should be provided with adequate time for the self-reflection process. The school management system shares the responsibility in sparing teachers the time, access to mentors, and supervisors' guidance.

This action research aims to assess language teachers' self-reflection tendencies to guide the decision-making process of teacher professional development. The research uses Hall and Simeral's (2015) framework for developing reflective teachers. Hall and Simeral explained that teachers' beliefs guide their daily actions in a cyclical manner. In the self-reflection cycle, teachers "develop awareness before they act with intentionality, they engage in intentional practice prior to assessing the impact of one's actions, and then they determine impact prior to enacting interventions" (pp. 38–39). For teachers to adopt reflective mindset, Hall and Simeral (2015) noted that reflection must develop through teachers' proactive, continuous monitoring of their reflection. They must constantly be attentive to their teaching and to students' learning. The last step in the self-reflection cycle is when teachers make decisions intentionally and adjust their

instruction to better meet the needs of students. The adjustment of instruction must be based on

the results of in-classroom assessment. Hall and Simeral's (2015) practical framework for

teachers' self-reflection presents five essential characteristics that could guide teachers'

professional development programs at the school level (Figure 1):

1. Awareness of students, teaching content, teaching approaches and teaching context

2. Planning teaching objectively

3. Assessing students' response to instruction

4. Adjusting instruction in response to students' learning

5. Frequency of self-reflection
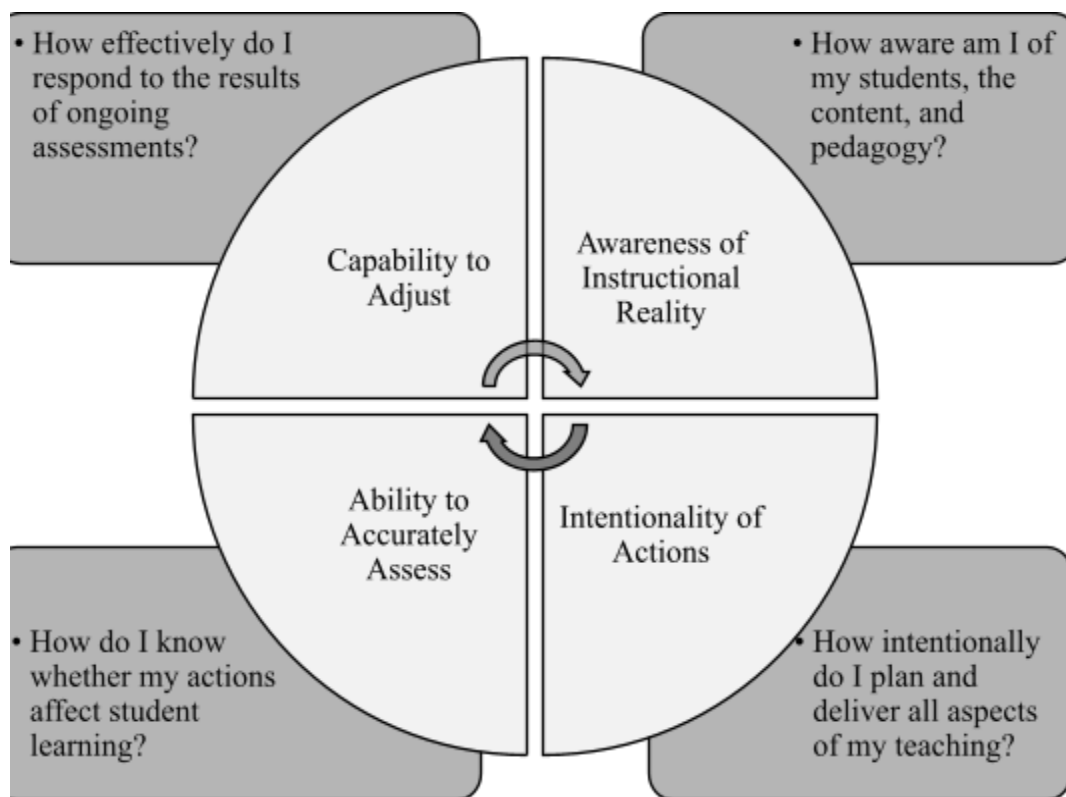
Figure 1 The Reflective Teaching Cycle (Adapted from Hall and Simeral, 2015)

Additionally, Hall and Simeral (2015) present teachers' reflective tendencies along a

self-reflection continuum. They explain that as teachers build their knowledge and develop their

teaching skills, they move along the continuum with the end goal of reaching a refinement stage of self-reflection that is consistent and continuous. There are four stages of self-reflection: (1) Unaware stage, (2) Conscious Stage, (3) Action Stage, and (4) Refinement Stage (Figure 2). Below is a description of the stages of self-reflection. Hall and Simeral ask teachers to remember that the self-reflection continuum is simply a tool to help them learn about how they think, act, and reflect to become effective decision makers and practitioners.

