



## Reflection: Is It A Promising Or Spurious Tool For Teachers' Professional Development?

Thuraya Al Riyami

English Language Center, Ibra College of Technology, Ibra, Oman

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**Abstract:** Professional development is seen as a fundamental aspect in teachers' careers if they want to "remain up to date in their knowledge of the curriculum, wise in their selection and use of a repertoire of pedagogical skills, committed and enthusiastic about their work and the students they teach, self-confident, and clear about their purposes" (Day, 2001, p. 1). It has been emphasised worldwide that, without reflection, the achievement of professional development is unlikely to happen. This is because reflection allows teachers to constantly question their assumptions and beliefs, analyse their practice and look for alternatives that lead to better practice (Burton, 2009; Richards, 2004; Artzt, 2002; Margolis, 2002). However, reflection that leads to professional development remains rare within a teaching career (Farr, 2010) and as a term it continues to be debated in the field of education. It has received significant critiques (Akbari, 2007; Hobbs, 2007; Fendler, 2003; Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Smyth, 1992). Given that, the aim of this paper in first part is to stress the fact that, although reflection can be crucial in the teaching profession, it should be problematised as a promising tool for teachers' professional development in terms of its meaning, implementations, implicit assumptions and application in a managerial culture. I will finish this paper in second part by talking about my personal experience throughout my career with regards to reflective practice.

**Keywords:** reflection, critical reflection, professional development, managerial culture

### 1. REFLECTION DEFINITION

Dewey (1993) initially defines reflection as the "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9). He considers reflection as special form of problem-solving that involves applying scientific methods to reach a solution. In addition, he identified three vital teaching qualities that enable teachers to be reflective: open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness. By open-mindedness, he means that the teachers should listen to all perspectives. Responsibility refers to the teachers being aware of all of the consequences of their actions and wholeheartedness refers to having these qualities at the centre of their being and actions. Similarly, Schon (1987) argues that reflection is a core concept of professional thinking, emphasising that this is how professionals should deal with complex problems. According to him, practitioners "frame and reframe the ambiguous" problems they encounter, test out various interpretations and then

accordingly modify their actions. He made distinction between reflection **in** action and reflection **on** action. The former refers to the processes of thinking while doing where the practitioners interpret their performance and modify it on spot. The latter refers to teachers thinking about and analysing their practice in order to gain knowledge. Richert (1990 as cited in Farrell, 2007) sees reflection as a key component of a teacher's professional development. He stresses that self-enquiry and critical thinking can help teachers to move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition or routine to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking. Valli (1997) considers reflection to have the ability to "look back on events, make judgments about them, and alter their teaching behaviors in light of craft, research, and ethical knowledge" (p. 70). Thus, these two definitions should push reflective teachers to critically examine their performances, think about ideas to enhance their practices to improve students' learning and implement these ideas in reality.



Copland, Ma and Mann (2009, p. 18) define reflection as “the ability to analyze an action systematically and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the action in order to improve practice”. On the other hand, many researchers have talked about the necessity of moving from analysing teaching endeavours and evaluating strengths and weaknesses to talk about critical reflection, which involves “taking in the broader historical, socio-political, and moral context of schooling” (Jay & Johnson, 2002, p. 79). This means that teachers need to relate aspects of teaching and what is going on in the class to broader social, cultural and political domains. In other words, critical reflection requires teachers to be reflective with an understanding and keenness to challenge and confront complex issues of power and politics in their schools and community as well (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1999 as cited in Çimer, Çimer & Vekli, 2013). Others define reflection as a cognitive process of inner dialogue and ‘conversation with self’ that results in teachers’ awareness of practice (Prawat, 1991 as cited in Mann, 2005).

Looking at the all these definitions, one can conclude that reflection is an aspect that can be defined in various ways and it is open to many different interpretations. In fact, current discourse about reflection in the literature carries multiple meanings: a problem-solving, intuitive performance; a key aspect in teacher’s professional life; a way to transform teachers; a mean to alter practice; a method to question power and achieve justice in society and an internal conversation. It seems that reflection is too complex so educators cannot precisely pin it down, as I will elaborate more later in this paper when I problematise reflection in terms of its meaning. However, despite the ambiguity and discrepancy of the reflection definition, most educators stress the importance of reflection as a powerful tool and enviable practice that leads to improve teachers’ performance and learning (Freese, 1999 as cited in Çimer, Çimer & Vekli, 2013).

## 2. ARGUMENT FOR REFLECTION

Reflection is considered to be crucial to the growth of teachers. It is central to enabling teachers to ameliorate teaching situations, give them power and allow them to cope with the demands of the teaching as a dynamic profession, as I will elaborate on in this section.

