

THE ROLE OF REFLECTION IN ELT: UNIVERSITY OF  
SHARJAH TEACHERS' VIEWS

by

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## **Dedication**

To all those teachers whose teaching practices are the reflections of their reflection.

## Abstract

Reflection is a vast and vague concept. If it is simple to reflect in some ways, in other ways it is complicated. We cannot find out what is going on in someone's mind until it is externalized in the form of actions. Especially, to know whether teachers reflect or not is an important issue because teachers' reflection affects the process of teaching and learning both for teachers and students. The aim of this study was to understand University of Sharjah teachers' attitudes and views about the role of reflection in their professional development, as not enough is known about how university level teachers in the UAE feel about reflection. The study investigated whether these teachers reflect or not and if yes, then how they reflect. It also tried to identify those factors which helped them in reflecting, and the constraints which impede reflection. Data were collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews. 40 out of 48 teachers who are currently working in the English Language Center at the University of Sharjah were invited to participate, and 30 out of those 40 teachers responded to the surveys. Five of them also volunteered for follow-up interviews. The data analysis helped me to find the answers to my research questions and unveiled the situation of reflection in this specific English language teaching situation. Findings of this study revealed that a majority of the participating teachers were aware of the concept of reflection and that they showed a positive attitude towards the role of reflection in their professional development. Results also indicated participants' different preferred modes of reflection and some factors that they thought inhibit reflection in teachers. It was suggested that to know about reflection and to show positive attitudes towards reflection are not enough. There is a need on the part of teachers to understand what to reflect about and to act wisely on their reflection. Finally, although this study's concern was to understand teachers' attitudes and views towards reflection, I believe it could also help teachers notice some important aspects that could trigger their interest towards reflection.

**Search Terms:** reflection, reflective practice, language teacher development, ELT, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

It is so simple, natural, and human to think and reflect, but some of us do not realize its importance in our lives. I was also one of those who were not aware of the importance of reflection. Especially, as an English language teacher, I never gave a thought to my thoughts. I didn't even know what makes reflection so important until I read Seidel's (2006) article, "Some Thoughts on Teaching as Contemplative Practice," in which she suggests that "contemplative practices might open paths for negotiating and rediscovering depth, grace, and courage in our work as teachers, in a time when such ways of living are not broadly or politically encouraged" (p. 1901). She also suggests that our actions are the physical forms of our meditation and thoughts so our thoughts matter a lot in our lives. Seidel's ideas inspired me to read more to get more insight into this concept.

This idea was further consolidated when one of my teachers during my master's in TESOL study asked us to write about the reasons of the successes of our lessons that we taught as a demonstration in our class. I started to think about it and realized my lesson plan was successful because I thought a lot about it to make it successful. I thought about it during driving, while washing dishes, even during taking a shower. My thoughts gave me new ideas and helped me to polish my lesson plan. Finally, I realized that my reflections on my lesson were the ultimate agent that made my lesson successful. My reflections helped me to take wise decisions, and to act accordingly. I also recognized that my thoughts and reflections were the part and parcel of my teaching practices. This realization made me wonder whether other language teachers think along the same lines or not.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Ur (1996) states, "It has been said that teachers who have been teaching for twenty years may be divided into two categories: those with twenty years' experience and those with one year experience repeated twenty times" (p. 317). This suggests that time spent on teaching is not a criterion of a good teaching experience, but rather teachers need continuous efforts, development, and growth to ensure fruitful experience. Richards (1998) considers reflection to be a key component of teacher development. Bartlett (1990) states that "improvement of teaching may be achieved

through reflection” (p. 204). According to Mann (2005), “teachers develop by studying their own practice, collecting data and using reflective processes as the basis for evaluation and change” (p. 103). Mann also believes that “reflection is a prerequisite of development” (p. 108). This much importance given to reflection in literature provokes some questions: Are teachers aware of the concept of reflective teaching? Do they really reflect on their daily teaching practices? How and when do they reflect? Does reflection play any role in their professional development and success? These questions further urged me to investigate language teachers’ attitudes and views about reflection, as I am a language teacher and wanted to know what teachers really think in this context.