Figure 2 Continuum of Self-Reflection Stages, Adapted from Hall and Simeral (2015)

1. ***Unaware stage.*** Hall and Simeral (2015) define unaware as "having no knowledge of a situation or a fact" (p. 46). In the unaware stage of self-reflection, teachers have vague and shallow understanding of teaching principles and practices. They have very little knowledge of teaching strategies and are not attentive to their students' learning. Teachers in the unaware stage do not reflect deeply about their teaching responsibilities.

2. ***Conscious stage.*** Hall and Simeral (2015) describe the conscious stage as "being aware of what is around you and having knowledge with the ability to think" (p. 71). In this stage, teachers attempt to understand what their students can and cannot do. They track students' development through unit tests and grades. They describe students' learning in general terms. They are aware of the need to implement new instructional techniques but cannot match their strategies to students' needs.

3. ***Action stage.*** Hall and Simeral (2015) define action as "the fact or process of doing something, typically to achieve an aim" (p. 98). Teachers in the action stage "both take

action when they see a lack of learning and try multiple methods to solve the problems

they encounter" (p. 101). Teachers understand students' needs, can provide specific

information about students' performance, and explain how their teaching is tied to

previous and future lessons. They implement classroom assessment tools to assess

students' learning but find a difficulty adjusting their instruction to meet the new needs of

students. They may intervene to adjust instruction, but intervention does not solve the

problem.

4. *Refinement stage.* Hall and Simeral (2015) define refinement as "improvement or

   clarification of something by making small changes" (p. 123). Teachers in the refinement

   stage "strive to see students in terms of strengths, not deficits" (p. 127). They base their

   teaching on research and can precisely describe students' needs and learning styles. They

   are aware of the content they teach and can employ multiple teaching strategies to tailor

   content to maximize students' needs. When developing their lessons, they set objectives

   intentionally. While teaching, they orchestrate their lessons skillfully and adjust

   instruction smoothly to meet the evolving needs of students. Hall and Simeral (2015)

   indicate that teachers in the refinement stage are always self-reflecting.

The goal of this action research is to answer one question that relates to teachers'

reflective teaching stages and tendencies: What are the self-reflection tendencies of the

participating foreign language teachers?

Research Design

To answer the research question, action research with an explanatory mixed-method

approach was chosen to generate understanding of teachers' self-reflection and act upon it.

Mertler (2017) describes this design as one where "The practitioner-researcher first collects

quantitative data and then gathers additional qualitative data in order to help support, explain, or elaborate on the quantitative results" (p. 107). The action research followed Creswell's (2005) strategy of convenient sampling of individuals at a particular educational site. The sample consisted of 13 teachers of a foreign language in a college in California. They volunteered to participate in the study in response to an email sent by the researcher. To answer the research question, the study used two means to collect quantitative and qualitative data: (1) Survey (Hall and Similar, 2015) to collect quantitative data; (2) Focus group discussion to collect qualitative data. See Appendix A. Initially, teachers responded to the online survey questions following the instructions of the researcher. The survey measured teachers' reflective teaching stages and tendencies. The survey includes 10 items with four options. Each option corresponds to a particular self-reflection stage. The survey was used to collect the quantitative data. Then, six weeks after taking the survey, teachers participated in a focus group discussion to share their daily reflective teaching practices. The researcher conducted the discussion. Questions were guided by the 10 survey items in the self-reflective assessment survey.

Data Analysis

The researcher adopted the recommendations of Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) for analyzing and presenting the quantitative and qualitative data. Descriptive statistics such as percentage was used to analyze the quantitative data. To analyze the collected data from the focus group, the researcher took Cornell notes of the discussion and coded the qualitative data. Qualitative data were coded into themes. The researcher looked for meaning-capturing codes that corresponded to five reflective teaching tendencies: (a) awareness of instructional reality, (b) planning lessons with intentionality, (c) assessment of students' needs, (d) adjustment of

instruction in response to assessment, and (e) frequency of self-reflection. The mixed-method analysis of data helped explain the relation between the qualitative and the quantitative results.

Findings and Discussion

The action research answers the question: What are the self-reflection tendencies of the participating foreign language teachers? The results of the survey indicated that nine teachers were within the Action Stage of self-reflection tendencies (Table 1), three teachers were in the refinement stage, and one teacher was in the conscious stage. However, the qualitative data revealed a discrepancy between the collected data from the focus group discussion and the survey results. During the focus group discussion, all the participants indicated that while answering the survey, they imagined their desire to carry out the reflective teaching tasks that pertained to the Action stage. In reality, and most of the time, teachers follow a preset teaching content and activities that are mandated by the curriculum. When time permits, they change content and design lesson plans to address students' needs. This finding would place the thirteen teachers in the conscious stage of reflective teaching.

