The Role of Collaborative Critical Reflection and Individual Reflection in Groups in Mentoring ESL Teachers

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Abstract

This study documents the process of critical reflection which nine teachers who participated in the ARMS (Action Research Mentorship Scheme) project engaged in and how the mentors and mentees tried to move beyond reflective practice. This article tries to understand the directions we need to take so that teachers’ engagement with reflective practice results in a transformative journey at the professional as well as personal levels. The process of critical reflection was approached in two ways: first, the construct of ‘critical’ in critical reflection was questioned to arrive at its meaning; and second, a distinction was made between individual reflection in groups and the potential for a ‘collective focus’ which is often missing in collaborative reflection in groups. Finally, the findings of the study are presented which record the major differences in individual reflection in groups (IRG) and critical collaborative reflection (CCR).

Keywords: reflective practice, critical reflection, teachers’ beliefs

Collaborative Reflection

The practice of reflection is often limited to individual learning from personal experience (Boud, 2006, p. 160). In this context some practitioners and teacher educators try to move beyond individual reflection. They encourage a group of teachers to get together and engage in reflecting and sharing their personal experiences about professional issues. Thus, discussions are often encouraged in these reflective groups on teachers’ professional concerns and/or triumphs. While teachers listen to personal
reflections of others in these groups, establishing connections between
the individual and social self of the teachers is often not encouraged
(sharing of critical incidents from personal experience which might
have a bearing on teachers’ professional practice). Time constraints are
a major cause for limiting teachers to consider themselves as individual
learners in principle detachable from social practices. This kind of
reflection is what is termed ‘individual reflection in groups’ (IRG) where
the focus is largely on the professional self of the teacher and not on
their personal and social selves. Our focus therefore was to work with
a framework of critical reflection which emphasizes the individual in
the social context and in particular what this might mean for changed
practices within organizations. This framework for critical collaborative
reflection in groups is neither inherently individual nor collective but is
based irrevocably on accepting the individual in the social context. In
this sense critical collaborative reflection focuses on the social contexts of
professional practice which includes workplaces, professional cultures,
social, political, and cultural contexts.

Fook & Gardner (2007) and Fook (2010) propose a framework to
practise critical reflection drawing from theories in reflective practice,
reflexivity, post-modernism and critical social science. Their two-stage
process of critical reflection for professionals linking reflection with
practice focuses on developing a critical reflective analysis/awareness
of practice through the exposure of fundamental assumptions and their
sources. The first stage focuses on changed awareness and the second on
changed practices. Fook (2010) summarizes the steps in the framework
in 6 steps as follows:

1. A first level of assumptions is unearthed.
2. These move to another deeper level through further reflection.
3. ‘Breakthrough’ connections are made.
4. This/these assumptions are evaluated against current experience/
   values/assumptions (and other people’s opinions/experiences,
   literature).
5. Old assumptions are reframed as desired theory of practice.
6. Changed practices.

This framework was applied in formal programmes where participants
were involved in group and individual assignments based on the above
model. They were further asked to develop their own ‘theory of practice’
through research and/or experimentation in their workplaces.

Cottrell (2011, p. 223) proposes a framework of critical reflection consisting of two phases and five stages in the form of a spiral:

**Phase 1:** Sharing ideas and raw experiences

**Phase 2:** Analysis and Synthesis

The five stages discussed by Cottrell are: Evaluate, Reconstruct, Analyse, Distil, Apply

**Figure 1** Core model for critical reflection, Cottrell (2011, p. 223)

This study draws from the above frameworks to understand what ‘critical collaborative reflection’ might mean in practice and how it is different from individual reflection in groups.

**Context of the Study and Research Questions**

This study is part of the ARMS action research project grant where I worked with two other colleagues (Monishita and Jenie) and together we mentored nine school teachers from different parts of India (Kolkata, Udaipur, a village near Nagpur and Delhi) to carry out action research projects in their teaching-learning contexts. The study is based on my work with six teachers (all female) with whom I worked closely. The data was collected using the following tools:

- Recordings from reflective sessions with mentees
- Reflective notes on CCR with co-mentors
• Noting down every situation of CCR vis-à-vis IRG
• Interviews and discussions with mentees and co-mentors on CCR and IRG
• Collecting data from mentees’ journals on CCR and IRG
• Questionnaire to co-mentor and mentees on CCR and IRG

The following research questions guided the study:

• In what way is collaborative critical reflection (CCR) different from individual reflection in groups (IRG)?
• In what context is collaborative critical reflection more productive than individual reflection in groups?

Methodology

The study is based on several reflective sessions with the teachers both over the phone and face-to-face. The IRG and CCR sessions were conducted during the three workshops (June 2018, September 2018 and January 2019), during the seminar on Action Research conducted by the British Council at AUD Lodhi Road campus, three other meetings with the teachers, meetings with the co-mentors, a group call, a webinar and a CCR session at the hotel in Chennai where teachers stayed before presenting their work at the ARMS mela.