### A. Having the ability to alter situations

According to Braun and Crumpler (2004), reflective teachers have the ability to think about their actions and the context in which they occur. They have the capability to look back at what they have done in their previous classes, assess them and alter their teaching practices and beliefs based on their students’ needs. They also highlighted that unreflective teachers have “limited

ability to make good decisions; to consider the consequences of their actions; and, to alter their actions.” (p. 60). In Burton’s words (2009, p. 298) “being reflective assists teachers’ lifelong professional development, enabling them to critique teaching and make better-informed teaching decisions”. Schon (1987) believed that teachers had spent thousands of hours as students and they already possess some beliefs and thoughts that constitute what good or bad teaching is. In order for teachers to progress and alter their teaching, they must voice, confront and evaluate these beliefs in the light of alternative models of teaching (Hobbs, 2007). In short, reflection can be a powerful means for enabling teachers, both novice and experienced, to understand and extend their profession and critically reflect on teaching problems or concerns, which will lead to new insight for practice. Studies that support reflection emphasise that reflective teachers are better able to monitor, make real-time decisions and respond to the changing needs of learners than less reflective teachers (Yost et al., 2000; McMeniman et al., 2003 as cited in Mann, 2005).

### B. Empowering teachers

Reflection has been seen as a means to empower teachers and give them a voice and autonomy. It is an approach that considers teachers as knowledge producers. Lytle (1993, p.2 as cited in Putnam, & Borko, 2000) stated that “throughout their careers, teachers are expected to learn about their own profession not by studying their own experiences but by studying the findings of those who are not themselves school-based teachers”. Thus, reflection gives teachers chances to be the generators of knowledge by studying their teaching context, reflecting upon it and acting accordingly based on the theory they formulate rather than on the theory dictated to them by researchers. Through reflection, teachers are encouraged to raise questions about theory and practice through systematic enquiry. This knowledge that is produced in such enquiry is more relevant and meaningful to teachers than the one which is told by experts who have not been to the field. Nowadays we live an era where teachers as professionals are challenged and threatened by organisations, being passive victims who are relatively powerless against demands for regulation, increased bureaucracy, transparency and accountability (Evetts, 2009). However, people who support reflection view it as a “way of being, as a teacher” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 9) in this era since it enables teachers to theorise and based their experience on what they have theorised, which gives them a sense of autonomy and power.



### C. The dynamic nature of the teaching profession

The dynamic nature of the teaching profession, which is characterised by ongoing reinventions and rapid reforms, necessitates the teacher being reflective. In other words, teaching takes place in a world dominated by change, uncertainty and increasing complexity. In addition, we witness quick changes in our life in general and our educational systems in particular, which includes a variety of technical devices, the amount of publications and the quick spread of information. All these encourage teachers to maintain career long professional development by seeking independent professional development, which refers to teachers' own views of teaching and the processes by which they engage in reflection on their own values, beliefs and practices (Leung, 2009). Thus, through reflection teachers will be capable of dealing with different students' needs, solving unexpected circumstances and maximising the students' learning potentialities. Some researchers go further in supporting reflection through enabling teachers to play their role as agents for change rather than passively transmit knowledge to their students. For example, Braun and Crumpler (2004) state that the goal of education is to prepare students for participation as citizens, which can only be achieved through having teachers who engage in critical reflection. This is because through critical reflection teachers develop "self-efficacy" which allows them to have a strong belief that they can make a difference in the lives of their students, institutions and communities.

However, despite all its usefulness, being a reflective teacher can still have some flaws that need to be addressed in order to help teachers to maintain professional development. The next section will discuss in detail how reflection is problematised as a promising tool for teachers' professional development in terms of its meaning, implementations, implicit assumptions and application in a managerial culture.

### 3. PROBLEMATISING REFLECTION

#### A. The ambiguity of what reflection is

Looking at the literature, as I demonstrated in section 2 when I talked about the reflection's definitions, one can observe that there are various definitions and what reflection means in practice is not all that clear. This can be due to the nature of reflection as a cognitive skill, which makes its meaning elusive (Burton, 2009). In addition, reflection has been influenced by many trends and philosophies, which make the term reflection open to different interpretations. According to Akbari (2007, p. 196), "the term is traceable to so many influences that it has lost its real, core meaning and it means whatever academics want it to mean".

