Reflection in action: Examining the place, impact and management issues surrounding the integration of reflection in classroom practice

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Abstract

With the changing nature of teaching and learning, educators constantly grapple with new ways of engaging learning so learners see meaning in what they do, guided by initiative and the desire to seek improvement. These trends have placed reflection in new light making it essential in the teaching and learning process. Despite acknowledgement that reflection is crucial in student learning, the level of use and implementation is inconsistent amongst educators as there are several competing perspectives and dilemmas faced. This paper explores, identifies and evaluates some of these dilemmas and discusses some of the implications and considerations that need to be addressed if reflection is to become a more dominant and natural learning component. The research involved 30 English Language educators from a Junior College and was centred on gathering educators’ level of use, perceptions and challenges encountered in managing reflection in student learning. While the study generally noted a positive stance on integrating reflection, this was not realised through actual classroom integration. Instead, implementation was inconsistent and sporadic – highlighting structural, conceptual and learner-based problems. These challenges need to be evaluated, with the hope that reflection becomes a natural learning avenue aligned to the demands of the changing education landscape.

Keywords: Learning and teaching; Reflection

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INTRODUCTION

As the sphere of education keeps changing alongside larger trends of globalization, teaching and learning have also undergone various paradigm shifts. Teaching and learning have thus become topics of ongoing debates where there seems to be a constant dilemma between some notable areas outlined in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tensions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-centred &lt;-&gt; Student-centred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritative &lt;-&gt; Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product-driven &lt;-&gt; Process-driven</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monologic &lt;-&gt; Dialogic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singularity &lt;-&gt; Multi-dimensionality</td>
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These dilemmas have thus required a complete rethinking in the ways in which teaching and learning are carried out. More emphasis began to be placed on the implications for student growth and development with a constant review of the relevance and skills of the new knowledge-based economy which is continually evolving.

One of these key paradigm shifts have included making space for the voice of the learner and encouraging personal initiative and independent thinking. While there are a slew of examples and pedagogical initiatives to cite, one critical approach that has been rising in importance and coming to the forefront is reflection. Traditionally existing in the realm of management, its prominence has grown across many professions, gaining a foothold especially in the areas of performance review and personal development. These purposes it is argued can be applied in teaching and learning – fostering a culture of independent initiative and critical inquiry, one in which students take ownership of their own learning. Thus, teachers need to be more proactive in highlighting how “contemplation and review of work can extend learning in powerful ways” (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005: 304). The thrust of this paper is in arguing that while there seems to be widespread acknowledgment of the importance of reflection, its actual use and integration within teaching and learning is minimal.

This disjunction calls for the need to examine why greater focus is not applied in realising the positive outcomes reflection brings, how has it been used thus far and with what effectiveness; what indeed are some of the roadblocks hindering the application and how these can be addressed. In examining all these issues, a whole picture of the situation is derived and a conceptual framework to address the problems can then be designed.

REFLECTION IN EDUCATION

The shift to incorporate reflection as a learning process and focus draws from numerous, integrated and current theoretical constructs such as new education buzzwords like New Pedagogies (Newmann & Associates, 1996) of which reflection has been numerously cited as an innovative and authentic learning and teaching tool; empowerment which is conceptually and
practically increasing in prominence in education contexts around the world as well as developing critical capacities through application of self-learning and evaluative strategies.

**New Pedagogies**

New or authentic pedagogies have become the education buzzword in recent years and are closely aligned with education restructuring and reform and in totality even considered a product of the ongoing research and education narratives. One of the forerunners in this area includes Newman and Associates (1996) whose work has been quintessential in refocusing teacher work towards the “vital elements of student learning” (Cheng, 2003). Previous attempts to rethink classrooms often centred on teacher work in terms of recreating learning environments, reinventing curriculum or refocusing on pertinent skills – however, what is crucial today is the quality of learning and the processes of intellectual development. While, the previous elements of skills and environments are still important, ensuring shifts in learning from being mere absorption and reproduction to active construction and application is more significant. This results in “achievements which are significant, worthwhile and meaningful” (Cheng, 2003). Central to authentic pedagogies are three strands that Newmann states would define authenticity of learning:

1. Construction of Knowledge
2. Disciplined Inquiry
3. Value of Achievements beyond school

These are especially relevant when one thinks of the processes underpinning reflection and are ideas that place the learner as the central agent in the learning process both in a constructivist and social-constructivist environment. In a constructivist environment, learning is individuated and is “an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based on their current or past knowledge” while in a social-constructivist perspective, “learning is a social process and knowledge is socially and culturally constructed” (Abu, 2005:2). Taylor *et al* (2002) have suggested in the latter environment, “knowledge as constructing” and “knowing as participating” best capture the ongoing learning dialogues that characterise the community of learners.

Another model, closely aligned with Newmann’s model is the NSW model of authentic pedagogy in Table 2. It develops and explicitly outlines the key dimensions and elements that are necessary in considering the authenticity of learning and outcomes and have been important bases on which this research took flight.

