**Report on a Professional Development Workshop: Managing a Student-centered Conversation-based Lesson**

Kevin P. Garvey

*Kanda University of International Studies*

*Chiba, Japan*

Abstract

Communicative language teaching requires that students produce their own, creative language. However, conversation-based lessons can sometimes lose focus. How can the teacher use reflective practice to focus their lessons?

This report summarizes the proceedings of a workshop titled “Managing a Student-Centered Conversation-based Lesson”, conducted on October 15th of the KOTESOL 2016 conference. The workshop began at 1:30 in the afternoon and lasted for 80 minutes, with approximately fifty instructors participating.

Using the example task of “giving directions”, this workshop was split into three sections.The first part of the workshop focused on a simulation of a classroom, with co-construction of the task among “students” and “teacher”. The second part of the workshop focused on exchanging ideas, techniques and strategies between teacher-participants. The final part of the workshop focused on interaction type and length, the usage of time, and questions for reflective practice.

**INTRODUCTION**

**The Growth of TESOL and the Need for Training**

Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is a fast-growing field. The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) reports 118 separate organizations (including KOTESOL) (2016), hosting conferences, events and publications for teachers in the TESOL field. While an exact number of TESOL instructors worldwide is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain, it can be said with certainty that the number is large and growing.

The high demand for English language education worldwide should be matched by the quality of the instructors. KOTESOL and organizations like it offer opportunities for instructors to improve as teachers through the presentation and sharing of ideas and exposure to the most recent research in their fields. This year’s KOTESOL conference made a special appeal for workshops aimed at newer and less experienced TESOL instructors of which, given the rapid growth of the field, there are many. The workshop described here sought to answer that appeal. It is the goal of this report to summarize this interactive workshop, iterate the theories by which it was conceived, present topics for future workshops, and present the reflective practice content in a way that will allow readers to engage in some of the same activities undertaken during the conference.

**Research Background**

Many of the guiding lights for this workshop’s structure and questions came from the same field of reflective practice that the KOTESOL 2016 plenary speaker, Thomas Farrell, presented during his speech. Since the conference, the author has attempted to supplement the research background work with the works of Farrell, in the hopes that readers interested in that speech might find more voices in the field to further their own exploration of the topic.

Simone Galea, in an argument for the constant reinvention and non-conventionalization of reflective practice relates Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”, in which “...reflection is metaphorized as a shadowy dark unclear cave but a necessary place through which the acquisition of knowledge becomes possible.” (Galea, 2012)

The modern practice of reflective teaching is most commonly attributed to John Dewey’s writing in “How We Think” (1933). There, Dewey defines “reflection” as “...turning a topic over in various aspects and in various lights so that nothing significant about it shall be overlooked - almost as one might turn a stone over to see what its hidden side is like or what is covered by it.” (Dewey, 1933).

More recently, Farrell has stated that “...it is necessary for *each* teacher to define for themselves the concept of reflective teaching” and that “there are said to be three major types, or moments, of reflective practice...” (Farrell, 2015). These types are as follows: reflection-in-action (in the classroom), reflection-on-action (after the class) and reflection-for-action (planning for the future, outside of class time).

Whatever the “true” origin and nature of reflective thought and practice, the essential point for this workshop was the application of reflective practice to pedagogy, specifically in the field of TESOL, and the exploration of *each* participating teacher’s definition of reflective practice. For this reason, the questions that inspired this workshop were about the learning of language specifically and English circumstantially.

**Goals of the Workshop**

The goal of the workshop was to introduce techniques for managing a conversation-based, student-centered TESOL learning environment to newer, less experienced practitioners. TESOL instructors often lack local support groups to help them adjust to new teaching environments, and there is a definite need for increased collaboration in many TESOL programs (Farrell, 2015). This workshop aimed to provide a model of collaborative support.

