

## Exploring Reflective Practice among College EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

During the past decade, there has been increasing interest in the role of reflection in professional development, especially amongst teacher educators in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Engaging in reflective practice means taking an active role in learning and recognizing one's personal responsibility for one's own lifelong learning. Despite its prevalence as an important topic in the educational field and the multidimensional plans that have been implemented to restructure the Saudi education system, there is little to guide EFL educators in Saudi Arabia on how to effectively develop reflective ability in themselves and consequently in their learners. This study intends to explore the perceptions of EFL teachers on reflective teaching as a tool for teacher development and its challenges in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia. The study is qualitative in nature, whereby semi-structured interviews were conducted with four EFL college educators in Saudi Arabia. The findings of the study indicate that the participants are aware of the value of reflective practice, and use different models of reflection in order to reflect on their daily practice. However, some participants manifested some uncertainties regarding reflective practice and its multifaceted nature whereas others highlighted the constraints impeding the practice of reflective teaching, namely, fixed curricula and the absence of adequate professional training. Thus, the professional development staff should provide in-service teachers with professional training about reflective practice and work with college administrators to produce a culture of inquiry in their teacher-learners.

**Key words:** reflective practice, research, teacher training

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### Introduction

To meet new challenges and global demands, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia introduced English as a foreign language (EFL) in schools in 1925 (Alnofaie, 2010). Given that English has an international relevance and is an essential requirement for higher education (Alam, Husain, & Khan, 1988), the Saudi government, with the help of the educational institutes, has spent billions of dollars on the recruitment of English teachers, language laboratories, curriculum development and teacher training. Additionally, several universities during the past decade in Saudi Arabia have started preparatory year programs (PYP) that require the freshmen students to study English for nearly twenty hours per week during their first year at university level (Javid, 2011).

Despite the efforts exerted in Saudi academic institutions, it is evident that Saudi students experience slow progress, especially at the college level (Liton, 2012). This is attributed to poor teacher training, learners' attitudes and a lack of emphasis on developing skills (AlMazrawi, 2014). These results align with those obtained in the study conducted by Javid, Farooq, and Umer (2013) investigating English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), where the researchers concluded that the standard of English language in the KSA is relatively low in comparison with other Arab and Asian countries. Moreover, the mixture of cultural, linguistic, and experiential plurality in today's classrooms means that teachers are constantly required to update their pedagogical practices in order to meet their students' needs, and attain professionalism. The process of reflective teaching supports the development and maintenance of professional expertise and plays a crucial role in enhancing teaching development and creativity (Shukri, 2014). Being observant and alert to students' needs requires teachers who are reflective. According to Moran & Dallat (1995), "Learning to teach involves learning to reflect on teaching in a characteristically systematic way" (p. 20). They further claim that the "emerging picture of the teacher as a reflective professional is a developmental one" (p. 25) which starts at the university, where student teachers learn to teach, and continues throughout their careers.

Although recent research is united in proclaiming the benefits of reflective practice for the professional development of teachers, it is important to note that many constraints such as issues of time, personal motivation and lack of training may have a significant impact on reflective practice development. Specifically, instructors in the Higher Education sector are required to become more effective teachers as regards curriculum and pedagogy. They have to become active researchers, student support counselors, managers of their own modules, and program designers. Amidst all these requirements, do they still practice reflective teaching and, if so, what forms of reflection do they use in their practice?

The present study aims at exploring the perceptions and attitudes of four EFL teachers in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia and identifying the obstacles that hinder reflective teaching from their viewpoint. The paper is basically divided into two parts. The first part provides a review of the role reflective practice plays in the field of education through a critical analysis of the viewpoints of various researchers and sets the theoretical orientation for the research study, which constitutes the second part of the paper.

## Literature Review

To build a shared understanding of what the term ‘reflective practice’ means, it is necessary to explore the concept in more details. To this end, this section provides a holistic view of what reflective practice really is, distinguishes between its different types, provides an overview of the theories behind the concept and discusses its various models and frameworks.

