PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

How to reflect on your teaching, learn from others, and plan your growth as a teacher

AT A GLANCE

What it is	the ongoing process of learning and growing as a teacher, throughout your career
Key idea	**reflective practice**: looking carefully at your teaching, understanding why things happen, and deciding what to do next
Key message	development is most effective when it is teacher-led, based on your own classroom, and planned with clear goals
Tools	a **post-lesson reflection template** and a **professional development plan** in the appendices

THINK ABOUT

- What has helped you most to develop as a teacher so far?
- What is one aspect of your teaching you would like to improve?
- Where would you like to be as a teacher in five years' time?

What is professional development?

Initial training, such as a certificate course, gives teachers a starting point. But most learning about teaching happens afterwards, in the classroom, over many years. Richards & Farrell (2005) distinguish **training** from **development**.

	Training	Development
Focus	specific skills and techniques for immediate use	long-term growth in understanding, beliefs and practice
Led by	usually trainers or institutions	usually the teacher, often with colleagues
Example	a workshop on using breakout rooms	investigating over a term why some learners rarely speak

Both matter. **Continuing professional development** (CPD) combines them: a lifelong process in which teachers keep learning through reflection, collaboration, study and experience. It is most effective when teachers choose their own focus, connect it to their classroom, and keep at it over time.

Reflective practice

Dewey (1933) described reflection as careful, active thinking about our beliefs and actions, as opposed to routine. Schön (1983) distinguished two kinds:

- **reflection-in-action:** thinking on your feet during a lesson, e.g. noticing confusion and changing an explanation
- **reflection-on-action:** thinking back after the lesson about what happened, why, and what to do next

From description to critical reflection

Reflection is more than describing a lesson. Hatton & Smith (1995) found that teachers' reflection often stays descriptive, but becomes more useful as it moves to deeper levels.

Level	What it looks like	Example
Descriptive	saying what happened	*The speaking activity didn't go well.*
Dialogic	exploring reasons and different interpretations	*Maybe the task was too open, or learners didn't have the language they needed.*
Critical	connecting practice to beliefs, research and the wider context	*I tend to skip preparation time because I believe speaking should be spontaneous, but research on task planning suggests otherwise.*

A reflective cycle

Gibbs' (1988) cycle turns reflection into a set of practical questions.

Stage	Ask yourself…
Description	What happened?
Feelings	What was I thinking and feeling? How did learners seem to feel?
Evaluation	What went well? What went less well? What evidence do I have?
Analysis	Why did it happen? What helps me understand it, e.g. theory, research, colleagues' views?
Conclusion	What have I learned? What else could I have done?
Action plan	What will I do next time?

Based on Gibbs (1988). See Appendix A for a template.

Reflecting on beliefs

Farrell (2015) suggests that reflection should reach beyond techniques to teachers' **philosophy**, **principles** and **theories** of teaching, and to the wider context they work in. Our beliefs are often shaped by how we were taught ourselves (Lortie 1975; see the **ELT Approaches and CLT** handout), so examining them is an important part of development.

Tools for reflection

Tool	What it involves	Tips
Teaching journal	writing regularly about lessons, questions and ideas	write soon after the lesson; focus on one or two moments; reread entries every few weeks
Lesson recording	recording part of a lesson (with permission) and watching or listening to it	focus on one aspect, e.g. your instructions or teacher talk
Learner feedback	asking learners what helps them learn	use short, specific questions, and act on what you learn
Critical incidents	analysing unexpected moments that made you stop and think (Tripp 1993)	ask why the incident happened and what it reveals about your beliefs
Self-observation checklist	reviewing a lesson against a few chosen criteria	choose criteria linked to your development goal

Learning from others

Reflection is more powerful when it is shared.

- **Peer observation:** observe a colleague, or invite them to observe you, with an agreed focus. Unlike assessed observation, the aim is **developmental**: to learn, not to judge (Richards & Farrell 2005).
- **Team teaching:** plan and teach a lesson together, then reflect on it together.
- **Mentoring:** work with a more experienced colleague who supports your development over time.
- **Teacher groups:** meet regularly with colleagues to discuss issues, share ideas or read and discuss an article.

> **TEACHING TIP**
>
> For peer observation, agree a narrow focus before the lesson, e.g. *How do learners respond to my instructions?* The observer collects evidence on that point only, and the conversation afterwards starts with the teacher's own views.

Action research

Action research is a small-scale, systematic enquiry into your own teaching, to understand and improve it. It follows a cycle of **plan, act, observe** and **reflect**, which can be repeated (Burns 2010).

Stage	What happens	Example
Plan	identify a problem or question, and decide what to try	Quieter learners rarely speak in open-class discussions. Question: *Will preparation time and pair work first help them contribute?*
Act	try the change over a period of time	For four weeks, give one minute of thinking time and a pair discussion before every open-class question.
Observe	collect evidence	Count how many learners speak in each discussion; ask learners how they feel about speaking; keep brief notes.