The reflective sessions were planned around creating a safe space for the teachers where they could move through the various levels of critical reflection beginning with narrating critical incidents from their personal and professional lives. Teachers were encouraged to link their professional experiences with their social and personal self at every level. Initially certain fundamental beliefs and assumptions emerged from the IRG and CCR sessions which moved into deeper understandings about the self and others when teachers were encouraged to move deeper into their critical incidents and when others in the group also deeply engaged with each critical incident. Often the critical incident of one teacher transcended the boundaries of the personal space and resonated with the life experiences of others. The CCR experience took teachers beyond the professional space and connected them with others in the group. It seemed that this connection created a powerful space which led to changed beliefs and transformative actions.

The reflective journey of each teacher was recorded at three levels:
The Reflective Journey of the Teachers

The IRG sessions involved teachers in reflecting and discussing their contexts and issues in the classroom through activities during the workshop. The IRG sessions helped teachers identify areas of concern which they would like to work on during the ARMS project and how they would like to go about it. In the process of reflecting on the issues and concerns in their classrooms teachers shared their challenges and triumphs, concerns and motivations. The major characteristics of the IRG sessions were that they were focused on the progression of the ARMS project and immediate challenges and success stories within their teaching context. When certain critical incidents were shared, they were not analysed deeply by all participants, but each teacher was encouraged to share their own incident/s. The sharing of incidents by each teacher was restricted and controlled by the mentor by allowing about 3-5 minutes of time and the mentor decided when the sharing was ‘relevant’ to the discussion and could be allotted more time or needs to be ‘redirected’ to more ‘relevant’ aspects of the discussion. In this sense the IRG sessions were more ‘controlled’ by the mentor as the workshop sessions were strictly timed and the objective of each session had to be achieved.

Reflections from the IRG Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues emerging from individual reflection in groups (IRG)</th>
<th>Reflecting on possible ways of addressing the issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1: Exploratory Phase:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- I am struggling with feedback and ways to assess my learners.</td>
<td>- Exploring innovative assessment tools and techniques, understanding feedback mechanisms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- I feel my learners don’t enjoy informative writing as opposed to narrative/reflective/free writing.</td>
<td>- Conducting workshops, interviews and discussions to explore my concern.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- My learners have mother tongue influence in their speech.</td>
<td>- Exploring activities and tasks to help learners notice L1 and English sounds.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- My learners don’t speak in class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Some learners in my class are quick.</td>
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learners while some need a lot attention and time.
- How much of mother tongue should I use in my class?
- Creating a non-judgmental, inclusive space through storytelling.
- Exploring multilingual strategies in the classroom.

### Phase 2: Data Collection

- Does my research question (RQ) capture my concern?
- What kind of tools should I use to collect data?
- What kind of data would be relevant?
- Will this project help me to address my concerns?
- How will I manage time?
- My colleagues may feel threatened.
- Will it mean more work?
- Will I be able to do this research?
- Am I good enough?
- How will this project help me in my career?
- One-to-one discussions with the mentors to finalize the RQ.
- Going through the materials given in workshop 2 and working with the mentors and other teachers to finalize the tools.
- Working out time management strategies.
- Developing strategies to deal with difficult colleagues.
- Discussions with other teachers and mentors to deal with doubts/insecurities (sharing concerns and getting suggestions).

### Phase 3: Data Analysis and Conclusions, Presentations

- I can see some changes in my teaching and in my students.
- Some of my concerns have been addressed in the course of this study.
- How did action research help me in finding some solutions to my issues and concerns?
- How do I analyse the data?
- What are different quantitative and qualitative tools for data analysis?
- How will I present the study in the mela?
- What kind of posters do we need to prepare?
- How will I travel alone to Chennai?
- Will my family allow me to travel?
- Finding strategies to sustain these changes.
- Moving to another action research cycle.
- Continuing the action research cycle independently.
- Continue to share my work with others.
- Collaborate with other teachers.
- Exploring ways of becoming independent (as a professional as well as an individual).
- Convincing family members to support me in my professional growth.
- Exploring ways in which I can continue professional development activities.

In the IRG sessions teachers reflected, shared, and discussed issues of immediate concern in their professional contexts and how they could work out solutions to their immediate concerns. They also shared their
work on the ARMS project, their individual reflections through their reflective journals, and future possibilities of working on other research projects, ways of working independently and other collaborations. Most teachers felt that by reflecting in a group they are now aware of the challenges and concerns of other teachers and can understand their contexts. By sharing their work with each other they exchanged ideas and perspectives which they felt had enriched them as professionals. The reflective journals also documented their immediate professional concerns and many teachers merely jotted down what they did in class or the tasks and activities they used and how it addressed their concerns. Most of the journal entries were largely descriptive instead of being evaluative and analytical.