### ***Definitions and Conceptions of Reflective Practice***

Despite the confusion in relation to its definition and the various interpretations, many scholars consider ‘reflective practice’ a “hallmark” of professional proficiency for teachers (Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). The origins of reflective practice can be traced back to the educational philosopher John Dewey, who defined reflection as “an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the future conclusions to which it tends” (1933, p. 9). Dewey argued for a progressive view of education where the role of reflection and reflective thinking is emphasized. His argument pivots on the fact that reflective thinking moves people away from routine thinking towards action and transforms impulsive blind action into an intelligent one (Dewey, 1933). According to Dewey, open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness are qualities teachers need to possess when translating thoughts into reflective actions; otherwise, they linger behind and stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations (cited in Larrivee, 2000).

Schön (1990), another influential thinker on reflective teaching, maintains that, when facing problems, professionals need to draw on “both practical experience and theory as they improvise, invent, refine and act” (cited in Finlay, 2008, p. 3). Schön challenged the belief of teacher as technician, replacing it instead with the concept of reflective practitioner: one who engages in reflection in action; one who is committed, autonomous and a decision maker. According to Schön, we can engage in reflection in one of two ways: either by ‘reflection in action’, which takes place while we are involved in the situation and draws upon theories in use, or ‘reflection on action’, which takes place after the situation has happened and draws upon teaching experience and espoused theories.

While Schön’s work has inspired many, it has also drawn criticism. Eraut (2004) claims that Schön’s work lacks precision and clarity, whereas Boud & Walker (1998) argue that the critical aspect has been overlooked in his analysis. Teachers need to be aware of what they can and cannot handle in their classrooms and not go beyond their level of expertise. Moreover, Greenwood (1993) claims that Schön failed to recognize the importance of ‘reflection-before-action’, which encourages people to connect with past experiences before engaging in the present activities, and Killion & Todnem (1991) advocate ‘reflection for action’, which links reflective thinking to future action and suggests analyzing one’s behavior with the designated purpose of taking some action to change. Ekebergh (2007) further argues that it is impossible to distance oneself from the lived situation to reflect in the moment. To achieve real self-reflection, she asserts, one needs to step out of the situation and reflect retrospectively. Nevertheless, one can argue that by restricting reflection to a retrospective role, the focus is merely on the individual’s mental activity, where in depth knowledge of one’s own pedagogical practices is not stimulated nor encouraged. It has also been argued that the dialogical dimension of thinking and the social context of practice have been ignored by Schön’s model (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). The proposition that reflection is an individualistic process is at odds with the contemporary theory

on learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978), which considers learning as a social process. Teachers need to reflect by engaging in dialogue with colleagues and students so that their ideas and interpretations of actions are subject to discussion, argument and consideration of alternative viewpoints.

### ***Theories Underpinning the Concept of Reflective Practice***

Theoretically, reflective practice is a professional development strategy with roots in the constructivist paradigm. Constructivists maintain that instead of viewing teachers as passive technicians, it is important to promote in them the incentive to reflect; they are not “empty vessels to be filled with knowledge and skills of teaching” (Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

The principles of constructivism and reflective practice suggest that pedagogical strategies such as engaging the learner, exploring personal beliefs, knowledge, and experience, challenging ideas, facilitating reconceptualization, and providing opportunities for experimentation and assessment lead to effective learning in which the ultimate goal is to improve performance and attain professionalism. Accordingly, by exploring and modifying existing theories in use, teachers can achieve success.

