

Perceptions and Practices of EFL Pre-service Teachers about Reflective Teaching

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Abstract

Current theories of teacher education and teaching expertise as a process consider teacher/ student teacher reflection one of the main ways of learning how to teach effectively. Such theories of teacher expertise reinforce the claim that teachers who engage in reflective practices can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching. Given the importance of reflective teaching, this case study focused on exploring pre-service teachers' perceptions and practices of reflection in teaching. Three student teachers took part in the study. Portfolios, reflective journals, observations and discussions were used to collect the data. The qualitative analysis showed that pre-service teachers generally believed that reflection was useful and helpful, particularly at the beginning of their teaching experience. Then, it became just a repetitive routine act. Analyzing pre-service teachers' practices, the study indicated that student teachers' reflection was general, brief, and mostly descriptive in nature. Pre-service teachers did not really engage in effective reflection practices. The study suggested that there is a need for reconsidering reflective teaching in undergraduate courses of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

Keywords: beliefs, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), expertise, portfolios, practices, perceptions, pre-service teachers, portfolios, professionalism, reflection, reflective teaching, reflective writing, student teachers, tacit beliefs, teachers

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need for reflective teaching. Initiated by Dewey's and Schon's models of reflective practice during the 1980s, the concept of reflective teaching flourished in response to the call for professionalism in teaching. Reflective teaching aims at helping teachers broaden and deepen their teaching through the on-going examination of their practices. Such examination assists teachers to uncover tacit beliefs and consider alternative practices and their consequences. With reflection, teachers can bridge the gap between their beliefs and classroom practices leading them to act critically rather than reactively.

Formerly, it was a common belief that only experienced teachers can be reflective. Nowadays, many teacher educators consider reflection a necessary requirement not only for in-service teachers, but also for pre-service teachers that can lead them to professional growth and expertise in teaching (Farrell, 2008). Most of the studies in the literature focus on reflective teaching of in-service teachers. However, very few studies deal with pre-service teacher's perceptions about reflection. Most importantly, few of them explore student teachers' reflective practices considering reflective tools such as reflective journals and portfolios. This study is an attempt to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions about reflective teaching. It also tries to investigate student teachers' reflective practices. More specifically, the study is set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are EFL student teachers' perceptions about reflective teaching?
2. What are EFL student teachers' practices of reflective teaching?

Literature Review

Different attempts have been made to define the elusive concept of reflection in the literature. These attempts and debates reflect the continuous efforts to arrive at a consensus about reflective thinking. Nevertheless, the proposed definitions share the underlying theme that reflection is a special form of thought. Beginning with its originator, Dewey (1933) defines reflection as an active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief in light of its original sources and consequences to which it leads. Also, Ross (1989) defines reflection as a form of thinking about educational issues to which one tries to make rational choices and assumes responsibility for those choices. El-Okda (2008) maintains that reflection is a special type of thought associated with professional practice in which the practitioner tries to de-routinize it and uncover the tacit beliefs underlying it. Hence, a reflective teacher strives to de-routinize teaching by considering alternative routes and their consequences to uncover the tacit beliefs underlying habitual actions.

Reflective teaching is a chief means of developing professional growth and expertise in teaching. Osterman (1990) comments that not only does professional growth depend on developing new ideas, but on modifying the old ones that have been shaping behavior through reflection. Essentially, reflective teaching paves the way to expertise in teaching regardless of a teacher's years of experience. Teachers usually come with beliefs about teaching and learning that have been formulated through years of being students and, later, teachers. These tacit beliefs are not always translated into actions. Reflective teaching helps in bridging the gap between teachers' beliefs and actual practices. Farrell (2004) comments that one way of exposing gaps between teacher beliefs and actual classroom practice is to encourage teachers to engage in reflective practice.

Different classifications of reflection have been suggested based on time, process, level, and stages (Farrell, 2004; Lee, 2005; Schön, 1983; Van Manen, 1977). Schön (1983), for example, introduces the concepts of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action based on two frames of time. *Reflection-in-action* happens while the action of teaching is taking place in the classroom. *Reflection-on-action* is teachers' reflection after teaching occurred in the classroom. On the other hand, Van Manen (1977) offers three levels of reflection: the technical, the practical, and the critical. The technical level is the lowest level of reflection in which the teacher considers the effectiveness of the practices to achieve lesson goals and objectives. In the practical level, the teacher reflects on the assumptions that support his/her actions and the consequences of such practices. The critical level of reflection encompasses the first two levels but, more importantly, considers moral and ethical criteria. Smyth (1989) maintains that there are four sequential stages linked to questions, which lead teachers to critical reflection: (1) describe (What do I do?), (2) Inform (What does this mean?), (3) Confront (How did I come to be like this?), and (4) Construct (How might I do things differently). Taking into consideration the different classifications of reflection in the literature, Lee (2005) comments that the meaning of reflection in educational research has changed over time to include both reflective thinking as well as non-reflective thinking.