**Table 2. New South Wales Model (NSW) of Pedagogy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions &amp; Elements of the NSW Model of Pedagogy</th>
<th>Quality Learning environments</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deep knowledge</td>
<td>Explicit quality criteria</td>
<td>Background knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep understanding</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Cultural knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic knowledge</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>Knowledge integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher order thinking</td>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalanguage</td>
<td>Student self-regulation</td>
<td>Connectedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantive communication</td>
<td>Student direction</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(extracted from: Ladwig & King, 2003)
Each dimension explored in the table has key components that have been emphasised in setting objectives, developing students intellectually and in terms of subject management as well as being able to situate and recognise how the learning process governed by reflection enhances the quality and meaning of their learning. Intellectual quality refers to fostering critical capacities, complex and challenging learning in students and this is to be situated within quality learning environments premised on student navigation, initiative and achieving high outcomes which become motivators and positive enablers of student engagement. Together, these two dimensions make learning significant because it is situated and meaningful, where the construction of new knowledge for learners and can be related to previously known information or the learner’s cognitive structure (Ausubel, 1978). While, it may be impossible for any particular learning instances to encapsulate all aspects of either model, it is imperative to incorporate and consider as many of these aspects as possible to ensure holistic learning. These ideas would thus also hold for reflection.

What is noted to be central in authentic pedagogies is the responsibility and agency accorded to learners in managing learning. Armstrong has noted as early as 1983 that when learners only see the teacher as the centre and authority of knowledge, they fail to become change agents in defining or leading their learning and this is a stance this research has tried to cultivate against and instead work to actively create opportunities to ensure students are accountable in their learning. This stance then forms one of the key thrusts defining reflection.

**Learning empowerment**

Research in authentic pedagogies has also seen another consistent theme – empowerment. This concept cascades into learning processes, environments, teacher roles to name a few. While research on authentic pedagogies broadly examines concepts, literature on empowerment focuses on issues of power, equity, access and relationships. These areas are very important since they look into classroom ideologies and situate the learner and teacher. It is therefore essential to recognise that reforming and authenticating classroom and learning classroom should integrate both – pedagogy and ideology.

There have been several proponents for empowerment – past literature (Auerbach, 1995; Janks & Ivanic, 1992; Rockhill, 1993) approached the issue from a sociological stance, looking deeply into issues of politics of education especially in ESL contexts – while these remain relevant, this research is concerned with classroom power-play and stakeholder roles. Friere (1980) was one of the first to consider the relationships and learning processes in classrooms and was seminal in getting systems to move away from the ‘banking concept’ of education that assumes learners to be passive agents without control over their learning. This idea is linked to Sullivan’s (2002) idea of ‘power-over’. While this may still persist to some extent in different instructional environments, educators are definitely more cognizant of the negative implications it has for learning and have been more proactive in reframing their classrooms along the ‘power-with’ and ‘power-to’ frameworks (Sullivan, 2002). Robinson (1994:7), for instance highlights the notion of empowerment as being,

“A personal and social process, a liberating sense of one’s own strengths, competence, creativity and freedom of action; to be empowered is to feel power surging into one from other people and from inside, specifically the power to act and grow.”

This all-encompassing definition situates empowerment as an individual and collective process and focuses on how empowerment should be a reciprocal and active process, which includes
both teacher and learner in a power-sharing environment (Page & Czuba, 1999). Such a notion, should thus inform any authentic pedagogies we may adopt.

Other more recent conceptions of empowering discourses have also highlighted the right to make decisions (Ashenden & Milligan, 1993) and express one’s “voice” through processes of negotiation and student engagement (Kordalewski, 1999; Stone, 1995) in a “constructive and critical” (Bottery, 2000: 2) way and the ability to express “ownership” (Duhon-Haynes, 1996; Robinson, 1994) over work done. However, the right to make independent decisions is often not possible within institutional hierarchies (Hughes, 1998) because top-down approaches often act as hindrances by advocating compulsory structures or requirements. The notion of ‘choice’ (Mendoza, 2000; Stone, 1995) is also important in allowing students to become independent thinkers. However, this issue remains highly debated as the common fear cited in literature, is allowing for a lassiez-faire approach may consequently result in loss of control and signal poor structure. However, denying choice can alienate learners from the processes and place them on the periphery. This is thus a continual struggle that needs to be negotiated.

Glickman (1989; as cited in Robinson, 1994: 12) has also postulated that empowerment develops and instils the initiative to “solve problems independently”. This definition is extremely crucial for this research because this is a core learning outcome that students need to be able to achieve. Besides that, Weissglass (1990; as cited in Robinson, 1994: 12) has critically put forth how empowerment encompasses the “process of supporting people to construct new meanings where learning is ideally about “communities of learners helping each other transform latent capabilities to active powers for the enhancement of all” (Duhon-Haynes, 1996: 6). These perspectives on empowerment are vital as they would inherently lead to learners’ process of self-actualisation. Dimmock (2000: 85) has argued that through the provision of “intrinsically rewarding experiences...[learners will] enhance their personal growth, integrity and autonomy” and this would be reflective of a truly empowering education – one that has allowed learners to achieve a sense of self-efficacy and greater awareness.