To gain insight into questions like those above, I surveyed and interviewed teachers of the English Language Center at the University of Sharjah. There were all together 48 teachers – 29 male and 19 female – who were teaching in the intensive English programs on the different campuses of Sharjah and Khorfakan when I carried out my study. This group of teachers included both native and non-native speakers of English. Out of these 48 teachers, 40 teachers were contacted and 30 – 17 male and 13 female – filled out the survey. I also interviewed five teachers – one male and four female – who completed the survey and agreed to be interviewed. In my research, I investigated the following questions:

1. Do these teachers reflect?
2. If yes, why do they reflect?
3. If yes, how do they reflect?
4. If no, why don’t they reflect?

### **Significance of the Research**

There has been a lot of research on reflection, and it is often considered an important and integral part of teachers’ development which ultimately affects students’ learning. There has been some research about teachers’ views and attitudes towards reflection here in the UAE. In this context, for example, Yassaei (2011) recently investigated former American University of Sharjah MA TESOL program participants’ views about reflection. These teachers were exposed to reflective practice during their MA TESOL program, whereas most of the subjects of my research are experienced teachers who might not have been exposed to reflective

practice during their master's studies. Knowing more about how important reflection is for these teachers has helped to unveil some of the mystery of their teaching practices. Therefore, I believe that my research contributes to the literature on experienced teachers' perceptions of reflection and reflective practice.

This research also provides insight into these teachers' points of view about their own development as teachers. At the same time, knowing about those factors that help and contribute to reflection and those factors which impede teachers' reflection is beneficial in order to suggest some practical implications.

### **Overview of the Chapters and Appendices**

Chapter 1 incorporates an introduction to the theme of the study, its purpose, research questions, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to the study. In the beginning, the definition of the term "reflection" and its understanding in teaching in general is discussed. Then the chapter highlights reflection's significance and limitations. The chapter also reviews the importance of reflection in teachers' professional development. In addition to that, the chapter illustrates some factors that help teachers in reflection and also those factors that inhibit reflection. Finally, it gives a detailed account of tools for teachers' reflection, and suggests that different tools can be adopted or adapted according to teachers' preferences and contexts. Chapter 3 describes the methodology. First it discusses the design of the study, the procedure that is followed to conduct the surveys and interviews. Then it describes the participants of the study. After that, it provides the details of the instruments which were used to collect data. Chapter 4 provides data analysis and findings of the study in detail. Chapter 5 includes the summary of the major findings of this study, implications for teachers and administrations, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

There are five appendices in this thesis. Appendix A is the college- and university-level teachers' survey. Appendix B includes teachers' semi-structured interview questions. Appendix C displays teachers' survey results. Appendix D presents teachers' responses to open-ended questions. Finally, Appendix E contains samples of interview transcripts.







































































































































































It is.

**You cannot externalize it or you cannot document it, ok, in a complete form.**

No, it is something inside the classroom, between you and your students, and you are the one in control, and how you're going to make those people play. And what goes wrong and how to improve it. Its all with you, the tool, or lets say the stick is with you.

**Do you think administrators should require teachers to reflect?**

They should encourage them. Because some people, if you love the profession, you would automatically do it. You don't need other people to tell you, "reflect, do this do that." Because if you are a teacher, you always need to know, you want to know, that you're doing your job in a good way. If you make it a prerequisite for other teachers, I mean, some people mumble, they might not like it, it's forcing them to do something.

**You cannot force someone.**

Yeah, no, exactly, yes.

**A lot of importance is given to reflection in literature and in teaching department and teachers are being trained to practice reflection. How much is being practiced in reality in teachers' life?**

Do you mean do they try to apply what they have learnt?

**Yeah, is it there also? To that much extent where it is available in literature and educational programs.**

They might apply some of the things that they have learnt in teaching. But as I said, teaching is there, I teach because I have learnt so many things and also in a way, it is a personal thing, you know, but of course, without knowledge, I cannot teach, I mean if I don't get this knowledge, if I don't know how to reflect, they don't tell me what to do, I cannot do it. I need it, at the beginning, I think I need it. Then they will, just like, they give you the data, they tell you, this is the way, and then, when you are left alone in the field, I think you can add more of your personal, because the case then would be different, because you are left alone in the field, so left alone in the field with the knowledge that you already have, plus as I said, it's personal experience, so you can add.