Recently, reflective teaching research has grown rapidly, given its importance in teachers' professional growth. Different studies have been conducted to explore reflective teaching among both in-service and pre-service teachers. A'Dhahab (2009), for example, investigates seventeen EFL in-service teachers' perceptions and practices of reflective writing as a teaching requirement in Oman. The analysis of the questionnaire, reflection document, and the interview results indicates that teachers have positive views about reflective writing. Contrary to these positive beliefs, only half the participants write reflections on a daily basis. Further, their reflective writings represent an inadequate understanding of reflection. Most of their reflective writings are descriptive with some evaluative statements about how successful the lesson was. The study recommends a reconsideration and improvement of the required reflective writing in Oman.

Further, Fakazli and Gönen (2017) explore the perceptions of eight EFL university instructors regarding different reflective practices. Several reflective tools, including diaries, video analysis, and peer sessions, were used for reflective practice after some training. The analysis of the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and reflective writings indicates that the participants recognize the usefulness of the reflective tools to their professional development in spite of some negative perceptions regarding the time and effort required.

Azizah, Nurkamto, and Drajadi (2018) examine the reflective practices of two EFL pre-service teachers. The analysis of the open-ended questionnaire, interview, and documents shows that the two pre-service teachers practice reflection in, on, and for action, i.e. while the lesson is taking place, after the lesson, and before the lesson, respectively. The study strongly recommends reflective training of pre-service teachers to help them engage in real critical reflection.

The above studies generally indicate positive perceptions about reflective teaching, but mixed findings regarding reflective practices. Actually, considering the fact that reflective

practices are analyzed from different perspectives necessitates the need for more studies on reflection. Further, most of the studies in the literature focus on in-service teachers rather than pre-service teachers in spite of the fact that they represent the foundation of teaching as a profession. This study attempts to enrich the body of literature by exploring EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions and practices of reflection.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were three female pre-service teachers from the English Department at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. The participants were chosen based on convenient sampling and their willingness to participate. Besides the preparatory year, university students spend four years studying at the department. They take courses in Linguistics, TEFL, Translation, and Literature. Considering TEFL in particular, university students take two TEFL courses. The first course introduces them to the different methods and approaches developed throughout history. The second course aims at preparing them for teaching as a profession through tackling topics of teaching the different skills and sub-skills, lesson planning, classroom management, etc. In the last semester, the students are required to practice teaching in schools for 11-12 weeks (all working days except Wednesdays as they go to the university). In the first week, the students familiarize themselves with the school, the administration, English teachers, and the school resources and facilities. In the second week, they attend classes to observe how English teachers teach their students and assist them. Starting from the third week, the student teachers begin to teach by themselves, and supervisors attend to observe and evaluate them. The participants in this study had their training semester at an intermediate school. They spent 11 weeks where they completed the English course with the school students. The following is a table showing the participants' grades in TEFL courses and their GPA.

Table 1. *Participants TEFL grades and their GPA*

Student	Grade in TEFL 1	Grade in TEFL 2	GPA
(A)	B	B	4.19
(B)	D	B+	4.18
(C)	D	C+	3.08

Data collection instruments

The study adopted a triangulation design to collect the data. Data triangulation assists in obtaining data from different resources; hence, enriching and deepening the results of the study. Additionally, it increases the validity and trustworthiness of the study results (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Specifically, the data were collected through portfolios, reflective journals, observations, and discussions.

Portfolio

The student teachers were required to build their portfolios during their teaching experience at the school. The portfolios contained their data and CV, their academic records, school acquaintance forms, school teacher observations, and peer review observations. They further divided the portfolios into two sections: curricular and extra-curricular activities. In the curricula section, they included all the lesson plans, the activities implemented, worksheets, samples of

quizzes and exams, a list of students' names and marks, pictures of games, realia, posters, and any teaching aids. The extra-curricular activities contained morning English broadcast, projects, copies of wall magazine articles, sample pictures of an open assembly, and any orientation or event executed by the student teacher. At the end of the portfolio, the researcher asked the student teachers to write a final reflective essay on the entire teaching experience, and on reflective teaching itself for the purpose of the study.