What is important to note overall is that moving from theory to practice requires significant thought, selection and appropriate design and implementation. The most effective learning frameworks are organised and structured and incorporate both, aspects of authentic pedagogies and empowering power structures, recognising the value of learners as designers of learning (Jonasson, 1994) and getting them to feel the “urgency of being in control of their own learning” (Ratneswary, 2005:3).

**Reflection**

Reflection has been a term used to mean different things in different contexts and when associated with different agents. In the simplest form it relates to thinking and making sense of thought; often referred to as metacognition. In more recent understandings (Lemon, 2004), reflection seems to entail some key aspects:

1. Purposeful thought
2. Process of contemplation with openness to change
3. A willingness to learn
4. A sense of responsibility in trying one’s best

Jay (2003) has further delineated reflection into 3 major forms of reflection as shown in Table 3.
Reflection is a process best encapsulated in terms of self learning and assessment but has been an area however, that has remained lowly or superficially represented in learning. It is instead a process more commonly associated with the work of educators – an important goal to be achieved (Schon, 1983) – and has begun to take precedence especially in the area of appraisal and thinking about active practitioners. However, this correlation of reflection with performance and target-setting is viewed to be too instrumental and unable to achieve the true desired outcomes of reflection (Ghaye, 2005). It was thus noted that early conceptions of reflection tended to be restricted to the contexts of the individual since it was associated to be dependent on individual's own approaches. However, Ghaye (2005) and Sparrow et al (2005) have commented on the need to emphasise the structure of reflection and its organisation to bring greater meaning to the process. Russell (2005: 203) similarly echoes this sentiment and suggests that “reflective practice can and should be taught – explicitly, directly, thoughtfully and patiently.”

There is in fact growing evidence to highlight the value, currency and positive learning outcomes to be gathered from such learning possibilities (OECD, 2000; Stiggins, 2001) when applied in student learning. Sparrow et al (2005) urges the need to “encourage” reflection as a learning tool to ask critical questions towards making learners change agents. Lemon (2004: 2) further argues that an important aspect of learning includes “awareness of the larger context in which teaching-learning occurs” and this is the ability to go beyond merely content and skills but to understand how one perceives them to be. Self-assessment is a process where learners actively manage and direct their own learning (Mok et al, 2005) and involves numerous processes at the pre-task, task and post-task levels. The process is often dialogic, giving students space to negotiate their learning, opportunities for reflection, reviewing, recording progress as well as engaging in peer-dialogue as a means for both self-improvement and peer-review (Berry, 2004). The process can be rigorous, however its application is often limited to better students with ability for metacognition, who are sufficiently self-motivated and objective (Mok & Cheng, 2002).

Self-learning it is argued, is one of the most effective means to develop critical self-awareness of what it is to be a learner and skills to learn how to learn (Ekbatani & Pearson, 2000) and makes students feel like competent learners (Sparks, 1999) which greatly boosts achievements and engagement with learning.

While, it is practised selectively, there is evidence to suggest hesitation on the part of teachers to make it a more natural or significant aspect of student learning. Some of the mental barriers that prevent a more widespread application relates to the fact that learners themselves may not be competent enough to manage assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses – common fears gathered from classroom practice are unrealistic reflections that veer into the extremes of complete strictness or leniency. This is perhaps an unjustified fear since reflection need not only be about target setting or evaluating performance and can, in fact, take various forms apart from students having to attach a numeric figure to their performance. More common and valuable forms are written appraisals or peer-dialogue. Other issues arising from allowing students to reflect candidly have included the level of acceptance of the reflections made (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005). Such candid reflections might allow teachers to better understand
the learning approaches adopted by students, even when these may not be good (for example rushing a research assignment and stating this in the reflection process). These allow teachers to develop a dialogue on important learning processes and should be avenues that are capitalised on rather than held against students (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005). This raises the issue of placing equal value and precedence on process and product reflections and not focusing on the latter which is often the case.

Further anecdotal evidence from classrooms have also highlighted time as a practical constraint that hinders a more wide-scale implementation especially since instating a self-learning and thinking framework consists of many complex processes and educators would require space to allow students to adopt such practices and would themselves need to acknowledge its importance and remove mental blocks. The literature has also noted that students’ “predisposition towards reflectivity” (Rarieya, 2005: 293). This would thus impact the level of receptivity and eventual success of the reflective approach.

Other problems noted in the literature with regard to encouraging reflection include the competencies of teachers themselves. Integration of reflection is based on particular skill sets within a dialogic environment. Such specific skills thus need to be trained and developed (Rarieya, 2005). As earlier noted, successful reflection strategies require modelling, scaffolding and coaching.