In the CCR sessions the six teachers with whom I worked closely moved from the initial level in Fook’s model which involves the unearthing of the first level of assumptions to moving to another deeper level through further reflection, making ‘breakthrough’ connections, evaluating assumptions against current experience/values/assumptions (and also other people’s opinions/experiences, literature), old assumptions are reframed as desired theory of practice and finally sharing their changed practices.

The collaborative critical reflection journey of the teachers can be summarized as follows:

**The first level of assumptions is unearthed:** At this stage teachers share ‘safer’ assumptions and beliefs which are easy to identify and fit their stated theory. For example, there were assumptions about power structures within the school where teachers felt that they didn’t have a ‘voice’ in larger decisions involving curriculum and testing. At this stage several binaries emerged through teachers’ reflective narratives and critical incidents. Bindu shared that a senior colleague was victimizing her (victim/perpetrator), Benny felt that she wouldn’t be able to share details of her work with colleagues as they would ‘team up’ against her (individual/group) and Neetu felt that her role as a teacher involved being ‘humane’, compassionate and kind (manager versus counsellor).

**Move to another deeper level through further reflection:** In CCR teachers reflected freely without being ‘restricted’ by the mentor. The role of the mentor and other teachers was to ask pertinent questions to enable teachers to delve deeper into their experiences and make
connections with their social and professional self. The group members thus served more like ‘critical friends’ listening and connecting with the shared experience and trying to find personal meaning in the experience. Sometimes the narratives shared seemed unrelated to their professional concerns or earlier concerns which were expressed. Students, for instance, felt that Neetu was dominating and rough while Benny’s colleagues felt that she was bossy. Bindu’s colleagues felt that she was arrogant and inflexible.

**Breakthrough connections are made:** This stage of reflection was emotionally charged as the connections were often made with past incidents which had left a considerable impact on the teacher and integration with these emotional experiences provided overall meaning. These critical incidents from teachers’ personal lives were shared to understand if they relate to teachers’ professional experiences. As teachers struggled to articulate more fundamental assumptions, it was these personal experiences (past or current) which allowed them to make connections between seemingly unrelated beliefs. At this stage, teachers confronted ‘difficult’ situations in their personal lives and reflected on how these were impacting their professional selves.

For example, Bindu’s traumatic experiences with her ex-husband and abusive in-laws brought out emotional outbursts of how she had been harassed by her husband’s family. She had to eventually escape from her husband’s house to save her life. This experience resonated with her present feelings at her workplace where she felt ‘victimized’. This justified the binary she seems to have created about victims being powerless and perpetrators being powerful ‘abusers’. Bindu’s defence strategies comprised shutting out people and resisting control which made her appear arrogant and inflexible.

Benny’s reflections brought out personal experiences with her parents and husband’s parents who burden her with huge expectations which has left her feeling lonely and sidelined. She has isolated herself from her husband and lives with her parents finding solace in her professional achievements. Her strategies to cope with issues involve being a high achiever and a workaholic. Benny’s reflections and the connections she made helped her to theorize her assumptions (individual versus group) as being about her own identity formation and the importance of her being in control of this process.
Neetu’s mother suffers from depression and anxiety issues which made her explore various ways of supporting her mother through therapy and alternate healing techniques. She could connect her personal interest in therapy and healing with her assumptions about her role as a teacher in the classroom (counsellor).

The teachers at this stage felt that critical collaborative reflection has been ‘transformative’ for them as they could see deeper connections between their professional, social, and personal selves.

**Assumptions are evaluated against current experiences/values/assumptions (and also other people’s opinions/experiences, literature):**
The process of contextualizing assumptions and beliefs allowed teachers to further contextualize them. They felt free to examine them from different perspectives. The motivation to rework their assumptions involved a recognition of the ‘political aspect of the emotion’. The teachers realized that the emotional learning which has taken place from their sharing of personal experiences performs ‘political functions’ in their lives (it is used as an ideology to freeze a set of assumptions and beliefs which guides their actions in their workplace).

At this stage teachers connected with other teachers who expressed similar experiences of harassments, abuse, feeling lonely, out of control, anxious, vulnerable, burdened by expectations, gender discrimination and so on. Therefore, teachers as a group connected at a different level and after this point, they forged deeper friendships and personal relationships with each other.

Benny realized that her colleagues’ perception of her as ‘bossy’ and dominating and her tendency to work hard was masking her own need to avoid the burden of other’s expectations and the discomfort of loneliness.

Bindu tended to avoid conflict situations at her workplace which reminded her of her abusive past. This made her appear ‘inflexible’. Her anxiety about people in power being perpetrators of injustice made her appear arrogant and rude. She felt at some point that all relationships are political.