Reflective journals

The student teachers were requested to keep a journal where they record their thoughts after each lesson. They were asked to write spontaneously focusing mainly on reflection rather than worrying about grammar or spelling. In order to guide them in the reflection process, the researcher informed them that they could ask themselves several questions after each lesson, probe into their answers and write them down. They were requested to take their time and write as much as they could to reflect on their teaching philosophy, what went well during the lesson and why, what problems they encountered, why they encountered them, and how they could overcome them.

Observations and discussions

As their supervisor, the researcher attended a lesson to all the three student teachers every week. She read and commented on their lesson plans, followed up their portfolios, observed and evaluated them. The evaluation was based on different criteria including personality, preparation, presentation, use of teaching aids, and classroom management. After each observation, the researcher asked the student teacher to reflect on her lesson, discussed the strengths along with the weaknesses, and provided her with feedback. There were also discussions of reflection and what they wrote in their reflective journals. Generally, the discussion for each student teacher usually lasted about fifteen to twenty minutes.

Data analysis

Generally, the data about perceptions and practices were systematically analyzed considering patterns and topics repeated among the three participants using the Constant Comparison Method. The data were broken down into communication units, coded, compared and contrasted and formed into categories. The comparison was examined in individual participants and across all the participants. A quantitative analysis was also followed in analyzing student teachers' practices. Further, Lee's (2005) three levels of reflection were considered. According to Lee, the depth of reflection is classified into three levels:

- Recall level (R1): recalling and describing the situations without considering alternatives.
- Rationalization level (R2): observing relationships between teaching experiences and interpreting them in accordance with the rational through answering "why" questions.
- Reflectivity level (R3): analyzing those experiences for future improvement.

Enhancing the validity of the results was also a continuous process. Starting from triangulation of data and prolonged commitment, to the quantitative analysis of the result to support qualitative analysis and avoid subjectivity.

Results

Perceptions about reflection

Student teachers' perceptions about reflection were generally positive, especially at the beginning. They perceived reflection as a helpful tool that assists them through their teaching experience. To them, reflection is a record in which they express their thoughts after each teaching experience in order to keep the good teaching acts, focus on the problems encountered, and consider plans for improvement:

A: "Self-reflection is a way to assist your progress. After each class, you write feedback about how your class was, what went wrong, and how you would change it next time."
"You set aside every time you finished your class and assist yourself. This helps to make sure you know what you are doing."

B: "Self-reflection was very helpful at the beginning. I benefited a lot from it." "It was an outlet and reference at the same time."

C: "The reflection I wrote after each class helped me so much. It made me better than yesterday."

They believed that reflection helped them develop and plan coming lessons through avoiding the mistakes in previous lessons.

A: "It helps to avoid mistakes and come up with new strategies for teaching to help students and you as a teacher."

B: "Each time I faced problems, the first thing I thought about was: I have to write this problem down in my self-reflection to remember it and avoid it next time. There were also good things that happened, and I was excited to write about them in my self-reflection."

C: "It helped me not to repeat the mistakes that I did."

Specifically, they maintained that it allowed them to notice how they can manage classrooms, time, and activities.

B: "There were some problems I faced with time management, students and activities in class, I write them down to learn and benefit from them."

C: "It helped me in dealing with students. It also helped me in varying the explanation method and become creative."

Yet, they believe that reflection is important only at the beginning. By time, it becomes a boring repetitive routine act.

A: "The only disadvantage is that by time it becomes a little bit boring or maybe because you feel like you are going on and on in the same circle; therefore, I think it should be for the first five weeks."

B: "By moving forward in training, it was difficult to find any problem or anything new to write about. So, the most helpful reflections were at the beginning of the training."

One of them believed that these reflective writings are for me to follow what they are doing:

C: "It helps the supervisor to know what we do every day, how was the class, what activities we used, the problems and the solutions."

Reflective practices

Basically, student teachers' reflective writings are considered short and brief and they become shorter as time passes on. This result reflects their perceptions of reflection as a useful and important practice only at the beginning. Looking at their reflective writings, for example, one can quickly notice that their early writings, though short by themselves, were longer than their late writings. Table 2 shows the difference in the number of words in the participants' reflective journals in the first week of teaching compared to the last week.