There is thus a need to recognise the many learning opportunities to be gained from these and instead of sidelining the issue, more help should be generated in training students to become reflective learners and assessors, to provide them with the rubrics or steps towards becoming more aware of their own learning and performance. In fact, the increasing dominance and shift towards learner centred pedagogies clearly makes this an avenue worth exploring. Reflection is an empowering approach situated within the context of individual initiative and encouraged to grow in a supportive culture – its relevance thus cannot be overlooked or relegated to the periphery.

SURVEY OF REFLECTIVE LEARNING

In order to fully understand the place of reflection within the practices of teachers and the extent to which it has been internalised or prioritised, a broad survey was carried out with 30 teachers in the English department. These teachers were situated within a college environment – an environment that thrives on and values the use of reflection fairly extensively especially within the domain of teachers’ professional growth. Given, the importance accorded to this both at the Education Ministry level and within the scope of the college, it was important to study how teachers utilise reflection in their curriculum practices. Overall, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How and to what extent is reflection currently used in student learning?
2. How effective is the use of reflection? (i.e. what are the benefits or problems?)
3. What might hinder or impact the implementation of reflection?

English teachers were selected for the study because of the nature of the subject. English requires constant reflective work at many different levels such as developing the curriculum materials, evaluating student work and providing feedback. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of the subject that does not function within a fixed syllabus further gives it precedence as students
would need to think about their progress. The flexibility of reflection thus allows for it to be used in a variety of ways that would benefit and enrich student learning.

The survey was made up of different sections requiring teachers to rate the importance of reflection for student learning, with 10 questions on its impact on student learning, designed using a 4-point likert scale ranging from 0-3 and finally ending with open-ended questions that allowed feedback to be gained on strategies used, frequency and motivations among others. These findings were then consolidated and the results were analysed to gather a perspective on the use of reflection applied in the context of student learning.

FINDINGS

The survey conducted with the teachers yielded very important results on the ways in which reflection was integrated in the classroom and some of the perspectives guiding actual implementation. Overall, these results reflected certain key principles surrounding the ways in which reflection is actually used by teachers, the value placed on its effectiveness and some of the real structural, conceptual and student-related problems that hinder a more widespread implementation. These ideas are taken up in the following sections.

Situating Reflection in Classroom Practice

It was found through the study that reflection when used as a means of improving and enhancing student learning tended to be restricted to particular ways. Generally, it was found that teachers accorded very important significance to the use of reflection in learning as about 80% ranked it as being useful and meaningful. Many were guided by their own personal culture of incorporating reflection within their own growth and development and thus felt strongly about encouraging its use in their classrooms. However, despite this acknowledgement, the frequency of use was not encouraging, with many implementing it only on a “needs basis”, rather than making it a natural avenue of learning (Gill & Halim, 2006). Instead, its use is often largely pragmatic – in relation to major assignments, in the form of personal reflection, or as a “milestone check”, especially after major examinations. Such utilitarian perspectives on its use render its influence and receptivity amongst students ineffective as it is associated with performance and targets. Furthermore, it is felt that these contexts of use generally make the approach teacher-centric and lack the benefit of being driven by the students themselves.

In reviewing some of the purposes that drive the use of reflection, it is noted from Table 4 that the use is largely concentrated as part of post-task routines, a trend noted in other studies (Rarieya, 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>PRE-TASK (20%)</th>
<th>POST-TASK (70%)</th>
<th>UNDERSTANDING SELF (10%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>when introducing new materials</td>
<td>recall</td>
<td>when reviewing work</td>
<td>review study styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical thinking</td>
<td>feedback</td>
<td>critical analysis of work</td>
<td>raising self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reinforce points</td>
<td>when reviewing work</td>
<td>stock-take</td>
<td>moral development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>review performance; basis for improvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

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This focus is extensively driven by the fact that this makes the process much more targeted and focused, instead of falling into the trap of becoming vague or nebulous. Furthermore, given the high precedence placed on being outcomes-oriented, this purpose gets the most weight and reception among teachers. The remaining 30% who accord its use to other areas of learning and growth feel that the value of reflection should stretch beyond the way it is currently utilised. For example, reflection is considered a very powerful tool when interacting with new information. Reflection triggers mental models and begins a process of inquiry that generates thinking and evaluation. This process, as argued by some teachers brings depth and sophistication to learning and adds value when teachers reinforce student reflections with their input. Such a means of engaging learning encourages students to take ownership of their own learning instead of depending on authoritative ideas. A much smaller group of teachers also considered the importance of reflection as a means of understanding self. This application however is fairly traditional in its approach and is used in relation to popular personality tests as well as a guided thinking process.

