

Toward a Better Understanding of Reflection in Language Learning

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1. Background

In relation to the recent shift of student-centered approach, learner autonomy is one of the key issues internationally discussed in the field of second language acquisition (Ridley, 1997). When looking through research on learner autonomy, we can find ‘learner reflection,’ ‘reflective activities,’ or the related terms appear in several studies (e.g., journal papers of JALT LD SIG; Ridley, 1997). However, the discussion about the effectiveness of learner reflection has been progressed with remaining the definition issues. Unfortunately there seemed to be less solid considerations on the inquiry what ‘reflection’ in language learning does mean. In the previous research the term seemed to be simply addressed in the meaning that we use in everyday language. On the other hand, the inquiry of ‘reflection’ has been deeply discussed in the field of philosophy and professional development. I think it would be worthwhile to learn some ideas from those fields because it will help language teachers and researchers to clarify the natures of reflection which is common with the general learning and also which is specific to language learning. I believe these clarification efforts would be helpful for language teachers to develop appropriate criteria to assess their students’ reflective activities. In order to contribute to this clarification, the present report addresses the concept of ‘reflection’ discussed in the field of philosophy and professional education. There are four main sections: A discussion of terminology, problems with definitions, and interpretive framework for reflection, and reflection in academic contexts.

2. A discussion of terminology

Moon (2004) identified four academic parlances representing the concept of reflection: ‘reflection,’ ‘reflective learning,’ ‘reflective writing’ and ‘reflective practice.’ Starting from ‘reflection,’ she described it as a process that appears to center around the notion of learning and thinking. Because ‘reflection’ in this sense seems to be closely associated with learning, Moon related ‘reflection’ to ‘reflective learning’ and used these two terms interchangeably in her book. She writes:

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We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting – so ‘reflective learning’ as a term, simply emphasizes the intention to learn as a result of reflection (Moon, 2004, p. 80).

According to Moon, the other two words, ‘reflective writing’ and ‘reflective practice’ are the expansions of the ideas of ‘reflection’ or ‘reflective learning.’ On the basis of her reasoning, I describe the relationship of four words in figure 1 below. ‘Reflective writing’ is a representation of the process of reflection in the form of writing. The ‘reflective practice’ was the idea developed in professional education and emphasizes the utilization of reflection in professional or complex activities in order to address the unstructured and/or unpredictable situations.

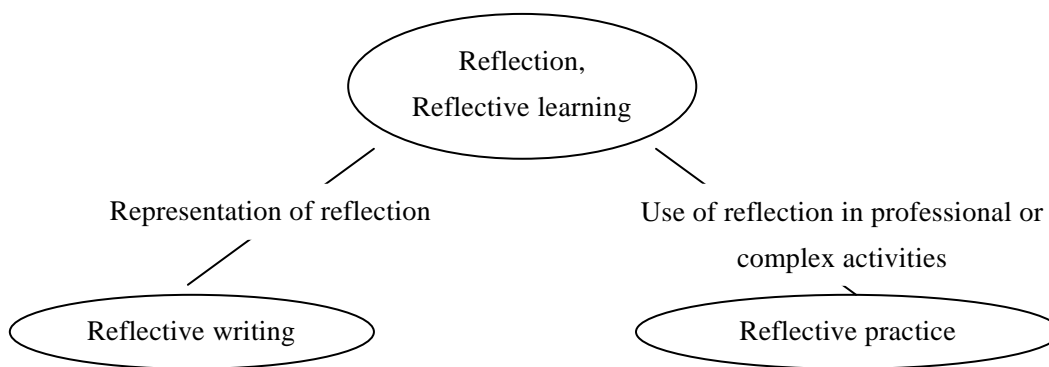


Figure 1: The relationship of ‘reflection,’ ‘reflective learning,’ ‘reflective writing’ and ‘reflective practice’ based on Moon (2004)