Another problematic aspect of what reflection is concerns the reliance on past memories. Thus, there is a danger that "reflective practice can fall into the trap of becoming only confession" (Bolton, 2005, p. 5) rather than being involved teachers critically examining their actions. To elaborate, teachers are frequently asked to reflect through analysis what happened in the classroom, not through thinking towards the future (Conway, 2001 as cited in Akbari, 2007). Thus, reflection can be used by teachers to reinforce existing beliefs or rationalise actions rather than challenge assumptions or try out new alternatives. In Loughran's words (2002, p. 35) "rationalization may masquerade as reflection". Within this meaning, reflection cannot lead to innovation or creativity in the teaching profession. Korthagen and Wubbels (1995, p. 69) found "no indication of a link between reflectivity and inclination towards innovation". Furthermore, Hobbs (2007) asserted that reflection is time-consuming, and it's often just easier to rely on past experience.

Another problem associated with what reflection means is related to types of reflection. For example, Hatton and Smith (1995 as cited in Al-Hakmani, 2011) stress the fact that reflection consists of three levels, as shown in the table below:

TABLE I. THREE LEVELS OF REFLECTION

Levels of reflection	Description
<b>Descriptive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited justification</li> <li>Reflection based on personal perspectives or rationales</li> <li>Recognition of multiple factors</li> </ul>
<b>Technical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stepping back from events and actions</li> <li>Different levels of discourse with self, events and actions.</li> <li>Use of judgments and possible alternatives for explaining and hypothesising</li> <li>Reflection is analytical or integrative, linking different factors and perspectives</li> </ul>
<b>Critical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness of multiple perspectives, and historical and socio-political contexts.</li> <li>Logical interpretation of events and actions based on theory and practice</li> <li>Argument evaluation of personal and external factors and perspectives</li> </ul>

From the above table the highest level of reflection is critical as it allows teachers to be aware of historical and socio-political contexts. Such kind of critical reflection is desperately needed in order to achieve the true purpose of education, which is to produce citizens who are able to affect changes in society. However, many studies have shown that most teachers fall between descriptive and technical reflection and are rarely involved in critical reflection (Al-Hakmani, 2011).



To sum up the range of interpretations provided in the literature, reflection is not an easy process to define in the first place (Copland, Ma & Mann, 2009), which causes confusion for the teachers who want to apply it. Fendler (2003) accurately describes that by saying, “today’s discourse of reflection incorporates an array of meanings: a demonstration of self consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one’s authentic inner voice, a means to become a more effective teacher, and a strategy to redress injustices in society” (p. 20). It seems that reflection is not only a vague concept but also has few implementation guidelines (Copland, Ma & Mann, 2009), which can be problematic when teachers are reflecting.

### *B. The ambiguity of how to reflect*

Looking at the literature, one can observe that tremendous effort has been made and there has been considerable literature written on the meaning of reflection and why it is important. However, there is little information on how to reflect and enhance teachers’ reflection (Kember et al., 2000 as cited in Hobbs, 2007). Marcos, Miguel and Tillema (2009, p. 201) highlighted that “most articles specify their definitions of reflection but not how to use the proposed principles; and when dealing with procedures, there is little or no detail or substance”. If we consider the two influential scholars, Dewey and Schon, in reflection, then conflicts and contradictions come to the forefront of the discussion. For Dewey, reflection is seen as a means by which a teacher can get rid of personal and impulsive actions through rational and scientifically approved alternatives (Akbari, 2007). However, for Schon, reflection is an instinctive, individual, non-rational activity where teachers are engaged in the process of making “new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness” of their teaching experience (Schon, 1983, p. 61 as cited in Akbari, 2007). A conclusion can be made that how reflection should be performed “is riddled with tensions between Schon’s notion of practitioner-based intuition, on the one hand, and Dewey’s notion of rational and scientific thinking, on the other” (Fendler, 2003, p. 19). If teachers want to practice reflection, should they follow Dewey’s school or Schon’s school?

When teachers choose one of these schools to follow, problems might occur during implementation. First, teachers are required to reflect using a scientific method like academia, going from identifying a problem, analysing a problem, taking an action, and evaluating and reflecting on the action to reach a valid theory or practice. Practically, teachers are not academics and what they are asked to perform does not happen in a real teaching context where teachers are busy fulfilling many teaching, learning and administrative activities, as I will explain later. Second, the ability to reflect is associated with teachers’ capability to identify an aspect that needs improvement or a problem that needs to be solved. In many cases, teachers are incapable of assessing their performance or seeing what has gone wrong in their classes. Schon (1983, p. 18 as cited in Akbari, 2007) stated that “professional practice has at least as much to do with finding the problem as with solving the problem found”. In a single school day, teachers encounter a lot of actions that can be problematic and often do not realise that. It is crucial for teachers to critically reflect and put their memories, thoughts and actions in words where they are unaware of problems in their performance.

