

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOR EARLY
CAREER LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Based on a range of detailed case studies, this innovative book presents a model for the development of early career language teachers. It showcases the lived experiences of English language teachers in their training years, as well as the reflections of two more experienced English language teachers, and uses these case studies to provide practical guidelines on early career needs and development. The book outlines four essential and highly interconnected conditions that will enable teachers to survive and thrive in the profession: *reflection*, *support*, *resilience*, and *well-being*. Using an innovative, evidence-based, data-informed approach to reflective practice, the book covers teachers' philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and critical reflection beyond practice. Each chapter contains practical reflection activities to encourage readers to reflect on what the research reveals. It is essential reading for graduate students who are training to become language teachers, as well as for language teacher trainers and lecturers.

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Preface

I was born, grew up, and educated in Ireland, where I received my undergraduate degree and a postgraduate diploma in education (called a Higher Diploma in Education [H.Dip.Ed.]) that qualified me as a teacher in the Irish secondary school system. I was qualified to teach business, accounting, and business English. During my teaching practice in Ireland, I had a real baptism of fire as I was placed in a classroom to teach for two hours each morning in a secondary school in south Dublin, without any mention of a school-appointed mentor or cooperating teacher. My greeting was “Here’s the book, go teach the class.” I went on that first day not knowing really what to do or whom to ask should I have any questions. For the teaching practice portion of the H.Dip.Ed., I was to be supervised by a professor from the university but was not informed about the details or the name of the person. Then one early morning, I arrived in my classroom as usual and that a woman was sitting at the back of the room with paper and pen ready. I assumed she must be a supervisor, but was not sure if she was from the school I was in or the university program I was required to attend each afternoon for education classes. I was visited three more times that year by the same woman and never had any conversations with her before, during, or after my observations. I just about survived this experience, but only because I really liked the students and a few experienced teachers in the school offered me some good advice throughout the year.

It took me a further eighteen or so years to write about my first observations in a paper I called “The Look,” because that is all my supervisor did: “look” or stare at me during those observations and write continuously without sharing any of them after (Farrell, 1996). Hopefully, things have changed for the better since then, but I wrote about my experience because, as I moved into teacher education and began to give talks and deliver workshops worldwide, I began to realize that mine was not an isolated experience and that, unfortunately, many other teachers lacked support when they started out in their early career years. My first year(s) of

teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) was not much different, as I was also given the book and told to go teach the class without any mentorship or support. I survived that period too because of some good colleagues who made suggestions during the year. My next four years were a period of real trial and error where I was really struggling to decide if I would continue teaching or not. I decided at the end of my fifth year that I wanted to continue, but that I would also need to study more about teaching, especially how to teach in such a “new” field as TESOL, which was taking off in the US. Along the way and during my studies, I encountered the interesting concept of “reflective practice” that would take up the next forty years or so of my career. During my career, I have attempted to encourage all language teachers, be they in teacher education programs, their first years, or their twentieth year of teaching, to engage in systematic reflection about what they do so that they can be the best they can be and help their students succeed.

Now I find myself, nearly forty-six years after my first entry into a classroom, feeling the need to write another book about how reflective practice can be used to better support early career teachers during these important years. *Reflective Practice for Early Career Language Teachers* is intended to fill a major gap in the language education literature. It covers central issues and concerns about the actual lived experiences of five early career teachers of English as a second language (ESL), in their first, second, third, fourth, and fifth years, as well as two more experienced ESL teachers, in their seventh and tenth years respectively. My main focus is on the adaptation challenges faced by the five early career ESL teachers, but I also use the reflections of the two more experienced ESL teachers by way of comparison to figure out what has kept them going in a profession that continues to eat its young (Halford, 1998). The ultimate aim of this book is to be able to provide early career language teachers, learner teachers in training, language teacher-educators, and other relevant stakeholders with knowledge and skills that will allow them to take control of their own professional lives both inside and outside the classroom. I also hope that they will become more familiar with how to operationalize reflective practice through the framework for reflecting on practice that I used for each teacher as a lens when engaging in reflections. I am still as passionate about the concept of reflective practice and I will continue to encourage all language teachers and their teacher-educators to engage in systematic reflection, so that we can provide more opportunities for our students to be successful learners. I hope the model for early career language teacher professional development that appears in Chapter 11 and is the result of

Preface

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all seven ESL teacher reflections outlined in Chapters 1–10 will be useful for all teachers and the various stakeholders responsible for educating, training, and retaining these teachers in their school systems. Of course, I would not have been able to provide such a model without the assistance of the seven ESL teachers who shared their reflections. I hope that this book not only honors their commitment to their students, but also all early career language teachers who strive to make a difference in their students' lives. I remain in awe of every language teacher who selflessly enters the classroom each day with the sole motivation of helping others succeed. Thank you all for all your work; we need to retain you all in the profession so that your students can benefit from your wonderful work.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the seven ESL teachers who allowed me into their professional lives and showed me the true meaning of what it means to be an English language teacher. I have written many books on reflective practice with the idea that such an interesting yet complex concept can help teachers to be the best that they can be for their students. This book portrays seven ESL teachers as dedicated professionals who put the needs of their students before their own and was illuminating for me as an academic removed from the ESL classroom. I was a teacher of English as a foreign language for many years before I became an academic but I had forgotten the time and effort that dedicated English language teachers put in when trying to help their students succeed. This book focuses on the adaptation challenges of five early career ESL teachers and illustrates their enormous talent and selfless dedication to the profession, but it also shows why two more experienced ESL teachers continue as dedicated professionals even though they too face challenges. So, I dedicate this book to all English language teachers who selflessly go into their classrooms each day to deliver the best lessons they can to ensure their students succeed.

I would also like to thank George Jacobs for his insightful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. In addition, I would like to thank Becky Taylor at Cambridge University Press for her unwavering faith in my ability to produce this book, as well as for her endless encouragement. Gratitude also goes to Izzie Collins and the exceptionally professional team at Cambridge University Press who put their valuable time in to help produce this text in its wonderful form. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada for providing partial funding for this project.

Abbreviations

BT	beginning teacher
EAP	English for academic purposes
ECT	early career teacher
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELT	English language teaching
ESL	English as a second language
RP	reflective practice
SLTE	second language teacher education
TESOL	teaching English to speakers of other languages
TLs	teacher-learners