Stage	What happens	Example
Reflect	analyse the evidence and decide what next	More learners contributed, especially in the second half of the term. Next cycle: try the same approach in feedback stages.

Action research doesn't need to be large or formal. What makes it research is that it is **planned**, based on **evidence**, and leads to **reflection**. Sharing the results with colleagues, at a meeting or a conference, helps others too.

Wider development

Option	Examples
Qualifications	initial certificates (e.g. CELTA, Trinity CertTESOL); diplomas (e.g. Delta, Trinity DipTESOL); master's degrees in TESOL or applied linguistics
Associations and conferences	international associations such as IATEFL and TESOL International Association, and their special interest groups; local and national teacher associations
Online communities	webinars, teacher forums, blogs and social media groups
Reading	teaching journals and magazines, methodology books, and the further reading in these handouts
Sharing	giving a workshop for colleagues, presenting at a conference, writing a blog post or article

Planning your development

Development is more effective when it is planned. **Competency frameworks**, such as the Cambridge English Teaching Framework and the British Council CPD Framework for Teachers, describe areas of teaching practice and stages of development. They can help you identify your strengths and choose a focus.

Step	What to do
1 Identify a focus	use reflection, feedback from learners and colleagues, or a competency framework
2 Set a goal	make it specific and achievable, e.g. *give clearer instructions for pair work*
3 Plan actions	decide what you will read, try, observe or discuss, and who can help
4 Collect evidence	e.g. recordings, learner feedback, observation notes, journal entries
5 Review	reflect on progress after a set time, and choose your next focus

See Appendix B for a template.

Making it work

Start small

Choose one focus at a time, and give it a few weeks.

Make reflection a habit

Five minutes after each lesson, or a short weekly journal entry, is more useful than occasional long reflections.

Find support

Development is easier with others: find a colleague, mentor or group to share ideas with.

Use the handouts as a map

Each handout in this series can be a starting point for a development goal, from classroom management to assessment.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Reflection that only describes what happened.	Ask why it happened, and what you will do differently.
Focusing only on what went wrong.	Notice what went well, and why, so you can do it again.
Trying to change everything at once.	Choose one focus and work on it over time.
Seeing observation as a test.	Agree a developmental focus, and start feedback with your own views.
Relying only on courses and certificates.	Combine formal study with reflection on your own classroom.

ONLINE CLASSES

Online lessons are easy to record (with learners' permission), which makes them ideal for reflection and peer feedback. Online teacher communities, webinars and conferences also make professional development accessible wherever you teach.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Professional development is lifelong, and most effective when it is teacher-led and classroom-based.
- Reflective practice moves from describing lessons to understanding them and deciding what to do next.
- Journals, recordings, learner feedback and peer observation support reflection.
- Action research is a small-scale, systematic way to investigate and improve your teaching.
- Plan your development with clear goals, evidence and regular review.

WHERE NEXT

ELT Approaches and CLT where our beliefs about teaching come from

Second Language Acquisition research to inform your reflection

Classroom Management a common first focus for development

Technology in ELT online communities and tools for development

Further reading

Burns, A. (2010). *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners*. New York: Routledge.

Farrell, T.S.C. (2015). *Promoting Teacher Reflection in Second Language Education: A Framework for TESOL Professionals*. New York: Routledge.

Richards, J.C. & Farrell, T.S.C. (2005). *Professional Development for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mann, S. & Walsh, S. (2017). *Reflective Practice in English Language Teaching: Research-Based Principles and Practices*. New York: Routledge.

References

Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think*. Boston: D.C. Heath.

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. Oxford: Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic.

Hatton, N. & Smith, D. (1995). Reflection in teacher education: Towards definition and implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(1), 33–49.

Lortie, D.C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schön, D.A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.

Tripp, D. (1993). *Critical Incidents in Teaching: Developing Professional Judgement*. London: Routledge.

Appendix A · Post-lesson reflection template

Complete this soon after a lesson. Focus on one or two key moments rather than the whole lesson.

Lesson	*class, level, aim and date*
What happened?	*describe one or two key moments*
Thoughts and feelings	*what were you thinking and feeling? how did learners seem to feel?*
What went well?	*and what is your evidence?*
What went less well?	*and what is your evidence?*
Why?	*possible reasons; links to theory, research or colleagues' views*
What have I learned?	*about my teaching, my learners or my beliefs*
Next time I will…	*one specific thing to try*

Appendix B · Professional development plan

Use this plan for one development focus over a few weeks or a term.

Focus area	*e.g. instructions, speaking activities, feedback on writing*
Why this focus?	*reflection, learner feedback, observation or a competency framework*
My goal	*specific and achievable*
Actions	*what I will read, try, observe or discuss*
Support	*colleagues, mentor, courses, resources*
Timeline	*start date, key steps, review date*
Evidence of progress	*recordings, learner feedback, observation notes, journal entries*
Review	*what changed? what did I learn? what is my next focus?*