### ***Models of Reflective Practice***

One of the consequences of the lack of consensus and clarity about the concept of reflective practice is the proliferation of different models to operationalize reflective practice. In his model, Van Manen (1990) looks at reflection as a three-dimensional phenomenon. The first level of reflection is when educators focus on the technical application of knowledge to accomplish a goal or achieve an end. Hall (1997, cited in Goodliffe & Palfreyman, 2013) describes this level as “everyday or random reflection” and considers it as being the lowest level of reflection. The second level is when the educator analyses and clarifies the assumptions and meanings underlying practical actions; it is ‘deliberate’ and involves reviewing and developing one’s practice in a number of deliberate ways, such as journaling, talking to a critical friend or mentor, participating in discussions and attending seminars and workshops. The third level of reflection is what Hall (1997) calls “deliberate and systematic.” It occurs when the teachers engage in a critical reflection; it is what Brookfield (1995) considers the most desirable level of reflection. Critical reflection to Brookfield is “standing outside ourselves and viewing what we do through four distinct lenses: our autobiographies as learners and teachers, our students’ eyes, our colleagues’ experiences, and theoretical literature” (1995, p. 28). In this regard, Schön visualized reflective practice operating through feedback loops. A single feedback loop is when the teacher detects an error and acts immediately; it is when goals, beliefs, values, conceptual frameworks, and strategies are taken for granted without critical reflection. A double feedback loop, on the other hand, is more creative and requires modifications in the rules, plans, strategies, or consequences initially related to the problem at hand; it involves critical reflection upon goals, beliefs, values, conceptual frameworks, and strategies (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Kolb’s 1984 experiential learning model goes a step further than Schön’s: while Schön’s reflection-in-action takes place only when things go wrong and errors are detected, in Kolb’s cycle reflection is an ongoing four stage cycle of experimenting, experiencing, observing reflectively and conceptualizing. Following this cycle, according to Petty (2009, p. 336), would “maximize the learning that takes place from experience”. Similarly, Gibb’s (1988) reflective cycle encourages

a clear description of the situation, analysis of feelings, evaluation of the experience, analysis of the experience, conclusion and an action plan.

Although it is beneficial for teachers to be taught how to reflect and the above-mentioned models provide comprehensive frameworks, imposing these frameworks leaves little scope for teachers to draw on their own intuitions, values and priorities. Models need to be applied selectively, purposefully, flexibly and judiciously for, if used thoughtlessly, they may actually devalue practitioners' professional work instead of promoting it and produce results that contradict 'Schön's professional artistry', in which competent professionals improvise, invent and test strategies of their own to solve the problems of practice.

Despite the concerns about reflection as a tool, it has high market appeal, since, if applied effectively, it can be an enormously powerful tool in reshaping the knowledge of teaching and learning (Brookfield, 1995; Heimlich & Norland, 1994; Mann, 2005). Reflective practice means that teachers critically question and analyze their own beliefs about teaching and learning, assume full responsibility for their actions in the classroom, and continue to progress in their teaching practice (Jay & Johnson, 2002; Valli, 1997).

## The Study

### *Significance of the Study*

Many studies in this decade center primarily on reflection as an instrument for change and on the various ways in which reflection can be developed (Avelos, 2013). However, despite the acclaimed virtues of reflective practice, it is important to note that practicing deep reflection takes time and dedication and that teaching in the Higher Education sector entails many responsibilities that might prevent EFL teachers from developing such important professional skills. This study investigates four EFL teachers' perceptions of reflective teaching as a tool for teacher development and its challenges in the Higher Education sector in Saudi Arabia. The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do college EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia perceive reflective teaching?
2. What institutional professional training in relation to reflection do college EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia receive?
3. What are the issues and obstacles they encounter in the process of reflective practice?

### *Methodology*

Given that the purpose of this study is to "clarify how interpretations and understandings are formulated, implemented and given meaning in lived situations" (Radnor, 2002, p. 4), an interpretive approach was adopted. Qualitative methods i.e., interviews were chosen to comprehend the meaning that teachers construct of the concept of reflective practice as related to their experiences in their daily teaching. It is important to note that the purpose of the study was not to generalize to a larger population, as in quantitative research, but rather to obtain a deeper understanding of how these teachers practice reflective teaching.

### *Research Methods*

Based on the understanding that the importance of qualitative research lies in exploring participants' multiple perspectives and experiences of the phenomenon under investigation, semi-structured interviews were used to gain insight into the issues related to reflective practice. Interviews allow the researchers to probe for particular responses, clarifications and confirmations of information from the respondents. In this type of format, the researcher introduces the topic, and then guides the discussion through posing specific questions to obtain detailed information (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Semi-structured open-ended interviews differ from unstructured conversations in that they involve pre-planned questions and pre-determined topics of discussion. They are conversational in nature, informal in tone and allow for open responses (Longhurst, 2003). The open-ended nature of the questions provides opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss the topic under investigation in more detail. Moreover, if the interviewee has difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer can use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer also has the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate on the original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee.