The example activity used was the collaborative construction of a task for “giving directions” around a fictional town. At different points in the introduction and co-construction of the task (with workshop participants filling the role of students), the presenter offered alternative methods for elicitation, including captain-led group brainstorms, board races, and interactive mingling activities.

Though there was an emphasis on using time constructively, one of the goals of the workshop was to avoid what Galea describes as “...a lesson consisting of nothing more than a series of steps that need to be followed according to pre-established boxes of time” (2012). Alongside the construction and execution of the task was an emphasis on active reflective teaching practice, wherein teachers become *aware* of *how* and *why* tasks take more or less time. Time, being an immutable factor, ought to be considered not as a series of “boxes” to occupy, but rather another tool a conscious teacher can use to their advantage in communicating the goals of their lesson.

**Summary of the Workshop**

The workshop took place in the afternoon, with around fifty members of KOTESOL attending. In the eighty minutes allotted, a sample task of “giving directions in the target language” was given, and co-construction of the task (between the participating instructors and the workshop leader) was completed in the first section of the workshop titled “Designing the Task”. Pedagogical concerns and small group discussion made up the following sections of “Noticing Comprehension” and “Student Autonomy and Overall Strategies”.

Participants were asked to begin by organizing themselves into groups of three or four and nominating a captain to lead discussion and present their ideas to the whole group. Once in groups, the workshop leader modeled how to share the details of his current work environment: the number and age of students he currently teaches, the time and length of his classes, and his feelings and attitude leading up to the beginning of an “average teaching day”.

Participants were then asked to engage in an active mental modeling of their work environment on an “average teaching day”. They were specifically asked to shut their eyes, imagine their classroom on that day, the number and age of the students, the time and length of the class, and most of all to engage with their personal feelings and attitude as that class began.

After this mental model was (hopefully) constructed, the workshop leader asked participants to open their eyes, and for group captains to lead discussion on what each participant saw in their mental model. Captains were instructed only to keep a time limit of fifteen minutes. At the end of fifteen minutes, the workshop leader asked captains to share their method for keeping time. Captains varied in their degree of strictness: some kept a stopwatch running and kept each group member close to equal time, whereas others only glanced at a nearby clock and let the discussion move more or less organically. Building off of this information, the leader asked all participants to then discuss their usage of time in the classroom, specifically as either an *active* or *passive* part of their lesson plan.

As an exercise in active reflection, participants were then asked to role play as “students”. “Students” were given two hand-outs; one a blank diagram of an imagined town, the other a concise summary of the presentation’s main points and strategies. The “students” and “teacher” then proceeded to fill-in the map of the imagined town together.

As the workshop entered the second section, the simulation was occasionally halted to allow groups to discuss techniques for active reflective teaching and modifications or alternative strategies to the ones presented. Again, in the spirit of cultivating a creative space in which teachers of varying experience might share and learn from one another, the announced purpose of these discussion breaks was to practice collaboration and revision, and to lean away from the idea that teaching is a craft to be mastered, for as Edwards (2006) puts it, “attempts at mastery - increasingly inscribed in discourses of standards and targets - only point to the inability to master.”

During the third and final section titled “Student Autonomy and Overall Strategies”, the workshop leader presented participants with a table listing types of classroom interaction and amount of time for each (see table 1)

**TABLE 1. Interaction time as a % of class time (blank)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Student-to-student interaction ((pair work, group work, presentations) |  |
| Student-to-teacher interaction |  |
| Student-to-class interaction (individual presentations, speeches, etc.) |  |
| Individual work |  |
| Teacher-to-class interaction (lecture, instruction, etc.) |  |

Participants were asked to write out an estimation for how long each type of interaction lasted in an average class that they were teaching. Discussion in small groups followed, with encouragement from the workshop leader to compare their numbers and discuss differences in class type, pedagogical techniques, and ideas about the role of the teacher. Elicitation of several participants’ answers yielded a respectably large range: some teachers estimated their teacher-to-class interaction (e.g. lecture, instruction, etc.) as taking up nearly 40% of class time. Most participants placed their own teacher-to-class interaction at around one-third of class time, while a few estimated that they spoke less than 10% of the time in their class. Upon further investigation, it appeared that instructors speaking for only 10% of the time were part of a program that encouraged ‘flipping’ the classroom in which students “take over” the classroom activities.