3. Problems with definitions

The concept of reflection is addressed in the literature from various disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, higher education, and professional development in the areas of medicine, nursing, law, and teaching (Lyons, 2010a; Moon, 2004). This complicating situation appears to be one of the sources for the inconsistent definitions of reflection in the literature. For example, Nona Lyons, a teacher educator currently interested in reflective development across professions, argued that multiple definitions of ‘reflective practice’ exist in the literature (Lyons, 1999; 2010c). Teacher educator Carol Rodgers also pointed out the lack of a common definition of reflection and went on to identify four problems associated with this absence of a clear definition (Rodgers, 2002, p. 282):

- It is unclear how systematic reflection is different from other types of thought.
- It is difficult to assess a skill that is vaguely defined.
- It has lost its ability to be seen without a clear picture of what reflection looks like and

therefore has begun to lose its value.

- It is difficult to research the effects of reflective teacher education and professional development on teachers’ practice and students’ learning.

The final problem is likely to be specific to the situation of teacher development. However if we replace the expressions ‘professional education’ or ‘professional practice’ with ‘teacher education’ or ‘teachers’ practice,’ all four problems become issues common across professions. Not only in the case of professions but also in students’ learning, these problems would not be negligible. In the following sections, I will highlight two researchers’ attempts which set out to clarify the concept of reflection through:

- 1) Examining major thoughts and works of three philosophers/practitioners, providing an interpretive framework for reflection (Lyons, 2010c), and
- 2) Reviewing the literature on reflection from various disciplines (Moon, 2004)

4. An interpretive framework for reflection (Lyons, 2010c)

Lyons (2010c) proposed an interpretive framework of reflection in professional life on the basis of the major thoughts and works of three significant theorists who contributed to the development of the concept of reflection: John Dewey, Donald Schön, and Paulo Freire. In her article, Lyons primarily used the term ‘reflective inquiry’ which seemed to be interchangeable with reflection or reflective practice. The main ideas of the interpretive framework are presented in the table below.

Table 1: An interpretive framework: Reflection and reflective inquiry

(Based on the table in Lyons, 2010b, p. 2 and the table in Lyons, 2010c, p. 19)

Theorists	Dewey (1910, 1933)	Schön (1983)	Freire (1970, 1990)
Interests	What is reflective inquiry?	How & what do we know?	Why is critical inquiry necessary?
Reflection as:	Inquiry/thinking	Knowing	Interrogation of the political, social, cultural contexts of learning & living
Reflective inquiry as:	Mode of thinking or inquiry aware of actions that need to follow	Mode of knowing	Mode of critical consciousness or inquiry aware of need to investigate
Implications	Learning is learning to think	Identifying knowing in/on actions	Uncovering critical contexts: political, social cultural through investigation

John Dewey, in *How We Think* (1910, 1933), provided an outline of how we think and how to scaffold its development in educational contexts. His thesis was briefly indicated in the subtitle of

his original text published in 1910: *A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Dewey (1933) viewed reflective thinking neither as ‘just mulling things over’ nor as just representing knowledge and belief which simply assert some matter of fact, principle or law. He defined reflective thought as follows:

Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends (Dewey, 1933, p. 6)

Dewey linked this notion of reflective thinking to educational contexts. He claimed that the challenge of learning is learning to think and an aim of education ought to be to cultivate the attitude of reflective thinking.

According to Moon (2004), the term ‘reflective practice’ seems to relate to the work of Donald Schön’s *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983). His interest was in what practitioners actually do in practice and investigated five professions – architects, psychotherapists, engineers, planners, and managers – in terms of how they reflect in/on action and how that contributes to doing and acting as a professional. According to Schön, reflective practice is a kind of knowing in/on actions of actual professional practices and identified ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection on action’ as separate activities (Lyons, 2010c).

Schön assumed that most competent practitioners know more than they can say and exhibit a kind of tacit knowing in their practice. Furthermore, they can reveal a kind of capacity to reflect on their knowing in the midst of professional practice. He explained:

(P)rofessional practitioners often think about what they are doing, sometimes even while doing it. Stimulated by surprise, they turn back on action and on knowing, which is implicit in action. They may ask themselves, for example, “What features do I notice when I recognize this thing? What are the criteria by which I make this judgment? How am I framing this problem?” (Schön, 1983, p. 50)

This phenomenon is labeled as ‘reflection in action.’ On the other hand, ‘reflection on action’ is a kind of capacity to reflect on his/her knowing or previous actions after their professional practice.

