

# “Talk is Not Cheap” The Power of Talk in Teacher Reflection Groups

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*Many of you know of Thomas Farrell through his extensive writings on reflective practice. What many of you may not know, though, is that Dr. Farrell spent almost two decades teaching and researching in Korea, and his connections to Korea and KOTESOL have been strong ever since. At the 2023 International Conference, Dr. Farrell will be delivering a plenary session on “Advancing Collaboration Among Teachers Through Reflective Practice,” and he will be pairing up with a one-time co-author for the special session “Jack C. Richards and Thomas S.C. Farrell in Conversation.” — Ed.*

## Introduction

The following (from Farrell, 2021) is an excerpt from novice TESOL teachers in a self-initiated novice TESOL teacher reflection group in Canada during the first semester of their first year:

- I liked hearing other ideas. I liked just getting some feedback when I said, “Oh, this isn’t working in my class.”
- Just to know that sometimes we were going through the same thing like, you know, we were frustrated with the administration. We were frustrated with sometimes the students or whatever.
- So, I think that’s kind of nice because we created an opportunity to talk about ... you don’t always have that opportunity in your office with a group of teachers.

The three novice TESOL teachers quoted above formed the group (I facilitated their group discussions as a “manager” rather than as a participant) as a survival mechanism because they felt they were “sinking” in their first few weeks, and they were able to survive through the collaborative process of the weekly group discussions about their experiences. The group talked about many different issues such as classroom management, discipline and control, how to organize their



lessons to motivate reluctant learners, student assessment, and coping with materials they perceived as inappropriate or inadequate that involved them becoming more aware of their isolation as novice teachers. As Mann and Walsh (2017) point out, reflection benefits from such dialogue because it “is a crucial part of the reflection-action-further-action cycle, since it allows for clarification, questioning and ultimately

enhanced understanding” (p. 8). I now outline how I discovered the power of teacher group reflections 30+ years ago while I was doing my own research on reflective practice in Korea.

## The Power of Group Reflections: Korea

In 1986, I set up my first teacher reflection group with four teachers in Seoul, and this later led me to continue researching teacher reflection groups for my PhD dissertation, completed in 1996, where I really discovered the power of group reflections firsthand and that talk is not cheap as the old adage would have us all believe. I wrote about this group in one of my early publications, and I will share some of the details here (for more details, see Farrell, 1999).

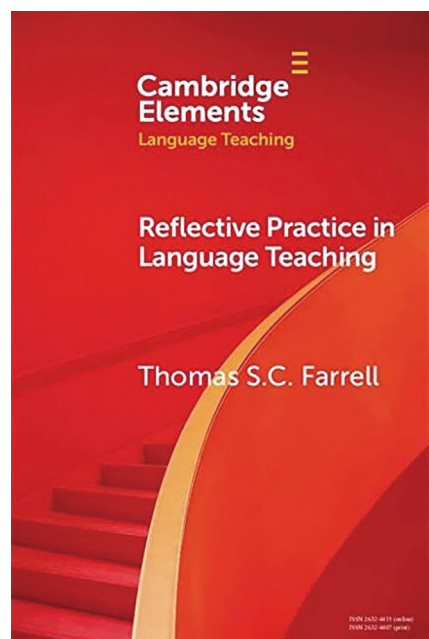
The study took place in Seoul, South Korea, in the autumn semester of 1992. The study sought to investigate in what ways regular group discussions promote reflective thinking when three experienced EFL teachers (two Korean female natives and one male Caucasian teacher) in Korea came together weekly to discuss their work. They said that they joined the group because “as ESL/EFL teachers, [we] need to share our own experiences” (Farrell, 1999, p. 165). By participating in a continuing dialogue about their experiences in their own and others’ classes, they said, “We will come to a clearer understanding of what it is to be a teacher of ESL/EFL and of how we can become better at what we do” (p. 165). Results showed that (a) the teachers talked about their personal theories of teaching and the problems faced in their teaching, and that (b) all three teachers were reflective, to a certain extent, in their orientation to teaching, although they varied in their degree of reflectivity.

This was my first real experience facilitating a group of TESOL teachers reflecting on their practice, and I have continued to encourage such group reflections since I worked with teacher groups when I moved to Canada many years ago (e.g., Farrell, 2014a, b; Farrell, 2016). Of course all teachers are different and have different concerns when reflecting on their practices while talking to other teachers. However, as the opening comments in the introduction above and the comments in this section above attest to, “talk is not cheap” in that sharing ideas with other teachers helps all to develop because of the supportive environment of the group. Of course, language teachers can engage in reflective practice by themselves, and this is a good starting point for many teachers who may be a bit uncertain about the process. However, while we are self-reflecting, we may encounter issues or situations that may be unpleasant, and so we may avoid these and become biased in our reflections to only those topics that do not upset us.