Table 1

Instructors Stages of Reflective Teaching

Conscious	Action	Refinement
1	9	3
8%	69%	23%

Regarding teachers' awareness of their instructional reality (students, content, and pedagogy) 69% of teachers were in the conscious stage, 23% in the action stage and 8% in the refinement stage of reflective teaching. However, as explained above, during the focus group discussion, the response of the thirteen teachers showed that they were within the conscious stage of reflective teaching, with no indication of the action or refinement stage of reflective

teaching. Findings showed that teachers stick to the textbook learning plan to make sure that they cover the required material. They opt to understand their students' learning needs, but cannot pinpoint why students struggle, as there are many variables. They track students' development through classroom performance and testing results, but describe students' performance in general terms such as "student X does not participate in class, students' homework is acceptable, listening skills are not strong, reading still needs improvement, students don't volunteer to answer questions, etc." Teachers explained that they embed assessment tools in the lesson to assess students' learning but did not explain how they would adjust instruction on spot to better attend to students' needs. According to Hall and Simeral (2015) teachers in the conscious stage are aware of the need to implement new engaging instructional strategies but cannot think about specific actions to take to address the needs on the spot. Hall and Simeral (2015) defined conscious as "being aware of what is around you and having knowledge with the ability to think" (p. 71). Regarding the frequency of reflection, teachers mostly reflect after grading assignments or quizzes. None of the teachers indicated that they continuously reflect or that reflection will guide their on-spot adjustment of instruction to better attend to students' needs, which is the frequency of reflection at the "Refinement Stage" of self-reflection.

Action Plan and Recommendations for Practice

Mills (2017) reminded researchers to ask, "Based on what I have learned from this investigation, what should I do now?" (p. 155). Accordingly, the researcher reflected on the findings to decide on the action plan. The findings suggested that the self-reflection tendencies of teachers are at the conscious stage. It can be developed to the action and refinement stages to better meet the needs of students' learning. Zeichner and Liston (2013) argued that teachers' practices are influenced in many ways such as their pedagogical beliefs and attitudes.

Additionally, Zeichner and Liston (2013) explained that the contexts in which teachers work, rules, regulations, teaching schedules, and directives outside teachers' control limit their freedom to act according to their own pedagogical beliefs. During the focus group discussion, teachers indicated that they mostly follow a prescribed teaching schedule that mandates the content and method of instruction. This places limitations on what each teacher could do to adjust instruction to students' needs. This action plan takes into consideration such limitations. Reflective teachers need the supporting conditions such as a manageable teaching schedule, adequate preparation time, and a fixed group of students to teach. Accordingly, to improve teachers' self-reflection tendencies, the role of the school administration is instrumental and needs to be defined to facilitate teachers' development of reflective teaching practices and subsequently improve students' learning. The following action plan describes the role of the administration.

Action Plan

Hall and Simeral (2017) remind us that for teachers to develop their reflective tendencies, administration needs to have extensive knowledge in principles, practices, benefits, and challenges of reflective teaching. Immediate supervisors have an essential role in engaging teachers in reflective dialogues to discuss successes and challenges, identifying teachers' individual developmental needs, motivating them, and facilitating teachers' self-reflection. Supervisors must guide and empower. They should act as leaders and exhibit the necessary behavior to achieve the desired teacher-development results. Supervisors create the proper training environments for teaching to flourish (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Therefore, administration shall design a reflective teaching professional development program to guide teachers to the next stage of self-reflection. In this program, teachers can collaborate with peers as well as supervisors to establish the meaning of, and purpose for, their learning experiences.

With these goals in mind, teachers plan instruction, reflect upon instructional practices, and exchange resources. It is anticipated that by doing so, teachers' self-confidence will increase, and they will develop self-direction in their learning.

Meuser, Liden, Wayne, and Henderson (2011) found individuals who are interested to be reflective are high performers. Therefore, only interested teachers will participate in the reflective teaching professional development program. Volunteering to participate in the program should increase teacher's receptivity to learning. At the beginning of the new performance plan in the new rating cycle, the supervisor advises teachers to set individualized learning plans considering their reflective teaching tendencies. Supervisor and teachers meet to set goals for students' learning and professional goals to grow as reflective practitioners. The supervisor celebrates teachers' successes in achieving their goals and take actions to show teachers that their concerns and needs are priorities.

