

# **REFLECTIVE TEACHING: AN APPROACH TO EDUCATION BASED ON ACTIVE LEARNING, MEANING-MAKING AND DISCUSSION**

Agustín Reyes Torres

*(Universitat de València)*

## **Introduction**

For heterogeneous and multilingual groups of students to work together and learn, there must be a common ground in which they can meet, interact, discuss their ideas and have the opportunity to express their different perspectives. That common ground is reflection. This is the key point to integrate subject and language content of language courses. If students do not elaborate their own thoughts, they cannot develop their knowledge. If there is no reflection, there is no learning. If they do not use the target language to articulate their own ideas, they are actually not using it for a real purpose nor can they connect new knowledge to previous one.

In Higher Education courses such as “Didáctica de la lengua inglesa” (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) at the University of Valencia, we find that 4<sup>th</sup> year students tend to memorize and reproduce the contents they study without really putting much thought into it. They are used to sitting in classes and listening to lectures, but not to build up their own thoughts, reach their own conclusions and develop their own theory-in-use as future primary teachers of English. They lack the confidence to think critically for two main reasons: they have not done it before and they have not been trained to do it. For most of their lives they only have been passive recipients of knowledge and have not had an active role in their own education. This paper aims to discuss a possible remedy for this and to present practical examples based on Dewey’s approach to reflection as a meaning-making process and Elliott’s principles of procedure along with a blended learning model that places emphasis on students learning outside of the traditional classroom space. First, by fostering the development of pre-service teachers by means of

guided and focused discussion of specific readings both on reflective practice and on teaching English in the primary classroom. Second, by having them play an active role in their learning process and their actions in the classroom, and third, by using Facebook as a didactic tool that facilitates interaction and exchange of perspectives. As it will be shown, having learners reflect and discuss their thoughts in every class is the overall objective.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical foundation that informs the approach to reflective teaching stems from John Dewey's book *How to Think* (1910/1933). He defended that the essentials of thinking were to carry on systematic and extended inquiry, or phrased differently, to acquire "the attitude of suspended conclusion," which in the field of education refers to the idea of constantly reflecting on every lesson instructed. For Dewey, teachers should be committed to continuous self-appraisal and development as well as to persistent search for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur.

Dewey's criteria for reflection is based on a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society. Likewise, reflection needs to happen in community, that is, in interaction with others. It requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others.

Such reflection and interactive engagement in discussion is also in consonance with Elliott's pedagogy and principles of procedure. According to Elliott, "whatever knowledge outcomes are pursued, the methods one adopts must satisfy the criteria of protecting and fostering student's ability to achieve this knowledge through their own powers of reason" (2007, p. 40). As educators it is important to understand that knowledge is neither objective nor definite and it cannot be transmitted; each student has to create his or her own on the basis of what each individual already knows (Wells 1986). On this regard, two important principles established by Elliott emphasize, first, that discussion must prevail over instruction

as a procedural approach to construct knowledge, and second, that the “discussion should protect divergence of view among participants rather than attempt to achieve consensus” (Elliott 2007, p. 22). Thus, teachers should be receptive and welcome substantial differences among students as well as a wide variation in their understandings and critical reflections. The goal is not to have all students think the same or reach the same conclusions, but to have them engage in their own process of reflection and reach and construct their own knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Reflection in pre-service teacher education is of vital importance because it provides a vehicle for improvement, promotes active engagement and provides a better understanding of the complex world of education. Through a critical pedagogical approach based on Dewey and Elliot’s learning theories, we can see that equipping pre-service teachers with the literacy and the practice to reflect both on their own and collaboratively brings about the production of knowledge, one that each of them develops anew and is also based on their prior personal experiences and sociocultural background.

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