Table 2. *The number of words in the participants' reflective writings in the first and last week*

Student teacher	Week	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Thursday	Mean
A	First week	36	52	73	67	57
	Last week	37	22	30	26	29
B	First week	66	57	42	31	49
	Last week	32	43	23	28	32
C	First week	43	50	38	60	48
	Last week	33	27	16	22	24

Another feature of student teachers' reflective practices is that they are mostly descriptive or narrative in nature. The student teachers began their reflection with a general evaluative statement about the lesson and how it was. They express their feelings. Then, they generally described what happened, what they explained, what went well, and if there were any problems they encountered. Even when the researcher asked them about their lessons in the discussion following the observation, they began to give general statements and described what happened, what they felt was effective, and what needed improvement. Further, their reflections focused mostly on the students and what they understood or did rather than on the teaching experience itself. Here are some of each of the student teachers' writings in the reflective journals at different times (the beginning, middle, and by the end of training):

A¹: “The class was the first period, so the students were little bit sleepy. If I asked them to raise their hands to participate only few students did so because the class was early. I decided to divide them into four groups, and each group will get a star for the correct answer. Slowly they become very active and cooperative.”

A²: “Today’s lesson was about adverbs of frequency. As I thought, it was easy to explain, and they understand it quickly. I gave them examples and then we did some of the examples in the book. After that, we watch the video and we discussed the broadcasting and what we should do about it.”

A³: “Today’s lesson was about grammar (there is/ there are). What I loved by this time is that the students are more comfortable to give me examples on their own. They were shy and hesitate, but now they are much better.”

B¹: “In today’s lesson, I divided them into groups. Their understanding of the lesson become much better, also they participated more than usual, but actually they were noisy little bit. Maybe I should separate some girls from the other.”

B²: “Everything works good today. I finished every part in its exact time. But students weren’t very active. Maybe because that there are a lot of new vocabulary and it was hard to pronounce. I will try to simplify it next time.”

B³: “Today’s lesson was grammar. It was good. I didn’t face any problem. The students were active, and I saw the best of them. The time was enough, and we enjoyed the class.”

C¹: “Today’s lesson was about around the home. They were so enthusiastic because I did some activities. I gave them cards and put inside them pictures of home chores, then I asked the students to come and choose a card and guess what does it mean. I gave them objects to use when they act such as t-shirts, sponge, dish, towel, and socks. After that I presented a video about house chores. I felt that they wanted activities every day. They love games.”

C²: “My class was good. The students were so active because the period was on early morning. The rule of (and & but) was so easy to them that is why they were so active. I answer the round up with them, then I gave the students worksheet about (and & but). The group who won, I gave them chocolate.”

C³: “My class was good, I answered with students the exercise in workbook and gave them the grades.”

In addition, their reflections are sometimes repetitive. They also reflect on similar problems such as, grammar explanation, student participation and understanding, time and classroom management. Table 3 shows the problems they commonly share in their reflective writings and their frequency:

Table 3. *Problems commonly reported in student teachers' reflective writings*

Problems	Times reported	Samples
Time management	6	B: "It is the first time I take the whole class and I fail in managing time. The period finished before I do the comprehension questions. I really wasted my time in many things." B: "I can't manage my time with extra activities." C: "Time is over before I finished my lesson."
Classroom management	6	B: "Today's class was horrible. It was the last period. There was noise everywhere." B: "I asked them to answer and write their answers on the board if it is correct. They become noisy." C: "Some of the students talk to each other while I was explaining. I asked them to stand up for 5 minutes."
Student participation	12	A: "The class was the first period so students were little bit sleepy. If I asked them to raise their hands to participate, only few students do so." B: "The class were lazy to participate. Maybe the subject was grammar, so they weren't active." C: "It was the last period and Thursday. The students were sleepy."
Grammar explanation	4	A: "The grammar took longer than I expected." A: "Today's grammar was about personal pronouns. As I expected that they were very confused about them." B: "I felt that my students didn't understand the difference between some and any. Their faces while I was explaining were like: we are lost."
Administrative issues	5	B: "There was a problem in the time, because there was a change in the schedule and I wasn't informed." C: "We have problems with the periods of classes." C: "The students are bored because it is the last period. I will talk to the deputy principal to change it."

In some cases, they do not offer solutions to the problems they encounter. Further, they sometimes generally state that they would do their best or they would look for a solution without specifying it.

B: "The class were lazy to participate. Maybe the subject was grammar so they weren't active. One student refused to participate completely. I tried with her then she gave me little attention. Perhaps there weren't anything to attract their attention. I have to change my way in explaining grammar. I will try a new strategy."

C: "They weren't enthusiastic about grammar. They prefer vocabulary and reading but I will do the best to make them like grammar."

C: "The time was over before I finished my lesson. The introduction wasn't good but next time, I will do the best."

