
Introduction

There is just so much more information in the field of English second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) teaching now than there was 20 or 30 years ago. For those new to the field (and indeed for experienced teachers too), some of this information may seem bewildering and even sound conflicting. This is not surprising since TESOL is still a relatively new field with new research developing in many subfields, such as linguistics, applied linguistics, second language acquisition research, and also from other fields such as education and psychology. *Reflecting on Teaching the Four Skills: 60 Strategies for Professional Development* is one attempt to provide novice teachers with some important strategies to reflect on as they teach the four macro skills of reading, speaking, writing, and listening and

how they approach assessment of these skills. (The order of presentation of each skill is not meant to suggest any particular importance of one skill over another—just that all four skills should be viewed as being equally important and taken as a whole.) The final chapter allows teachers to reflect on future action as they consider their future professional development. Within each macro skill, I include ten strategies so as not to overwhelm the novice teacher and offer some precautions on how these strategies can be implemented in the classroom. The ten strategies presented in each chapter are arbitrary in nature and not intended to reflect the most important or only ones; rather they are sample strategies intended to help in-service or new teachers consider which strategies they would like to implement in their classes.

—What Is Effective Teaching?

The goal of this book is to promote *effective teaching*, a difficult concept because there are many different interpretations on what effective teaching is. Indeed, if you ask ten language teachers or teacher educators to define effective teaching, you are likely to get ten different answers. To date, there are no precise benchmarks of what constitutes effective language teaching in all settings, nor are there agreed-on effective strategies that teachers should implement in their classes. Also, what does an effective teacher look like in a classroom? If we asked students this question, we would probably get many different answers because their criteria for what makes an effective teacher likely differs from ours. For example, some students may like a relaxed classroom atmosphere while others may think a teacher who has this type of class will be ineffective. Some students may prefer teachers who correct every mistake and may, therefore, think this type of teacher is most effective.

So, it is difficult to explain clearly what exactly effective teaching is in all situations. Even if we could identify all the traits of effective teaching, how do we actually measure them? The reason for the difficulty in defining effective teaching precisely is that most educators would agree that it depends on many factors such as the type of course that is being delivered, the size of the class, the abilities and proficiency levels of the students, and how they are being graded (Marsh & Dunkin, 1997). As Richards (2010: 102) has cautioned, “The nature of what we mean by effectiveness in teaching is not always easy to define because conceptions of good teaching differ from culture to culture.” Perhaps we can take it as a positive that each and every language teacher will have to define what effective teaching means to him or her each time he or she enters the classroom. If we take this stance, then we will consider not only the methodology that has been offered to us from teacher education courses and the literature, but our students’ needs and the context we find ourselves teaching in so that we can become more effective teachers.

Although it may be difficult to define effective teaching, we can nevertheless look at the overall characteristics said to be essential to effectiveness as defined in the literature. According to Ethell and McMeniman (2000: 88), successful teachers “have a larger knowledge base from which to draw” and usually they “organize knowledge more efficiently in complex interconnected schemas and utilize it more effectively.” Thus, in order to be considered effective and successful, teachers would need to have both superior subject matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. If we further explore these categories, we can see that at the very least, effective language teachers should have good technical knowledge of the language they are teaching (and of course, proficiency in that language), *competency in how to teach the particular macro skills* of that language (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening), how

to *assess* those skills, and how to pursue their own *professional development*. These are really the bare essentials for a language teacher to be considered effective, and all are covered extensively in this book.

The four macro skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) are presented as separate chapters in this book, even though most English language lessons are integrated in nature; this is true even if the focus of a given lesson is on one skill like speaking. As Brown (1994: 218) also notes, “We learn to speak, for example, in part by modeling what we hear, and we learn to write by examining what we can read.” The skills are addressed separately in this book to help readers deepen their understanding of each one. Teachers can make use of such activities as project-based work (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010) and content-based instruction (Brinton, Snow, & Wessche, 2003), among others that combine all purposes of speaking and focus on the completion of specific tasks.

Of course novice teaching professionals will need to have some understanding of the bare essentials if they are to succeed in their first years in real classrooms. But how can they move through the sometimes confusing and conflicting advice they receive from language educators and reviews of the literature while at the same time deliver effective lessons to their students? I provide some strategies in this book so that readers can make their own informed decisions about their teaching. Although many strategies are presented in this book, the intent is not to suggest that teachers should teach according to prescriptions or routines. Rather, an effective teacher is well prepared and has a solid knowledge base related to the profession so that he or she is ready for whatever classroom contingencies he or she will meet. So, the strategies (or teaching tips) included in this book are ideas for consideration and are not to be regarded as suggestive or rough approximations of what we might expect to occur when teaching reading, speaking, listening, and writing in real teaching situations. Where appropriate, the research background

for each strategy is cited; however, I limit these citations to a few of the most salient so as not to overwhelm the novice teacher or to irritate experienced teachers who may be using the book to reflect on their practice. The final chapter on professional development offers novice teachers various methods of how to reflect on their practices in real time and in the future.

Reflecting on Teaching the Four Skills is appropriate for student teachers who may be doing practice teaching as a component of a teacher education course.

—Structure of the Book

Each chapter begins with a brief introduction to the topic followed by ten **strategies** on that topic, structured as:

- **The Strategy:** A simple and concise statement of the strategy (or teaching tip) for teachers to reflect on, followed by an outline of the principle(s) behind the strategy being discussed.
- **Application:** A concise description of *one way* the strategy can be used and applied by language teachers.
- **Precaution:** One caveat intended to make implementation of the strategy or teaching tip reasonably error free, in the attempt to help teachers troubleshoot for, and possibly avoid, common problems before they occur.
- **Scenario:** One scenario of a teaching example in each strategy followed by reflective questions. These scenarios are not necessarily good or bad representations of strategy implementation. They reflect real experiences of language teachers and are a composite of my experiences in language teacher education around the world over the past 35 years.

The chapters are not ordered in any particular way, so teachers can read any chapter at any time and read any strategy they may be interested in.

I hope all teachers will benefit from the strategies, the practical classroom applications, and the scenarios. I hope that my experiences as a second language educator and the many discussions I have had with ESL/EFL teachers in many different contexts will help others.