The workshop leader then presented the participants with the same table, filled in with values taken after examining a video recording of the leader’s classroom (see table 2).

**TABLE 2. Interaction time as a % of class time (example)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Student-to-student interaction ((pair work, group work, presentations) | 35% |
| Student-to-teacher interaction | 20% |
| Student-to-class interaction (individual presentations, speeches, etc.) | 15% |
| Individual work | 10% |
| Teacher-to-class interaction (lecture, instruction, etc.) | 20% |

Following this, the workshop leader encouraged participants to film their classrooms in the future, and compare their estimation of interaction length with the actual lengths as an on-going exercise in reflective practice.

Finally, there was a conscious attempt in presenting three explicit questions for reflection in the concluding remarks, to provoke the sort of self-reflection that would make explicit the usually tacit teaching maxims that “function like rules for best behaviour” (Richards, 1996) and “...also guide a teacher’s classroom actions just like metaphors” (Farrell 2015). In Farrell’s case study work (2015), he found that one teacher was able to ‘uncover her unconscious assumptions about teaching and learning” through an active examination of her tacit teaching maxims. The questions included in the workshop were as follows:

1. *Do you teach the same way that you learn?*
2. *Have you completed your tasks yourself?*
3. *Could you complete your tasks in a second language?*

In the final minutes of the workshop, the participants were invited to openly discuss these questions, with an emphasis that no “final” answer could truly be reached; as teachers reflect on their practice, their metaphors and maxims might change. With that change comes a renewed opportunity to reflect once more, pointing again to Edwards’ assertion that mastery is ultimately elusive.

The goal of these questions (and their unusual, somewhat invasive character) was to introduce novel approaches to reflective practice for the teacher and to “disturb and disrupt acquired images of herself as a teacher and to explore how this touching differentiates her reflective practices” (Galea, 2012).

**Conclusion**

In highlighting interaction type and duration, the workshop leader intended to make “time” an explicit factor in reflective practice. A further development of this activity might be transcription of the filmed interactions, with the goal of differentiating exploratory talk and final draft talk (Barnes, 1976) and/or display-type and reference-type questions (Long and Sato, 1983).

Above all, it was the goal of the presenter to dismantle the “routinization” of reflective practice by introducing methods subject to constant revision and encouraging a meta-awareness of reflective practice processes, the purpose of reflective practice, time as active or passive in the classroom, and the perspective of the teacher-as-learner. It is the hope of the author that this report serves as a useful reference to instructors interested in further readings on reflective practice methodology and history.

THE AUTHOR

Kevin Garvey is currently an English Language Lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies located in Chiba, Japan. He has been teaching since 2008, and has experience with learners of all ages and levels of English proficiency. He completed an M.A. in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from the University of Chicago Illinois in 2013. His research interests include CALL, willingness to communicate (WTC), task complexity, teacher empathy and teacher noticing. Of particular interest to him are the combined topics of CALL and WTC, as applied directly to classroom teaching.

*Email:* [*garvey-k@kanda.kuis.ac.jp*](mailto:garvey-k@kanda.kuis.ac.jp)

REFERENCES

* Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
* Edwards, R. (2006). All quiet on the postmodern front?. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *25*(4), 273-278.
* Farrell, T. S. (2015). *Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
* Galea, S. (2012). Reflecting reflective practice. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *44*(3), 245-258.
* Richards, J. C., Ho, B., & Giblin, K. (1996). Learning how to teach in the RSA Cert. *Teacher Learning in Language Teaching*, 242.
* TESOL International Association (2016). *List of Associate Members*. Retrieved from <http://www.iatefl.org/associates/list-of-associate-members>