Since many teachers relied on reflection as a tool in enhancing their post-task processes, there were also notable similarities in the strategies they adopted. Driven by the examination and task-based imperative, reflection strategies were often situated within the context of the individual. While, this is relevant and certainly crucial in an institution preparing students for a university education, it was felt that the nature of General Paper allowed for more interactive applications of reflection which have been growing in recent years (Gill & Halim, 2006). Thus, most strategies focused on individual thinking and processing of information and relied heavily on writing as a means of communication as reflected in Table 5. While these strategies have value, these are not applicable to all kinds of students for example weaker students struggling with language and expression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Reflection Strategies and Tools used</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection tools / strategies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRITING (Guided) (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>re-writing notebooks, journals (can provide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing letters (to the teacher, peers,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mind-maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>response essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THINKING (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>penning thoughts on post-its</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>section of work that is unmarked -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ask them to reflect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resources on metacognition from internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie Benesh “brain-based learning” -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metacognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VERBAL (Structured &amp; non) (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>review work for the rights and wrongs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>using examples to provoke reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choose difficult concepts &amp; guide them in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guided questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussions (unstructured talk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(challenging conventions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>questioning (generic questions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(open-ended)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was also interesting to note that teachers tended to specialize in the strategies they adopted for their students. This meant that students would always reflect *only* in one particular way for *one* particular purpose for example journaling (Hill, 2005). This it is felt would stifle learning and might in fact deter students from taking reflection more seriously and harness it value. Research (Gill & Halim, 2006) however, has noted a value in using mixed reflection strategies and applying it across different learning contexts such as the individual and or group. Such strategies bring
variety and help address the learning problems often faced by students. In addition, there was also a high incidence of using reflection strategies that relied on writing. While, such strategies work very well in training students within an exam and task oriented environment, it is limited and demands a particular mindset and aptitude of students. Lower ability students who face language impediments would not benefit as much from this strategy. Thus greater understanding is needed on the part of teachers in selecting strategies that are appropriately pitched for students, their interest and their learning needs.

In considering the level of implementation in the classroom, it is also noted that teachers are driven by different sets of motivations. These motivations relate to:

1. Support available
2. Resulting outcomes
3. Nature and development of students
4. Personal values

Many teachers across all spectrums of experience seem to hedge in their efforts to incorporate reflection within their scheme of work. Many cite lack of experience in managing a complex metacognitive approach such as reflection. As such, despite the acknowledgement of its importance, actual use remains limited. Teachers therefore seek support structures either in the form of sharing best practices, especially those who use this frequently or in the form of resources. Many also feel that given the open-ended structure of reflection, it is important to have a framework or structure which may better allow them to implement it for their students. However, it is often noted that the lack of such support is linked to another larger and perennial problem of existing within an outcomes-oriented system. This paradoxical system expects divergent learning patterns that involve students in the learning process, yet prize and have high expectation on tangible student outcomes. This pressure to perform and constant assessment for learning thus negate the implementation of reflection. Some teachers stated the importance of being able to see “positive evidence” before they adopt the method. Such sentiments thus make it very difficult to encourage the use of reflection more consistently.

However some teachers do feel that those students who do have the calibre would generally benefit from the approach. Some notable advantages cited by those who strongly advocate its use include, its ability to reinforce learning, pushing discussions to a higher level of engagement and making room for constructive changes in work and learning. These teachers are driven by more intrinsic student outcomes that are not negated or subverted under pressures of examinations or meeting targets. Finally, many who support its use also use it extensively in their own practices to aid their learning and growth. Their own “natural” inclinations towards being reflective individuals generally allow them to extend its use to students.

It is thus clear that while reflection is multi-faceted and an approach offering many valuable outcomes, its use is limited and dependent on many factors.

**Views on Effectiveness**

It is also important to note that despite the importance and value of reflection as acknowledged by teachers or in the literature, they have also cited many issues relating to its extent of effectiveness. It has been noted that for reflection to be successful or valuable; its use is tempered by several aspects such as,

1. Student calibre
2. Culture of learning
3. Qualities of teacher

The first aspect is constantly raised when considering the implementation of reflection even at higher levels of learning. Given that the diversity of students today is varied and many come from different backgrounds with different aptitudes and strengths, the task of encouraging reflection is a challenging one. Most teachers note that students who are weaker in general are not able to value the process of reflection as they are coping with many other learning difficulties. On the other extreme, high ability students who enjoy verbal discourse and discussions are also not able to assimilate the individuated process traditionally associated with reflection. These problems thus negate a much wider application in the domain of learning. It is also noted that many students actually “dread” the process because it is associated with performance and grades and about providing a constant “reality check”. This focus thus adds pressure to learning, subconsciously adding a sense of threat and removing the element of interest-driven learning.

Many of the teachers also noted the significance of reflection as a tool for developing learning culture amongst students. The pressure for academic performance and accountability currently sets the environment for extensive “hand-holding” by teachers which subverts the importance placed on learning avenues like reflection. However, the currently predominant emphasis on independent thinking and moving in a direction where students become self-managing learners would build a positive learning culture where students naturally use reflection to think about their learning and take proactive steps towards making improvements. Fernsten and Fernsten (2005: 304) argue that ‘reflective practice itself becomes part of the learning process…and should become the student’s tool for coming to terms with what strategies worked or did not.” This it is felt would be effective in making reflection a more staple component of learning, encouraging students to take ownership of and pride in their learning. At the level of the college, establishing such a culture is paramount as students are being prepared for university and such skills would certainly foster better growth in them overall, leading towards “self-actualisation and enhance more responsible management of the roadblocks and challenges of academic life” (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005: 305).

