

# ELT



## Ireland bulletin

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Treasuring ELT Ireland by Liliana O'Reilly

Acknowledgements by Editor, Peter Lahiff

[info.eltireland@gmail.com](mailto:info.eltireland@gmail.com) @ELTIreland

[elt-ireland.com](http://elt-ireland.com)

## Stepping Away From the Mirror: Effective Approaches to Reflective Practice

by **Conor O'Reilly** (DIFC)

Reflection is heavily promoted as a development strategy in English language teaching, but it is not an easy thing to do effectively. A mirror is a useful metaphor for discussing reflection, as it does exactly that, it reflects. Functionally, it is perfect, but critically it is highly flawed. A mirror or mirroring in reflection distorts the image presented and provides none of the necessary insight required to make reflection both necessary and effective.

Think about the last time you stood in front of a mirror. It was probably this morning. What did you see? You certainly did not see yourself: you saw an image of yourself reversed. Not only was everything in reverse, but you also saw things you can't normally see in your surroundings such as what is behind you. Not only this, it was an image grossly manipulated by your mood, plans for the day, and even the weather. This is not reflection.

Reflection is first and foremost a thought process. It requires you to think about your experience, but it doesn't necessarily require any action, at least not immediately. Through thinking we associate meaning to our experiences by recognising their significance in relation to other past and future

experiences, teaching us to not only learn from the past but also prepare for the future. For the reflective process to be effective, thinking must be critical, and there must be a desire for change.

A way to start this critical analysis is to look at your general assumptions about your approach to a class or way of teaching and think how they could be overturned. We all have them, regardless of whether we are a Director of Studies or a newly trained teacher. Our assumptions follow us and can direct our decision making process. By establishing how and where our assumptions can be overturned we acknowledge the necessity for change, the first step in reflective practice.

Here's an assumption of mine which increasingly has been a factor over the past year or so. I've taught English for over ten years, so that would equip me for pretty much every classroom situation, and it even allows me to go into a classroom without preparing too much, and thanks to my experience I'll be able to react and provide adequate challenges for my students. While this may be true, it is certainly not an exclusive case. More advanced classes require more specific material, and even lower level classes still need additional material and notes to help them understand at-first confusing grammar, for example. Thinking I can pull a lesson from my magic hat of experience is in some cases possible, but it is not something I should rely on – this is something my ten years of teaching has taught me.

By assuming we limit our engagement with the classroom and in doing so limit the learners' potential. It may be fair to say that each student has different needs, but we also think it is fair to suggest that students should be strong communicators across all four skills, but are we not assuming that the student will actually need to use all four skills? Some students may not even need English when they return to their country, as you may be familiar with those learners who wish only to improve their English so as to improve their summer holidays, which is an assumption in its own right. At all stages of our practice there is increased likelihood that we are making assumptions which are worth overturning, for our benefit and our students.



Mirror mirror ...

Pic by Pixbay

Questioning our actions is at the heart of reflection, and it is important when we question we are critical of all our actions and those actions which influence. Questioning gives us a better and more robust understanding of our working environment. It is not enough to simply ask why for everything, not only because you may never get a suitable answer, but also this approach is more childlike and less actual criticism.

Before you find an answer for each 'wh-' question, try to establish as many possible 'wh-' questions that can be asked, and write them down. If I apply this approach to my situation where I went into a class unprepared and hoped to get by on my experience, I might come up with a list which looks something like this:

**Who?:** Who were the students? Who will have problems with my approach? Who am I answerable to? Who else does this? Who will benefit?

**Where?:** Where is the school/classroom? Where could I have found extra resources before the class? Where was I that made me so unprepared?

**When?:** When did the class happen? When did I see the students last and when will I see them next? When will the class finish?

**What?:** What resources are available at such short notice? What can I teach from the text book pages? What are the potential pitfalls to this approach? What do the students need to learn today? What's my alternative?

**Why?:** Why did I not prepare? Why am I so confident of my ability? Why might the students or management have a complaint?

**How?:** How many students are there? How can I get the students to do the work for me? How can I make the most of a bad situation?

These questions do not necessarily need to be answered. The objective of your analysis is to understand the justification, the significance, and the overall meaning of your actions. By applying a diversity of both critical and honest questions, you will aid your thought process and find more answers from which you can reflect and learn from.

Reflection can require as much thought and discipline as the individual believes necessary, or it may need more or less. Reflection is a thinking process that can be enhanced by more formalised and regular writing, such as journal entries, regular reviews, and even group discussion. There is no rule, except that you should be looking to change something about the way to do things, be that now or in the future. In time the most effective strategy will prove itself. As a practice which may not be commonly encouraged in English language teaching, overcoming our assumptions and questioning our actions can provide a starting point for an effective and mirror-free approach reflective practice.

## ELT Burnout and what to Do about it

by Stephen Cloak (Cloak Consulting)

Burnout is something that ELT professionals often complain of jokingly, but behind such light-hearted comments, there is a condition which needs to be taken seriously. Stress is part and parcel of an ELT professional's life. However, chronic stress, if not managed carefully, can lead to burnout, which can in turn wreak havoc on health, happiness, relationships and job performance. This article aims to help the teachers and academic managers identify the signs that they are suffering from this condition, and what they can do to deal with it.

According to the literature on this topic, burnout is "a condition caused by depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished sense of accomplishment" (Clandfield 2016). The HSE says that this condition can have negative consequences on a person's professional performance and that burnout is often associated with chronic job stress and it likely occurs in anyone who works with people in some capacity (HSE.ie 2012). David Ballard, an expert in the field, describes job burnout as "an extended period of time



When it feels too much.

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