Taking these features together, it can be recognized that most of student teachers' reflective practices come under the recall level (R1) of Lee's (2005) three levels of reflection. Sometimes, they move to the second level where they rationalize their practices interpreting why they believed something happened in a certain way. Yet, they rarely practice real critical reflection that helps them to uncover their tacit beliefs. Even in the discussion following the evaluation, the researcher sometimes asked them about a certain problem and why they believed they encountered it, or why they acted in a certain way to help them rationalize or critically reflect on their practices, but they began to describe or relate it to administrative issues. For example, student teacher A constantly complained that the class students did not participate. When I asked her why, she related that to having the class as the first period in the schedule. But after observing her, I noticed that the class students did not participate because her instructions and questions were not clear enough and the classrooms students were not following her.

Actually, they sometimes recall and describe administrative issues rather than teaching practices. For example, in one of student teacher C's reflective writings, she stated that "My class was good, but some students were bored because it was the last period.", then she extensively described how she would change it by talking to the deputy principal. In another writing, she fully explained how she substituted the classes with another teacher because she took permission to leave early.

Discussion

The results show that pre-service teachers' perceptions about reflection are positive. They believe that it was helpful during their teaching practice at the school. It helped them to notice and record what they actually did and improve their teaching through developing solutions for the problems they encountered. Yet, they think that the importance of reflection was temporary. It was useful only at the beginning but became a repetitive routine act with time. This actually indicates that they have misconceptions about reflection. They consider it as a way of writing down their thoughts about their teaching practices and how to develop them rather than an on-going process to explore and de-routinize teaching. Such findings echo the results in previous studies (A'Dhahab, 2009; Al-Jamal, 2012; Azizah, Nurkamto & Drajadi, 2008; El-Dib, 2007; Fakazli & Gönen, 2017)). Al-Jamal (2012), for example, found that Saudi EFL teachers' perception of reflection revolved around their understanding that a teacher needs to find alternative routes and solutions to problems encountered. In this regard, Lee (2005) argues that the process of reflective thinking should not just discuss progress towards the solution of a problem, but rather the degree of awareness of the situation; the process and progress should be viewed together. Teaching training is not enough for developing reflective teaching. It is just a milieu in which pre-service teachers can practice reflection. In reality, reflection training is needed before teaching training itself because reflective teaching does not develop with experience; rather, it is a learned skill (El-Dib, 2007).

The misconceptions about reflection are also reflected in pre-service teachers' reflective practices. Their reflections are general, short and become shorter with time. Further, they are mainly descriptive or narrative in nature, impeded with some repetition of shared problems that

focus mostly on students rather than on the teaching experience itself. Basically, most of their reflections occur at the first level of recalling and describing teaching practices, with some reflections in the second level of rationalizing. However, they seldom involve deep critical reflection that uncovers tacit beliefs. In other words, student teachers did not consider why they were doing what they were actually doing. They focused mainly on how the students reacted rather than on the sources behind their practices and how they were formulated in a way that can help them develop new practices. Similarly, in her study of EFL teachers in Oman, A'Dhahab (2009) hardly found any instances of deep critical reflection in which classroom events were critically analyzed to develop decisions carried forward to subsequent lessons. Al-Jamal (2012) also comments that teachers lack in-depth reflection as they seem to be unaware of the multiple reasons for problems, or their beliefs and assumptions that guide their choices. Reflection is not about describing teaching acts and developing solutions based on students' reactions. Rather it occurs when "teachers subject their own beliefs about teaching and learning to critical analysis, take full responsibility for their actions in the classroom, and continue to improve their teaching practice." (Farrell, 2008, p.1). In other words, reflective teaching occurs when teachers identify problems and anything they do routinely, question why they do it, try to uncover the underlying beliefs, then break the routine by experimenting with alternatives and consider the consequences for such alternatives.

Conclusion

Reflective teaching is the impetus for professional growth. With reflective teaching, teachers can become experts in teaching not through routinized years of teaching experience but through expertise. The skill of reflection is not gained through experience, no matter how long it is, but through learning how to critically and thoughtfully consider teaching acts and what motivates them in order to consider alternative routes and their consequences. Hence, reflection should be considered in designing EFL syllabi. Practically, reflective training should be a condition for teaching training of pre-service teachers before the teaching training itself. Criteria for reflection also need to be part of the student teacher evaluation. In reality, reflection needs to be considered not only in pre-service teacher programs but also in in-service teachers' professional development programs to increase the understanding of teaching as an on-going process of development. Portfolios and reflective journals are indispensable tools lying at the heart of any reflective teaching experience. Technology can also be utilized to develop reflective practices through the use of e-portfolios or online communities of practice in which teachers can share their ideas in online discussion boards.

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