Finally, the effectiveness of reflection is dependent on the qualities of the teacher. Reflection is a high level metacognitive activity that requires a certain skill set. The fact that many teachers have confessed a low proficiency (Rarieya, 2005) in the area highlights the need for more training and scaffolding to build teachers’ competencies in this area. One suggestion made within the findings gathered was to “increase sharing by teachers who have tried it out in their classes.” Such platforms increase confidence and through shared dialogue can allow for improvements and trailing other more effective approaches to using reflection. It is also noted that personal belief is a strong determinant of effectiveness. Teachers who feel compelled to use it without support or their own belief tend to find lower rates of effectiveness as every reflection process is just a step to be completed – a process that degenerates into “form-filling”; in such instances, students do not benefit from extended conversations that often evolve in reflective approaches. Instead, teachers who personally believe in the value of this provide more supportive structures, offering personal insight (Russell, 2005) and creating a conducive “climate” for such processes (Rarieya, 2005).

**Implementation Issues**

While many of the educators expressed confidence in the benefits of reflection for student learning, they do not pursue it as a teaching tool on a regular basis, due to several concerns. They identified these practical issues as considerations that make reflection difficult to conduct:
1. Outcomes of reflection
2. Devising creative tasks for reflection
3. Lack of time
4. Students’ interest
5. Lack of formal support

Educators generally felt that the nature of reflection does not allow immediate outcomes to be seen as it is process-oriented and the gains from reflection vary across individuals. In the context of a result-oriented curriculum and one where teachers have only two years to guide students towards certain measurable objectives, reflection may have to be passed over for other faster teaching methods. Their sentiments are not unique for often teachers opt to “tell the learner how to analyse, the connections to be made and which explanations to accept” as these are deemed “more efficient than self-discovery” (Grant et al, 2004). For a subject such as General Paper where students are tested on their abilities to write argumentatively and comprehend abstract concepts, rigorous practice in examination-oriented formats may be deemed more measurable and efficient methods. This is done at times with the awareness that self-motivation in learners, which learning through self-discovery promotes, may be sacrificed.

Some indicated that the existing literature has not surfaced sufficient empirical evidence or studies that decisively show the benefits of reflection in student learning for educators to gravitate in that direction. Until such developments are present, trends in language education will continue to favour current popular methods and reflection will be an option only at certain junctures, if at all.

Another implementation concern was the question of “how” educators could design these tasks for meaningful reflection to occur. The lack of available teaching resources on facilitating student reflection was identified as a practical problem. Educators voiced how it was imperative to ask thought-provoking questions to stimulate reflection and raised the importance of pitching reflection tasks accurately but admitted they lacked the experience and skills to design creative and effective reflection tools. There were also different opinions on whether reflection for students should be structured or otherwise. Those against a structured reflection plan argued that it would become yet another mechanical task as reflection in itself connotes boredom for some students. Participants in favour of structure saw value in encouraging students towards certain common goals but overall, all respondents concurred on the need for creativity in designing reflection tools.

Creativity in task design was a key concern to those surveyed, bearing in mind the varied learning styles of learners and their interest in reflection. The design of reflection materials is a pertinent consideration as it translates to the effectiveness of the process as well. Creativity is considered an important attribute of quality teaching and as suggested by Amabile (1996:35)

“A product or response will be judged creative to the extent to that (a) it is both novel and an appropriate, useful, correct or valuable response to the task at hand, and (b) the task is heuristic rather than algorithmic. “

These qualities make up creative teaching and educators will need to be mindful of the need to have refreshing approaches that address the learning need, both in the planning of lessons as well as in the practice of teaching when they have to improvise very quickly in unforeseen situations. Creative teaching methods are lived, practised by teachers in a multitude of ways and crafting creative reflective tasks is a worthwhile undertaking.
The interest that many educators have in reflective learning is almost always moderated by the apprehension of committing to a process that may be time-consuming (Gill & Halim, 2006). For reflection to be effective, follow-up activities to monitor the ability of the students to realise their gaps and to take action for them, for instance, are necessary. Reflective learning undertaken by individual students, demands that time accorded to each learner for monitoring and feedback be multiplied and teachers cannot afford this commodity. Often, reflective learning is something they are interested to implement but end up shelving due to time constraints.

In tailoring reflection tools to meet the needs of students, myriad factors need to be considered, such as the attitude of learners, their learning styles, their lack of experience with reflection and their preferences as learners. “Reflection is meaningful for expert learners” (Ertmer & Newby, 1996), some of whom may have chanced upon the benefits of reflecting on one’s project or work because there was a need to revisit existing methods in less structured circumstances. Experiences in higher education, through assignments designed by academics may have also incorporated reflection. In less structured settings, reflective experiences are “not carefully selected or paced” and depend on the learner “noticing things and recognising them as significant” (Grant et al, 2004). Through these positive accidental or incidental reflective learning experiences, these learners continue to find value in reflection for life. Younger learners at the secondary or pre-university level, however, have little familiarity with reflection and the process to facilitate their reflection needs scaffolding and should be made explicit.

