

# Interview with Thomas S.C. Farrell

Conducted by Dr. David Shaffer

**Dr. Farrell, our regular reflective practice columnist, is a featured speaker at the 2019 KOTESOL International Conference. Rather than ask him for an article this issue, we asked him for an interview. – Ed.**

**TEC:** Dr. Farrell, you spent a fair amount of your early career teaching in Korea, could you tell us about what brought you to Korea and your work here?

**Dr. Farrell:** I was on my world tour after finishing my degree and teaching qualification in Ireland, and I landed in Korea and loved the place immediately. That was over 40 years ago.

**TEC:** How did you get involved in reflective practice? I don't believe it was much of a thing in Korea while you were here.

**Dr. Farrell:** I became interested in reflection while on my travels, especially during my wonderful months touring India, and brought this concept to my teaching while in Korea. However, I was not aware that this was a concept that was developing worldwide (remember, we had no internet during this time!) until I began my PhD in the US and started reading formally about it. Before beginning my PhD, however, I started my first teacher reflection group in Korea, which really changed my life, as it showed me the power of collaborative and reflective conversations about teaching.



**TEC:** Could you give us a snapshot of what ELT was like in Korea when you were first teaching here – 40 years ago when you first set foot in the Land of the Morning Calm?

**Dr. Farrell:** This question will give more details to my earlier answer related to reflective practice, too. ELT in Korea 40 years ago was a lot different. I think I was one of four or five qualified teachers on the go (no disrespect to the others who were wonderful teachers, too) beyond some Peace Corps teachers (but many in Peace Corps at that time were not connected to teaching, as you know – they moved into teaching when the Peace Corps left in the early 80s, I believe). I would say that the concept of ELT from a local perspective was “if you can speak it, you can teach it!” Indeed, the TESOL profession had not

really taken off at that time. That said, luminaries like the wonderful Dwight Strawn and Horace Underwood were very much supporters of having “qualified” ELT professionals, but supply and demand was the order of the day (with demand more than supply, given the location of Korea). One great aspect of the ELT community at that time was that we all knew each other and helped each other in our daily lives, and that was wonderful. I loved living and teaching in Korea at that time, and of course, I met my wife in Seoul...

**TEC:** Let's talk about the future for a bit. You will be doing a featured session for us at the international conference this October. Could you tell us a little about it and why everyone at the conference should not miss it?

**Dr. Farrell:** My featured talk is *Advancing ELT by Becoming an Expert Teacher*. We all assume that if we spend lots of years doing something, we can become an expert. Well, this is not so, because without reflecting on what we do, we can only become experienced non-experts. In this talk, I will also discuss what makes an expert TESOL teacher based on research I have undertaken in Canada. The result of all this is that engaging in reflective practice is critical to expertise. I am hoping that all your wonderful teachers can come to this talk and take this reflective journey so that they too can transition smoothly into their rightful roles as expert TESOL teachers.

**TEC:** You will also be doing an invited workshop for us. What will it be about? Will it be useful to both the early-career teacher and the more-experienced teacher “in the trenches”?

**Dr. Farrell:** Keeping with my overall theme of reflection, my workshop, *Reflection-As-Action: Implementing Reflective Practice in TESOL*, will show teachers/participants how reflective practice can be implemented. The framework that I have developed not only focuses on the intellectual, cognitive, and meta-cognitive aspects of practice that many other approaches suggest, but also the spiritual, moral, and emotional non-cognitive aspects of reflection that acknowledge the inner life of teachers. The framework has five different stages or levels of reflection: *philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and beyond practice*. Each of these will be explained in detail, and participants will be able to practice each in

this interactive session. This session is for very beginning teachers with little experience as well as for very experienced teachers who will really value a break from the “trenches,” so that when they return they will even transform those “trenches”!

**TEC:** You are by far the most prolific ELT or applied linguistics book author that I know of. How do you find the time to do so much writing and still teach and also spend so much time on the ELT conference-speaking circuit? And what publications are in the pipeline for us to look forward to?

**Dr. Farrell:** I research reflective practice and also practice it in my daily life: writing is part of my process of reflection. I have built writing into my daily routine. Writing is the result of my reflections and the beginning of further reflection. My writing mantra is “How do I know what I think until I see what I say!”

Regarding new publications, I have just published a new book on reflective practice called *Reflective Practice in ELT* (<https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/reflective-practice-language/>). This is an introductory book to a new series on Reflective Practice in Language Education that I am editing for Equinox Publications in the UK (<https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/reflective-practice-language-education/>).

This series covers different issues related to reflective practice in language education and includes an introductory book that introduces these areas. The other books in the series clarify the different approaches that have been taken within reflective practice and outline current themes that have emerged in the research on various topics and methods of reflection that have occurred. This is a very exciting project, and we have four books about to appear in the near future.

I have also published a few papers. All are on my webpage: [www.reflectiveinquiry.ca](http://www.reflectiveinquiry.ca)

**TEC:** You have decided to initiate this year an annual

reflective language teacher award, which KOTESOL is quite grateful for. Could you tell us what motivated you to begin this award at this time?

**Dr. Farrell:** As I mentioned above, I first arrived in Korea 40 years ago, and Korea launched my ELT career and teacher training career as well as my early work in reflective practice. One critical incident was important also in defining my life in Korea in 1994 when I was the last car to cross Seongsu Bridge before it collapsed at 7:40 a.m., October 21. I crossed one second before. I was collecting data for my PhD dissertation, so I guess I was destined to finish this work, and it made me *really* reflect! Without Korea, I would not have done any of this. I want to give back by encouraging others to engage in formal reflective practice in Korea so that the ELT profession in Korea can be further advanced (the theme of your conference this year!).

**TEC:** After leaving teaching in Korea so many years ago, you have stayed connected to KOTESOL. What is it that fosters this desire to stay connected to KOTESOL?

**Dr. Farrell:** Similar to my answer above, I love Korea and always want to come back and to give back. If any university will have me for a short stay, I am willing to come to give talks, workshops, seminars, too – just let me know. In addition, it is people like you who have motivated me to continue to be in contact with Korea TESOL. Although I never held office, I was in the background many years ago – I think I was the first editor of the *Korea TESOL Journal*.

Korea launched me in the TESOL profession, and I am forever grateful. Korea TESOL allows me to continue to encourage reflection for teachers, so I am forever grateful to Korea TESOL and all the wonderful people who selflessly give their time to volunteer to help other teachers reach the highest levels of their expertise.

**TEC:** Thank you, Dr. Farrell, for making time for this interview. We’re looking forward to seeing you at the international conference in October.