### ***Research Participants***

Since the goal of selecting participants in qualitative research is to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, this study used purposive sampling. This sampling technique selects participants "based on a specific purpose rather than randomly" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003a, p. 713) and is believed to be a rich source of the data of interest (Du Gay, 1996). The participants were selected based on two criteria: that they had taught in a higher education department for at least two years, and had worked in universities accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) as full-time EFL instructors in Saudi Arabia. Thus, they suited the purpose of the study and would most likely contribute appropriate data, both in terms of relevance and depth.

The invitations to participate in the study were issued individually to eleven teachers; four out of the eleven agreed to participate in the study. The rest refrained from participating due to their busy schedule, since the study was conducted at the beginning of the academic year. The participants were one male and three females teaching at two different universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

1. Jenny: BA in cultural anthropology; MA in adult education TESOL; PhD student in sociolinguistics; 12 years of teaching experience in KSA; American nationality.
2. Cathy: BA in Education, MA in adult education; 20 years of teaching experience in KSA; American nationality.
3. Mike: BA in Arabic and French; MA in Arabic and Applied Linguistics; MA in Education; PhD student in Technology Enhanced Learning and Networked Learning; 14 years of teaching experience in KSA; American nationality.
4. Leila: BA in Education; MA in TESOL; 2 years of teaching experience in KSA; Palestinian nationality.

Once the main participants were identified, I met with them individually and explained the purpose of the study. The participants were given consent forms and were told that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were also assured that their names would remain confidential and that all information provided would be treated with the utmost secrecy. Accordingly, pseudonyms were used in order to preserve the participants' anonymity.

### ***Interview Design and Data Collection Procedure***

The interview questions were designed to elicit information from the participants based on their experiences of the concept of reflective practice. A pilot study consisting of a practice interview session with one of the author's colleagues was conducted with the purpose of ensuring precision, clarity and proper sequencing of the interview questions.

In all instances, the interviews opened with an introduction and explanation of the purpose behind the interview. Rubin & Rubin (1995, cited in Du Gay, 1996) recommend that the researcher begin the interview with an informal chat about something related to the topic of the study. Background information about the participants such as their ages, nationalities, years of teaching experience and qualifications were then asked. The second part of the interview consisted of questions about the participants' definitions of the concept of reflective practice. "Definitions are the basis on which individuals explain their understanding of a particular concept" (Pedro, 2005, p. 56). Questions about the participants' engagement with reflective teaching then followed. In the last part of the interview, the participants were asked to point out the relationship between reflective practice and teacher empowerment. Finally, they were asked to pinpoint the benefits and problems they have experienced when practicing reflection.

Each interview was conducted individually and was recorded using a digital recorder in order to access the data when the coding process started. With recording, according to Ghaye (2010), we do not have to worry that we have missed something. Permission to record each session was requested. In addition to using the recorder, notes were taken with the purpose of avoiding missing important data and formulating additional questions whilst reflecting on the on-going conversation. Lastly, the participants were thanked for the time and shared experiences and were assured that all the material provided would remain confidential.

### ***Data Analysis***

To analyze the qualitative data, audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and the answers were codified and categorized based on the literature available on reflectivity. To ensure the credibility of the subsequent transcription of data, the participants were asked to review and verify the transcripts of the interviews. Bracketing and coding were then performed in order to identify themes, which were selected based on the recurring of the ideas in the participants' answers. Lastly, to help alleviate researcher bias or eliminate over-analysis of data, a colleague was asked to assist in the decoding and theme-analysis process.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In this section, the current paper presents an analysis of the participants' viewpoints regarding reflective practice in the Saudi context.