Appendix A: *Workshop handout*

October 15th, 2016

Saturday 1:30-2:55 pm, Room B17 8

Managing a Student-Centered Conversation-based Lesson

*This handout is meant to summarize and supplement the presentation on the topic of “Managing a Student-Centered Conversation-based Lesson”. It will list the ideas provided during the workshop, as well as leave room for notes on more ideas that came out during discussion periods.*

1. Designing the Task

**Complexity: lexical items (what we teach), modality of instruction (how we teach), structure of task environment (where we teach)**

* 1. Lexical items: What do the students **already** know? (elicitation techniques)
     1. Board race (ABC fill-in, categories, opposites)
     2. “Captain”-led group work
     3. Association games (“post office → mail” or noun-verb collocations)
     4. Partner-work and “class share-out”
  2. Modality of instruction
     1. Town map on the board; matching hand-outs
     2. Students fill in the map with known lexical items
  3. Structure of the task environment
     1. Using portable furniture to recreate a “downtown”
     2. Role-play stations: Student B looks for hospital; student A plays police officer, doctor, postmaster
     3. Conversation stations: rotating in clockwise fashion, students move from point to point collecting information for info-gap activity (ex: “What are the opening hours of the \_\_\_\_\_?”)

1. Noticing Comprehension

**Noticing: (1) Student-to-student interaction, (2) students’ hypothesis-making, (3) student-teacher interactions**

* 1. **S-to-S:** Are students using their L1? Are ‘captain’s fulfilling the role you defined? How fast are students completing your tasks? What kind of interaction is the classroom environment encouraging?
  2. **Students’ hypothesis-making:** Does the task make room for guessing? Are guesses rewarded? Do students have a reason to move beyond the original task (i.e. keep producing language)?
  3. **S-to-T:** Have you spoken to each group or pair? Have you *modeled* the roles you are giving them? Are you sitting or standing? Are you using time aggressively or constructively? **Have you asked students how much time they need for a task?**

1. Student Autonomy
   1. Time management: **How much time do you spend on each of the following activities:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Student-to-student interaction (pair work, group work) |  |
| Student-to-teacher interaction |  |
| Student-to-class interaction (presentations, etc.) |  |
| Individual work |  |
| Teacher-to-class interaction (lecture, instruction, etc.) |  |
| *Other:* |  |
| *Other:* |  |

* 1. Autonomy strategies
     1. Specific T lectures at the beginning of the term focused on autonomy and examples of it; repetition of “autonomy” as a classroom theme
     2. Homework assignments on time management & keeping a schedule
     3. Asking students how much time they want for each activity
     4. Having students generate the lexical items, rearrange the classroom environment, and write their own guiding questions to keep the conversation moving
     5. Reserve one unit topic towards the end of the school year for students to choose
     6. Minimize teacher talk time and utilize peer correction as feedback
     7. *If available:* use video recording equipment (iPads, apps) for student projects so that they can *see and hear* themselves speaking English

1. Overall Strategies
   1. Group work
      1. Change groups often
      2. Change captains often
      3. Model the role of the captain
      4. Ask them how much time they want for each activity
      5. Jigsaw technique: “color” groups read/share/discuss a unique piece of information. Then, “number” groups share their unique piece of information.
   2. Pair work
      1. Check that Ss understand their role (“A raise your hand”)
      2. Change partners often for small tasks; less often for larger ones
      3. “A open, B close” -- book info-gap activity; peer quizzing
      4. Swap A and B roles, if one role is using the target form and you want both to practice it
   3. Time limits
      1. 30 seconds to form groups
      2. 30 seconds to elect a captain
      3. 2-4 minutes for discussing comprehension questions
2. *Conclusion*
   1. *Do you teach the same way that you learn?*
   2. *Have you completed your tasks yourself?*
   3. *Could you complete your tasks in a second language?*

Appendix B: *Blank Town Map*