I will focus on three different aspects that I think are important when developing such reflection groups.

## Forming Teacher Reflection Groups

As mentioned above, in this article, I am focusing briefly on three important aspects that teachers can consider when



▲ **Thomas Farrell’s most recent book (2022).**

forming teacher reflection groups: (a) setting up the group, (b) members' roles and responsibilities, and (c) modes of preferred reflection and time considerations.

When setting up a teacher reflection group, it will be important to effectively address the issues of members' roles and interaction within the group so that discussions are supportive when members are sharing their experiences. One of the most important considerations from the very beginning when setting up a group is that a non-threatening environment of trust should be fostered in the group. Ways of establishing trust can be incorporated into the reflective process itself. The members of the group can establish ground rules early on that will ensure respect and trust in all discussions, even if there is disagreement when controversial issues arise. One way of ensuring that trust is to guarantee that confidentiality will be of utmost importance. Indeed, the question of leadership is also a very important consideration for language teacher reflection groups, and this can also be connected to the idea of trust: trust in the leader and a resulting trust in the group process. Who would decide the leader? Would it be a voluntary position? What would the leader's responsibilities be – deciding the topic, nominate speakers, end topics, and so on?

Regarding roles of individual members, Belbin (1993) suggests some of the following but individual groups may also come up with some other roles:

- *Coordinator or facilitator* who makes a good chairperson and ensures that everyone in the group has an opportunity for input.
- *Shaper* who drives the group forward.
- *Implementer* who gets things done.
- *Monitor evaluator* who ensures that all options are considered.
- *Team worker* who helps cement the group together.
- *Resource investigator* who develops outside contacts.
- *Completer/finisher* who finishes things off.
- *Expert* who provides specific areas of knowledge.

Once the group has been set up and has discussed and agreed on the allocation of different roles for the period of reflection, they should then consider what opportunities they will provide for reflection. The main mode of reflection considered here is talk with other teachers, but teachers can also combine this with other modes such as written reflection as well as classroom observations that include the use of audio and video recordings to aid reflection. Of course, all of these can also be considered doable on online platforms as well as in face-to-face meetings.

Having facilitated many reflective practice language teacher groups over the years, I have found that time can be a huge factor for all teachers (Farrell, 2016). Thus, each language teacher group must consider and discuss four different aspects of time associated with reflection: *individual, activity, development, and the period of reflection*. A certain level of commitment by *individual* participants in terms of time availability should be negotiated by the group at the start of the process. Associated with the *activity* time each participant has to give the project is the time that should be spent on each activity. Another aspect of time that is important for teacher self-development groups is the time it takes to *develop*. Analytical reflection takes time and only progresses at a rate at which individual teachers are ready to reflect critically. Finally, groups must consider the timeframe for the project as a whole, or the *period for reflection* for the group. How long should a group, a pair, or an individual reflect? Having a fixed period in which to reflect allows the participants to know what period during the semester they can devote wholly to reflection.

I believe that in such teacher group reflections, whether face-to-face or on online platforms, language teachers can encourage more exploration of teaching and learning and as a result gain more of an understanding of their individual practice. Such communities of practice can help language teachers to (re)configure, define, and redefine their philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and critical reflections beyond practice. In such a manner, entering into discussions with another teacher or group of teachers can result in gaining new knowledge, new perspectives, and new understandings that would have been difficult for teachers reflecting alone.

## Conclusion

In this article, I pointed out that from my experience over the past forty years or more, reflection in a language teacher reflection group of peers, be they novice or experienced, can be a powerful way of exposing language teachers to different viewpoints. These viewpoints can be seen as positive when the group members are supportive. I have briefly explained how teachers can form such teacher reflection groups

...we may need to be challenged about our beliefs and the only real way of doing this is to share them with other teachers.

through the research I have conducted with such groups over the years because these studies have shown me that groups that engage in dialogic reflective practice can help novice and experienced teachers resist plateauing that can occur easily if teachers are left in isolation and drifting alone as they teach. I will give the last words to the Korean group members from all those years ago when one of the members wrote to me privately one year after the project:

We shared what was happening in our classrooms and professional lives. I don't think we found solutions per se, but I think we provided a forum for each of us as individuals to articulate what was happening and then to share similar experiences in a supportive way. I also found that I created friendships.

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