In his work of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paul Freire claimed the significance of critical reflection or critical consciousness in educational contexts. Based on his educational practices in Brazil, Freire identified one important premise: education practice is not neutral, uncommitted or apolitical. According to Freire, because learning and living cannot be separated from the social contexts in which people find themselves, it is essential to look critically at such

situations. This process refers to critical reflection, and by the process Freire believed that learners “achieve a deepening awareness of both the sociocultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality through action upon it” (Freire, 1970, p. 27).

The above interpretive framework appears to clarify three types of reflection: 1) reflection as inquiry/thinking (Dewey, 1910, 1933), 2) reflection in/on actions as knowing (Schön, 1983), and 3) reflection as interrogation of the political, social, and cultural contexts of learning and living (Freire, 1970, 1990). The next section will also consider another attempt which tries to elucidate the concept of reflection through a review of the literature from various disciplines.

5. Reflection in academic contexts (Moon, 2004)

Moon (2004) expanded on her previous works (Moon, 1999a, 1999b) to review the literature on reflection. She firstly pointed out ‘the common-sense view of reflection’ and showed how this definition had developed, especially in academic contexts.

According to Moon (2004), the common-sense view of reflection refers to the word ‘reflection’ that we use in everyday language. It is a form of mental processing but is more than just thinking about something. Rather, it involves some intention and is applied to more complex issues. She defined it as follows:

Reflection is a form of mental processing – like a form of thinking – that we may use to fulfill a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome or we may simply ‘be reflective’ and then an outcome can be unexpected. Reflection is applied to relatively complicated, ill-structured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess. (Moon, 2004, p. 82)

Since the end of the 1990s, not only have the various ideas of reflection spread across the professional practices but they have also attained a much more significant role in academic contexts including both professional education and undergraduate studies (Moon, 2004). Reflection in educational contexts contains some specific features in addition to the above definition. For instance, reflection in curriculum potentially involves assessment: it requires learners the evidence of learning or change of behavior as the results of the process of reflection. In this sense, the common-sense definition is expanded as follows:

Reflection/reflective learning or reflective writing in the academic context, is also likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection, with an outcome specified in terms of learning, action or clarification. It may be preceded by a description of the purpose and/or the subject matter of the reflection. The process and outcome of reflective work are most likely to

be in a represented (e.g., written) form, to be seen by others and to be assessed. All of these factors can influence its nature and quality. (Moon, 2004, p. 83)

Moon (1999a) explored the different accounts of reflection in the literature and pointed out one assumption that the basic process of reflection was likely to be same among the accounts: the common-sense view of reflection. She further explained why there were various accounts of reflection. One reason was because theorists and practitioners focus on how reflection is applied and how it produces a particular outcome within each discipline rather than addressing the underlying mechanism of the reflection process.

6. Conclusion

“It is not likely that there will now exist a single agreed upon definition, nor need we hope for one” (Lyons, 2010c, p. 20).

Lyons (2010c) seemed to show a rather positive standpoint toward the absence of a consistent definition of reflection. This view would be convincing in terms of the fact that there are various disciplines which address the concept of reflection; there are various purposes to apply the ideas of reflection into the various contexts of practice or learning. In this sense, it is not surprising evidence that there are no strong need of ‘a single agreed upon definition.’ However, as Rodgers (2002) claimed that it is difficult to assess a skill that is vaguely defined, I think a certain definition would be needed when assessing the process of reflection or its outcomes in certain contexts. When considering which definition is appropriate for which context, it would be helpful to refer to the above two attempts: 1) the interpretive framework for reflection which consists of three ideas of reflection (Lyons, 2010c) and 2) the development of common-sense view of reflection in academic contexts (Moon, 2004). Further study of the literature will be needed, especially to clarify the natures of reflection which is common with the general learning and which is specific to language learning so that teachers could develop appropriate criteria to assess their students’ reflective activities in language learning.

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