**So you want to say that, for example, teachers must have some knowledge about it.**

Guidance.

**Guidance, mentoring, or knowledge.**

Yes, yes. I think it's guidance, because, the ABCD's of teaching, not everyone knows that.

**No, I'm not talking about guidance of teaching, I'm talking about the idea or concept of reflection.... The idea of reflection should be in their mind, they should be guided....**

At the beginning, yes, just to draw their attention to this fact.

**Because now I would like to ask about your experience, because as you said that you didn't know about the idea of reflection.**

Yes, yes, I do it without knowing that this is reflection.

**But you used to do it, so it's something personal, it's already, but in your opinion it would be helpful.**

Yes, if I have learnt it before, of course it would be helpful.

**So my question is like, how much is being practiced in reality, do you think that teachers-**

Again Ambreen, teaching is applying your personal style. That's why every teacher is different from the other teacher. It's your style, doing something. I can't be you, you can't be me, I can't be him, he can't be me. Because there is some kind of personal touch in every lesson that you can add, how you add it.

**So means, you cannot know this, about others, as I asked you.**

There might be something in common, certain things in common, but still, I mean, your way is peculiar, my way is peculiar, you know, and so on, because you know I think this is the only difference. I mean how I apply it, how you apply it, how you look at it, this is the difference between you and me.

**What do you think can be done, in order to promote reflection by teachers?**

Well as you said, you were talking about administration, things like that like-

**But you said that we cannot...**

No no, I'm not talking about forcing, no, like, always asking, not forcing, trying to draw the teachers attention to this point, not forcing them and not observing them, not spying on them, no not that. In addition to attending, you know these peer observations, things like that, I think this could help quite a lot.

**Yeah, in literature it's considered a very important tool for reflection.**

You see? Yeah, so I think peer observation is very important, and that's why I tell you that it is something to do with the style of a person. You know, its just like, you know

when you do something in a good way, I do it, it's one way, suppose both of us are supposed to present it in a good way, you'd do it one way, I'd do it – every one of us would have a touch or a style.

**Ok, now my last question is like, do you think to be reflective is a personality trait, or it can be developed?**

Both, as I said, yes, but so much of the personality. Yes.

**There is a personality touch.**

Yes, yes.

**Not all are perfect.**

No not all, but it's accumulation you know, its kind of a combination of both.

**But it can be developed you feel.**

Of course, of course, because as long as you want to improve yourself, improve your tools, it can be developed. Of course.

**Ok, thank you.**

## **Interview #5: Female Non-native Speaker of English Teacher**

**Alright, my first question is, after getting knowledge, education, qualification and training, do you think you are a good teacher, or there are chances of improvement or development?**

I think I'm a good teacher but there's always a chance for improvement and development.

**If yes, then how can you improve or develop?**

Well, continuous professional development and courses, meetings, conferences. And by looking back at my own teaching and seeing what worked and what didn't work. You can always build on that and improve, of course.

**During your masters, did you study about reflective practice?**

No.

**No? I mean even not theoretically?**

No, my master's was not anything related to teaching English. It's applied linguistics and translation.

**Do you think that reflection plays an important role in teachers' development?**

Definitely, of course. If a teacher is sensitive to the environment around her or him, then, they can improve on their teaching. If you can read the signs of positive teaching and negative teaching to your students, and you know that something improved the level of your student, then you would work harder on that. If you do a practice and you see that it didn't work with your students, then you need to change it, or modify it in some way.

**So you think that it plays an important role in teachers' development. How do you reflect on your teaching, if you do?**

By assessing the outcome of the lesson, the goals, and see I've achieved them or not, and checking which area needed more time. This means that the technique was not probably, effective enough, and needs to be improved, because students did not reach that goal easily. But if goals were reached faster, it means the technique was working and it was fruitful. Am I making sense?

**Yeah, of course. Is that the only way, or do you think there are some other ways also?**

By educating myself on methods of teaching of course, I like to discuss it with colleagues and read on different ways of doing the same thing and try a couple of