When students are made to reflect, its importance may not come intuitively to them and educators may be faced with resistance or lack of interest. The reality that students may be detached from the process because they are not intellectually ready to reflect, or they see it as a waste of time, or perhaps the idea that the process appears to be too passive for it to hold any meaningful outcome are predictable possibilities. Furthermore, the teachers also find that many students do not have confidence in their own abilities to reflect or make meaningful observations and prefer to rely on the teacher’s “expert opinion”. This perceived lack of competence in their own abilities causes them to be stressed when they are tasked with reflection activities and correspondingly, may yield observations that fall below what they are capable of. It has indeed been noted that reflective practice presents varied degrees of effectiveness in that “some learners benefit more from it than others” (Boud et al, 1985). The challenge thus lies in implementing reflective learning in an engaging and flexible manner for the purpose of encouraging student ownership to ensure that each learner derives meaning from it.

An additional concern was the absence of formal support for reflection at the school level and that of the Ministry of Education. Several educators felt that the existing climate, in according flexibility to teachers to utilise a spectrum of teaching methods, does not particularly raise teachers’ consciousness of the importance of reflection in student learning. They contend that while conferences and seminars for teachers may host the topic of reflection, emphasis on it as an effective teaching tool has not been cascaded for schools to decisively adopt it.

DISCUSSION

It has been established that the educators involved in the study agree that reflection is a beneficial learning tool for 17 to 18-year-old students for the purpose of English language mastery but several obstacles prevent them from applying reflective learning in their lessons. By addressing difficulties presented by reflective practice and making recommendations, it is hoped that, the objective of making it a more accessible learning tool in future is achieved.
Reflection as a Learning Tool

The objectives of facilitating student reflection are clear; students are able to utilise yet another learning tool and are encouraged to manage their own learning, in the process being responsible for it and self-motivated to develop their critical faculties. This ability to express “ownership” (Duhon-Haynes, 1996; Robinson, 1994) and “solve problems independently “Glickman (1989; as cited in Robinson, 1994: 12) is crucial for students to monitor their own progress and to prepare them for higher-order and more difficult learning opportunities. Therefore, efforts to incorporate student reflection should be encouraged at the department, zonal and district levels or for certain subjects by the Education Ministry. As earlier discussed, student reflection could be weaved into the post-assessment stage for students to reflect on their errors, strengths or weaknesses, in carrying out a project or research, in journaling, or reviewing the most recent lesson, among many other opportunities. The process of reflection has immense benefits for the learner and also the educator if the student should point out something the teacher has neglected.

In addition, student reflection encourages independent inquiry and thus echoes the “Teach Less, Learn More” (TLLM) nation-wide educational initiative where teachers are encouraged to devise innovative practices that spur students to learn more by relying on their own devices with some teacher facilitation, and not merely through dissemination of information by the teacher. TLLM seeks to encourage “less dependence on rote learning, repetitive tests and a ‘one size fits all’ type of instruction, and more on experiential discovery, engaged learning, differentiated teaching, the learning of life-long skills” (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2006). Student reflection reinforces the principles of the TLLM proposal and especially, at higher levels of learning such as pre-university education, guiding students to be more independent and self-motivated is of value.

Raising Awareness on Reflective Learning

Fundamental to the efforts of promoting reflective practice would be awareness-raising through sharing sessions and seminars on the value of reflection. In Singapore, there is always debate over how students could better enjoy the process of education by doing less memorising, completing fewer drills and moving away from the textbook or exam-oriented outcomes. Raising awareness of the link between reflection and critical thinking and demonstrating how reflecting entails mulling over or critically pondering why one’s project seems to be missing something, for example, would persuade more educators to invest time in it. Efforts to share practices involving reflection are already being undertaken and more needs to be done in this regard as the study has shown that educators are largely unaware of these successful practices.

It is realistic to expect to find students who may be nonchalant towards the reflective process and also those who express difficulty with it as they consider the teacher to have all the information needed and feel that they themselves, as students, are not competent. In fact, students may be indifferent or uninterested in the process because they are unsure of what is expected and are uneasy with the task. Students may be “unused to being asked to process information” that are not from the traditional sources or uncomfortable being asked to review lessons from the first person perspective. There have also been many reports of students who are “unable without help, to deepen their reflection beyond a descriptive account” (Moon, 2005).

Such students may benefit from some patience and persistence on the part of the teacher to encourage them to have more confidence in their critical abilities but the teacher should also be mindful that such students may not be mentally prepared for the task, in the short span of two years. To make the process work, such learners would probably require more scaffolding and a
two-part reflective process where they are first made to understand what reflection entails before being gradually trained to reflect at deeper levels through a series of activities.

**Documenting Reflective Practice**

To address skepticism over the effectiveness of reflection and the lack of empirical data of its benefits, it is necessary to document effective practices involving the use of student reflection. At higher levels, for instance at the zonal and district levels, action research could be initiated to get educators, representing various schools, to design creative tools for reflection for subjects that would benefit from it. Students could document their reflection in a log book and such an artifact would be useful as empirical data of its benefits.