Hall and Simeral (2017) explain the benefits of constructive feedback in enhancing teachers' reflective skills and abilities. Regular feedback has a transformational effect on teachers' performance when it is matched to teachers' initial stages of self-reflection. Therefore, it is recommended that supervisors plan to tailor classroom observation protocol and pre-and post-conference meetings for the observation with teachers according to each individual teacher's stage of self-reflection. Classroom observation is not a one-size-fits-all type of observation protocol. Rather, the observation is tailored to promote teacher' awareness of students' needs and ability to plan lessons objectively, to assess students' response to instruction, and to adjust instruction in response to assessment. Through dialogues and empowering strategies, the supervisor strengthens teachers' confidence to make changes in their practices.

Furthermore, the supervisor creates opportunities for teachers to carry out methodical action research to improve their learning and sharing their experiences with peers at the school-level. By doing so, supervisors would help in creating value for the school to attract, retain, and support the continued learning of well-prepared and committed teachers (Liden et al., 2014). When teachers acquire the desired experience that allows them to be successful with students, they will be an even greater resource for the school.

Limitations

Action research is a human experience with the intent to generate knowledge (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The researcher realizes that she might have brought subjectivity when interpreting the results. Anyone may revisit the data and see new findings. Also, results are bound by moment in time, the research context, and the participants. Generalizability is not the intent of the researcher.

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Reflective Self-Assessment Tool

Reprint from Hall and Simeral (2015, p. 26–31)

1. **When planning for today's (or tomorrow's) lesson, MOST OFTEN I...**

    a. Begin with the content and activities that we will be covering, and occasionally prepare specific teaching strategies.
    b. Utilize recent student assessment data to determine what I'm going to teach and how I'm going to teach it.
    c. Spend most of my time deciding which instructional methods I'll use to meet specific needs of my students, relying on unit plans to determine the content.
    d. Consult the teacher's edition and follow the lessons as provided

2. **When considering the frequency that I reflect on my teaching, MOST OFTEN I...**

    a. Reflect usually after teaching a particular lesson and/or analyzing an assessment.
    b. Reflect after grading student work or when prompted by an administrator, coach, or colleague.
    c. Occasionally reflect on my own, usually after grading assignments or quizzes.
    d. Continuously reflect, including during the lesson itself.

3. **When planning to address student misconceptions, MOST OFTEN I...**

    a. Address them when they occur, because it is difficult to tell where students will struggle.
    b. Follow the plan for the lesson from beginning to end.
    c. Analyze student work to determine what struggles they're having, then plan to address them.
    d. Plan for check‑ins through the lesson, so I can provide support as necessary.

4. **When I encounter students that struggle in a lesson, MOST OFTEN I...**

    a. Analyze each student's specific struggles to determine a course of action to address them.
    b. Can't always tell why they struggle, because there are so many variables.
    c. Realize I have little control over how some students perform, so I continue to encourage them.
    d. Look at my teaching strategies to see if changing strategies might have a better effect.

5. **When attempting to re‑engage students who are off‑task, MOST OFTEN I...**

    a. Stop the lesson, regroup the students, and resume the lesson when I'm ready.

b. Address the situation with a variety of pre‑planned engagement strategies.
c. Employ a strategy that I am most comfortable with and have used before with success.
d. Use ideas from the lesson plan I'm following and/or power through in hopes that the students will reengage.

6. When I ask questions in class, MOST OFTEN I...

a. Ask questions that I have prepared in advance.
b. Ask questions from a collection I have prepared, varying my asking/answering strategies.
c. Ask questions that come to me while I'm teaching that will continue to move the lesson forward.
d. Ask the questions as written in the lesson plan.

7. When describing the students whom I teach each day, MOST OFTEN I...

a. Can identify those who are most/least successful, who struggle with assignments, and who are the first to finish.
b. Share the students' academic profiles and can cite the latest assessment data.
c. Focus on personality, behavioral, and overarching descriptive traits.
d. Can explain the latest assessment data, including anecdotal information, and describe how students are grouped for instruction.

8. When students are struggling in a lesson, MOST OFTEN I...

a. Stick with the lesson plans to make sure we cover the required material.
b. Attempt to address the learning gaps by modifying the following day's lesson.
c. Adjust my instructional approaches immediately.
d. Will go back and re‑teach the problems they got wrong.

9. When determining the level of success of a particular unit, MOST OFTEN I...

a. Monitor the progress of individual students through continuous formative and summative assessment strategies.
b. Monitor class performance on lesson assignments and/or quizzes to see if they are "getting it."
c. Monitor performance by administering an end‑of‑unit test and noting student scores.
d. Monitor class progress through formative and summative assessment strategies.

10. When reflecting on the levels of performance my students demonstrated on a recent assessment, MOST OFTEN I...

a. Check the grade book to see how the students fared.
b. Can describe individual students and the specific concepts they have mastered.

c. Explain with solid details about how groups of students performed.
d. Provide information about how the class did as a whole.