***What are the main themes of reflection?***

All four participants held different views with regard to reflection. Sparks et al., (1990) assert that reflection has no universal definition. When asked to define the concept of reflective practice, two of the participants demonstrated no or little knowledge; however, near the end of the interview, one recalled that she had dealt with the topic in a summer course of her doctoral programme. The third respondent considered it a common practice shared by all educators whose goal is to move forward in the profession. The path leading the fourth participant to reflective practice was slightly different from the other teachers for she was introduced to the topic through a course in her MA TESOL program. Nonetheless, the first theme surfaced from the participants' voicing their own perspectives about the nature of reflection.

***Theme 1: Reflection is a process of self-observation and self-evaluation***

Reflection, according to one participant, is a process of "observing what happened and then going to the next stage, which is judging what happened on the basis of whether it's a good experience or a bad experience and why and then we start proposing solutions and after the solutions, we go for action." As for another, reflection is a process of self-evaluation as "it helps you see what worked well and what didn't...this worked well so I'll do it again...this didn't work well, so I won't do this kind anymore." The third participant's definition of reflection was based on her thinking about her daily actions and what she could change by declaring, "after I teach a lesson, I look back to determine whether it was successful or not...what I maybe want to change I think I do an analysis of what I've done, so for the next time, I can make improvements." The fourth participant considered reflection as a means of self-observation, self-evaluation and a tool for improvement as teachers continuously "ask themselves what worked and what didn't work, why didn't it work and why did it work...and use the answers to those questions to try to improve their practice."

Thus, thinking about an action to initiate some change seems to influence the way teachers perceive reflection. This finding is supported by the literature that regards reflection as a special form of thought (McNamara, 1990). The definitions given by the teachers concur with Dewey's (1933) view that reflection encourages the implementation of solutions after a profound thinking of the status quo. Schön argues that a vital attribute of all effective practitioners, no matter in what area they operate, is that they are able to reflect on their ongoing experience and learn from it. He further indicates that teachers need to think back on what they have done in the purpose of determining improvements to be made in the future. This thinking back on action is similar to Dewey's (1933) definition of reflection as looking back at past events critically before taking action.

With regard to involvement in reflective practice, a second theme emerged as all respondents indicated that they engage in different forms of reflection throughout their course of career.

***Theme 2: Reflection is continuous***

While one participant keeps a learning journal in which she writes down "some questions on what worked well in class today, why, why not, what didn't work well, why, why not... this didn't work well so I won't do this kind anymore," another resorts to writing notes with the purpose of keeping a valid record of her teaching process: "You have to assess every minute,

whether you are in the classroom or before and after". She went on to describe an incident where she took immediate action in the classroom after pondering upon a problem through reading the notes she had written whilst in class. This description supports Dewey's theory, which states that learning is most effective when it begins with a problematic experience (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).

The third participant likewise asserted that teachers are always reflective and added that he independently uses a journal to write down his reflections regularly and "make some recommendations for how to do the same activity in later teaching" The fourth respondent emphasized the benefits of discussing dilemmas with colleagues for further advice: "and then I think about it again and try to think of a solution." She also stated that getting feedback from students has helped her "deal with class issues, deal with things that weren't working and get students more engaged than they were before."

Getting different viewpoints enlightens, reinforces and offers genuineness for a more holistic view on the teaching process. Three of Brookfield's four lenses can be detected in the responses of the participants i.e., autobiographies, students' eyes and colleagues' experiences. The autobiographical lens, or self-reflection, is the foundation of reflective teaching. Teachers may focus on their previous experiences as a learner, or on their experiences as a teacher in order to "become aware of the paradigmatic assumptions and instinctive reasoning that frame how we work" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 34). Moreover, going beyond self-reflection to understand student experiences is important for good teaching since it increases students' understanding of school life, creates a sense of belonging, and enhances the quality of teaching and learning (Gunn, 2005; Reid 2002).

Teachers who engage with peers for mentoring, advice and feedback are in a position to gain greater confidence since peers can highlight unseen behaviors in the teaching practice, support, guide and offer solutions to teaching problems. Hence, the interview excerpts clearly indicate that the participants have experienced 'reflection-in-action', as they reflected on and modified their action instantaneously, 'reflection-on-action', as they engaged in the process of continuous learning, and 'reflection-for-action', as they assessed their teaching practices and decided on future improvements.