It is to be noted that in language learning or other relevant subjects, empirical data that conclusively traces the effects of reflective practice to an improvement in a student’s grade, in isolation of other intervening factors, is unrealistic. There are factors such as other methods employed by the teacher, the classroom environment and home environment that combine with effective reflective practice to effect a change. Reflective practice ought to be deemed measurable and “beneficial when a student vocalises or expresses” through his log, evidence that he is more aware of his goals, has knowledge of his capabilities and perhaps “through his journals”, gradually demonstrates an improvement in his ability to evaluate and analyse articles critically (Boud, 2002; Hiemstra, 2002). Such artifacts when gathered and published or presented to large audiences of educators in seminars or workshops, will be able to serve as evidence of the value of student reflection.

**Formal Support & Time for Reflective Practice**

In line with efforts to conduct action research on reflection at higher levels, departments responsible for subjects that would benefit from student reflection could offer more formal support to their teachers. Time could be allocated for teachers to plan creative and purposeful reflection tools for implementation. Teachers who are comfortable with implementing their lessons could be given the flexibility of cutting down on the number of assignments for that particular term for instance, so that they could build in more time to monitor the reflection process. Reflection “requires time for the reprocessing of ideas” (Moon, 2005) and such formal support effectively addresses the problem of time constraint as reflection replaces another teaching method or is complementary to existing practices and does not suffer the label of being an additional undertaking. Effective methods that encourage student reflection could be shared with fellow educators in the department and these methods could be tweaked for learners with different abilities.

Another view to the issue of “not having enough time” is that presented by Raelin (2002) who argues that time will be invested in reflective practice if people believe in its benefits. In this view, the barrier to reflective practice is not time but “skill” and thus, if formal support is given to teachers to devise creative tasks to encourage student reflection, and these tools could be documented and shared, educators would gain the know-how or expertise in carrying out these exercises.

**Planning Reflection Tasks**

Whether reflective practice should be structured or unstructured depends on the objective of specific reflection tasks. Structured reflection tasks may help learners who have no experience with reflection, understand the aim of reflection and it is useful for documentation purposes when
the teacher stops at various junctures to monitor their reflection. Otherwise, students may feel that the process has no guidelines and their reflections may reflect some aimlessness. Students who had gone through a 3-step reflection cycle where they had to go through pre-task, post-task and post-assessment stages, expressed appreciation for the structured process as they found it focused (Gill & Halim, 2006) and the different stages allowed them to evaluate their progress from different perspectives, given that they would have fresh insights at the later stages. Structured reflection, however does run the risk of adding stress to students for it may be seen as another mechanical and time-consuming task.

While it is the educator’s challenge to balance the advantages and disadvantages of a structured reflection cycle, students would benefit from creatively designed tasks, questions that leave room for flexibility in critique or in raising self-awareness, and some monitoring by the teacher. It is important to strive to have creatively designed tools while at the same time, remain open to changes and improvisations in conducting reflection so as to always keep students interested and attentive. To quote Csikszentmihalyi (1990:33) in this context:

“The shape and content of life depends on how attention has been used. …Attention is the most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience”

The attitudes and multiple learning styles of learners must also be a consideration as they would need guidance and a range of varied activities to grapple with a learning tool that taps not only on their metacognitive ability but also their “emotions and motivation” (Grant et al, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The study has explored the dilemmas that educators face in balancing the emphasis on student-centred learning with teacher-centred instruction and also in managing learning tasks that are process-oriented while still ensuring that positive outcomes are met. Reflection, a student-centred process that taps on critical faculties is beneficial for the purpose of language mastery by students between the ages of 17 to 18, as discussed in our study. Reflection could be incorporated into journal writing, critique of reading materials or lessons and evaluating one’s written work at various stages, just to name a few possibilities. However, educators have generally avoided weaving it into everyday lessons for students due to several concerns, such as lack of time, inadequacy of resources, lack of empirical evidence on its effectiveness and students’ receptivity.

The benefits presented by reflection in student learning are numerous – reflection encourages critical thinking, hones one’s ability to learn independently to prepare them for more difficult learning opportunities and motivates learners. It is a tool not only for immediate education but for lifelong learning. In view of the implementation issues surfaced by educators, several recommendations have been proposed to make reflective practice for students more accessible. Efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of reflection and sharing of effective practices need to be continued to update and inspire educators of the many creative reflection tasks at the secondary, pre-university and college levels. Formal support should be given at the department, zonal and district levels for action research in the area of student reflection for subjects that will gain from it. Educators could be given structured time to plan creative reflection tasks that cater to multiple learning styles and a reflection cycle could take the place of a writing assignment to help educators better manage the time-consuming nature of reflection. Finally, reflective practice
needs to be documented for learners and educators to monitor the effectiveness of the process – this should serve as persuasive evidence of its value.

REFERENCES