**Old assumptions are reframed as desired theory of practice:** Teachers were able to embrace their original fear/assumption/belief and reframe them as an actionable problem which can be researched and worked upon in their everyday workplace setting. Hence Bindu reframed her
assumption as ‘what kind of thought and action will help me connect with my senior colleagues?’ She also explored tasks and activities in her classroom which allowed students freedom and space to notice and observe the difference between certain sounds. Earlier she believed that her learners would never be able to overcome their mother tongue influence in spoken English. Benny reframed her assumption as ‘how can I involve my colleagues in my workshops and work collaboratively with them?’ Neetu’s reframed theory of practice was ‘how can I understand the fears, anxieties, insecurities and dilemmas of my students and provide them a safe place to express themselves?’

**Changed practices and transformed actions:** This process allowed teachers to become more open to others and the differences that exist. They started appreciating other’s perspectives and opinions rather than being defensive about issues. It also opened up for the teachers’ multiple choices for action. Teachers shared that they now have many options to act and were more open to ‘experimenting’. Teachers felt more empowered and ‘alive’. They reported being more active and open to communicating with those who they earlier avoided. Thus, the focus moved from the ‘self’ to the ‘other’.

**Findings of the Study**

The collaborative reflection (CCR) sessions were found to be transformative for the group at various levels. First, it focused on unearthing deeper assumptions and ‘pre-suppositions’ as discussed above. This involved some fundamental change in perspective at various levels. Second, it focused on power relationships and dominant assumptions about power both at the workplace (school) as well as in their personal lives (administrators, colleague-boss, husband-wife, parent-child, in-laws and so on). These seemed to influence their practice unwittingly. Finally, the sessions helped all the participants (in the session) to understand the ways in which their assumptions may be restrictive and thus create space for more empowering ideas and practices.

The individual reflective sessions in groups focused on immediate areas of concern often related to the ARMS project, various aspects of data collection, their immediate challenges, and future plans. It has been possible to have both collaborative critical reflection (CCR) and individual reflection in groups (IRG) within a single session. I have recorded most of the sessions and made reflective notes after every
session. I have encouraged mentees to also maintain reflective notes on the sessions and discussed the reflective journey with them.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual reflection in groups</th>
<th>Critical collaborative reflection (Fook, 2010)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing individual reflections with the group (in terms of ideas, opinions, challenges, concerns, success stories, information etc., reflective journal).</td>
<td>Specific incidents from the classroom and/or personal life which can be recalled in graphic detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom: materials, what went well, what didn’t go well.</td>
<td>Thinking of past incidents and describing it in graphic detail, responding to subtle questions from the group to explore the impact of the incident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives of the lesson, identifying issues for the action research project and sharing their explorations.</td>
<td>Finding links between how incidents have shaped teachers’ beliefs and assumptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were lesson objectives achieved? Framing research questions, collecting data from the classroom, sharing their experiences and challenges.</td>
<td>Connecting with common emotions of the group emerging from the incident triggering personal incidents in the group member’s mind (which they don’t share immediately but wait for the person to finish). Connecting the impact of the incident on their professional and personal lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom interaction, feedback, sharing.</td>
<td>An awareness of “power” relationships and dominant assumptions at the workplace and personal life and developing an understanding of how these impact their professional practice at various levels. Reframing earlier assumptions as desired theory of practice.</td>
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**Conclusions**

There are many important observations which can further develop our understanding of critical reflection. The importance of personal experience and its potential to provide a framework to make meaning of teacher’s actions and behaviour in the workplace was evident in the CCR sessions with teachers. It highlights the difference between individual reflection in group (IRG) and critical collaborative reflection (CCR). While the former helps teachers in reflecting on immediate concerns of their classrooms the latter enables them to become agents of change and transformative professionals. Teachers have assumptions and beliefs
which are embedded in their social context and in the process of CCR they invariably delve into the personal meaning of these. This seems to contradict the assumption that the learning process is primarily about arriving at a social understanding. For these teachers it seemed that their socially constructed beliefs and assumptions assumed meaning through further connection with personal experience.

The study enabled me to understand how personal, social, and professional realms are linked in a teacher’s life. Thus, personal experience may need to be recognized and validated to affect broader collective/social changes (Fook, 2002). Secondly, personal empowerment may include a sense of reflexivity and agency. This can sustain motivation, vision, and power for collective actions. Finally, the ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ rather than being different realms are simply different perspectives. Hence for some individuals the social realm cannot be meaningfully understood except through the ‘prism’ of personal experience.

(Names of the teachers have been changed on request)

References


Ipshita H. Sasmal teaches linguistics and ELT courses to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Her research interests include English language teacher education, teacher cognition and teacher beliefs. 

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