In relation to the role of research on reflection, a third theme surfaced highlighting the close relationship research shares with reflection.

### ***Theme 3: Action research is a tool for stimulating reflection***

In response to the question 'What is the role of research in reflection?' the following comments were obtained:

According to one participant, "If what you do isn't working, then, you can look at the research to see what other people have done to see if there are any ideas, so you can modify what you do and improve your teaching." The second participant also affirmed: "as you learn something new, you can reflect on how you use it in the classroom." Most importantly, the third participant noted the link reflective teaching has with action research: "one needs to be skilled at reflective practice in order to do an action research" whereas the fourth respondent stated that observing a situation is a necessary step before researching the literature and finding solutions.

Action research is a process of continuously inquiring about problems and taking actions to solve them. Geiger (2004) notes that, in the current era, research advances knowledge, promotes education, and offers wisdom. Consequently, in exploring new theories, the practitioner-researcher develops and constructs new knowledge. This coincides with Brookfield's framework of reflection, in which he highlights the importance of viewing practice through "lenses" that reflect back a picture of who we are and what we do. Exploring the theoretical literature (Brookfield's fourth lens) can help extend our understanding and appreciation of our own learning by offering multiple perspectives on similar situations that seem challenging in different ways (Brookfield, 1995).

Reflective teaching has been defined as a process that encourages teachers to analyze, discuss and evaluate practice, all of which lead to professional development and strengthens teaching ability (Vacca, Vacca & Bruneau, 1997). Hence, the fourth theme emerged as the participants articulated their thoughts with regard to the relationship between reflection and professional development.

***Theme 4: Reflection is a path for professional development***

All participants concurred that reflective practice fosters professional development. One respondent stated, "the more experience you get, the more you explain what works and what doesn't work." She further acknowledged the importance for teachers of having "confidence in what they're doing...evidence to show people what worked and what didn't work...become better teachers and feel better." Another participant stated that reflection allows her to "be a better teacher, and if you are a better teacher, then you will teach better and hopefully, have more successful students." Reflective practice is viewed by the third participant as a means by which educators can develop a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development: "It makes me more aware of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it...take more responsibility for making decisions." Similarly, the fourth participant argued that reflection leads to empowering teachers because "teachers then start to self-develop themselves and become aware of what they're doing without having a boss or a supervisor coming and telling them, you need to improve this or you need to improve that."

In brief, reflective teaching plays a critical role in enhancing teachers' development. It assists teachers to become better educators, raises educational standards (Pollard, 2005; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2011) and promotes teachers autonomy, which, as Kumaravadivelu (2008, p. 178) argues, is a necessary quality in post-method teachers: "post-method pedagogy recognizes the teachers' prior knowledge as well as their potential to know not only how to teach but also how to act autonomously". Similarly, Dewey (1933) emphasized the concept of responsibility, which entails the desire to search for the truth as well as use information gained in problematic situations (Yost, Senter, & Forlenza-Bailey 2000).

***What are the problems and obstacles that discourage reflective practice in Saudi Colleges?***

With regard to the problems and obstacles that hinder reflective practice, the respondents expressed their frustration in relation to the following issues:

- A closed, restrictive educational system with no freedom for teachers' creativity
- Failure in raising awareness of the importance of reflective practice
- Insufficient training programs

Two of the participants argued that fixed programming hinders teachers' creativity and has a negative impact on teachers' performance. Practicing reflection, according to one, is of the utmost importance especially when you are:

compelled to work from course books because if you are, then the natural tendency is just to deliver content, which you were told to deliver and that leads to very poor teaching practice because teachers who are teaching course books do not feel particularly responsible for what they're teaching...they have not made any decisions.

Reflective teaching promotes teacher's confidence, creativeness, and personal capacities for learning and improvement. It has been argued that when teachers teach in a routine fashion, they follow the designated textbooks or teach a lesson in the same way it was taught in the past without any effort to change or innovate. This mechanical way of teaching, according to McKay (2002), results in ineffective lessons and teachers become slaves to routine. Thus, being a more reflective teacher frees one from routine action and results in more creative and effective lessons. It further empowers teachers to be decision makers and agents of change in curriculum development and prepares teachers to effectively counter the complexity of their classrooms. Thus, to foster a climate of autonomous, self-reflective collegueship, principals must enable teachers to be primarily responsible for judging the success of their own work.

Another participant highlighted the importance of promoting reflectivity in students for "it would help everyone all around, the students, the teachers, the administration and the whole system." In the same vein, a third participant stated, "reflective practice is a life-long skill that needs to be acquired and experienced." Finally, all four participants emphasized the importance of providing reflective supervision and consultation; however, one participant recommended "non-obligatory training sessions where teachers can share their experiences in a meaningful way."

It is clear from the above excerpts that the lack of independence in thinking, deciding, and acting impedes to a great extent the implementation of reflective teaching in some colleges in Saudi Arabia. Hence, awareness as to its importance needs to be developed, for, as one of the participants stated, "it should be considered if something is going wrong and if something is not going wrong." It is what Kolb in 1984 describes as an ongoing cycle of experimenting, experiencing, observing reflectively and conceptualizing.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

Although the present study obtained interesting findings, it had some limitations in its methodology such as the use of only one data collection tool: additional data collection tools would increase the validity of the study. The timing of the interviews can be considered another limitation since they were conducted during the first weeks of the academic year, with many colleagues choosing not to participate due to their busy schedule. This should be taken into consideration by other researchers when choosing an appropriate time for this stage of their research.

However, this study could be replicated with different groups of participants, such as a variety of educators from different teaching contexts, to develop a more holistic view on the

effectiveness of reflective practice, so the results could be compared with the present study and the accuracy of the findings re-examined.

### Concluding

### Remarks

The present study explored the perceptions of four EFL educators on reflective practice and its challenges in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The study obtained results similar to those of previous research studies mentioned in the literature review section. The findings indicate that all the respondents have a positive attitude towards reflective practice, despite the fact that some of them have never conducted any systematic inquiry into the subject. Their understanding of the concept of reflective practice is based on their personal experiences and general knowledge. Those who were introduced to the concept for the first time during the course of this study realized that they are unconsciously reflective since they have been using different methods of reflection, such as journals and notes, in their daily practice. Thus, being aware of the concept of reflective practice and having a qualified trainer may give these unconsciously reflective teachers an opportunity to voice their views aloud with the aim of improving the quality of their teaching and learning. Teachers should be trained to teach within the constructivist perspective, where they reflect on and interpret the available information in their own particular settings, take decisions, and follow up on them. Ultimately, this will lead to more innovation and creativity. Teachers cannot develop reflective practice by themselves without guidance; as Larrivee (2008, p.345) states, “The general accepted position is that without carefully constructed guidance, prospective and novice, as well as more experienced, teachers seem unable to engage in pedagogical and critical reflection to enhance their practice”. Hence, English departments in Saudi Arabia should supply all the teachers with regular conferences and workshops using models based on constructivist approaches. This training and preparation should start during their pre-service teacher education programs and continue into their in-service or workplace contexts.

Briefly, reflective teaching has been introduced to the ELT community as a result of the shift of paradigm from a positivist-oriented perspective to a constructivist-oriented one. Apart from some potential flaws and pitfalls, reflective teaching provides language teachers with a variety of techniques to become more conscious of their own actions and feelings both inside and outside the classroom. As Akbari (2007, p. 192) claims, “It is good to reflect, but reflection itself also requires reflection.” Specifically, reflective teaching improves professionalism among teachers, develops teachers’ classroom effectiveness, builds up rapport between teachers and students, provides a positive learning environment, and increases students’ cognitive, social and constructive strategies for learning. It is a means to an end: better student learning and more efficient teacher performance.

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**Randa Sibahi** is a Syrian citizen living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. She spent over fifteen years working with international students as an ESL instructor in Saudi schools and colleges. Her ultimate aim as an educator is to help students become global citizens who have the 21st century skills that will enable them to succeed and prosper in the next decades. She is currently an EdD student at the University of Exeter. Her purpose for seeking an EdD in Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages is to expand her knowledge of theory and research methods, improve her awareness of English grammatical and phonological systems.

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