According to Moon’s cyclical model of reflection on action (2004), shown in Figure 1, reflection involves various steps starting from noticing a concern and ending with acting on the insight gained. However, Marcos, Miguel and Tillema (2009) reviewed about 221 articles (2001-2007) related to reflection to examine the extent to which what is stated theoretically about teacher reflection’s key characteristics is validated by empirical research. Their analysis revealed that hardly any study gauges reflection as a complete cyclical process of problem-solving. Instead, they studied reflection as a process dealing with certain aspects or fragments. Thus, “this fragmented focus in studies on teacher reflection may hinder a full understanding or integrated account of the process” (Marcos, Miguel & Tillema 2009, p. 195). In addition, most studies have a tendency to focus on teachers’ thoughts, beliefs and conceptions rather than how they reflect in reality. I also observed that most reflection literature discussed how to prepare pre-service teachers to be reflective and little has discussed what in-service teachers are really doing when they are being reflective. A conclusion can be made that even though teachers grasp the meaning of reflection they have little clue of how to put the concept into practice.

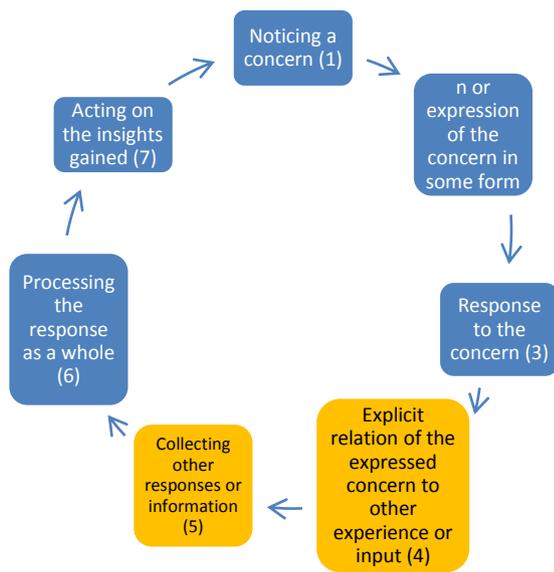


Figure 1: Moon's cyclical model of reflection  
Steps 4 & 5 are the additional stages that may occur in reflection-on-action.

### C. The implicit assumption of reflection

The literature about reflection and how researchers theorise what teachers are supposed to do when they reflect has problematic assumptions. These assumptions implicitly indicate that teachers cannot be reflective unless they follow specific techniques and procedures proposed by researchers. Given that reflection which is supposed to empower teachers is, indeed, rooted in the fact that teachers are unable to reflect without guidance from the academia. This is noticeable in the in-service training that teachers go through, where sessions are specified to train teachers about how to become reflective and expose them to steps of the process of reflection. Or even in some articles that talk about how teachers can be encouraged to be reflective if they do not know by stating this: "for teachers who find it difficult to sustain a reflecting approach to practice, there are a number of ways in which this process can be encouraged, prompted, guided and structured" (Mann, 2005, p. 108).

Looking to reflection from this angle is reminiscent of McClelland's categorisation (1990, p. 107 as cited in Evetts, 2012) that distinguishes between professional development 'from within' (successful handling of the profession by the group itself) and 'from above' (control of the profession by external forces). Based on the previous categorisation and the implicit assumptions that I explained previously, reflection is seen more frequently as a way of professional development 'from above' where teachers are told by experts about the techniques of how to be reflective. Thus, the results of such development cannot be that substantial. On the other

hand, if reflection is done 'from within' where teachers find their own way to practice how to be reflective, then the impact of professional development is more extensive (Evetts, 2012). It is naively assumed that teachers do not reflect because reflection is part of human life. However, the way it advocates in the literature seems to look at teachers as incapable of being reflective without direction from experts. According to Foucault (1996, p. 144 as cited in Fendler, 2003), "to reveal relations of power is, in my opinion at any rate, to put them back in the hands of those who exercise them" (p. 144). Therefore, teachers' ability to be reflective should be trusted and educational researchers should look at reflection as teachers practice it in a real context and not from a theoretical perspective, where certain steps and procedures are followed. Nonetheless, teachers have been experienced a lot of 'from above' policies and regulations, especially in a managerial culture, which might also limit the power of reflection as a professional development tool, as I will explain in the coming section.

### D. The limitations of being reflective in a managerial culture

Being a professional teacher is challenged and threatened by schools and organisations that look at teachers as passive or powerless against demands for regulation, increased bureaucracy, transparency and accountability. Indeed, "changes over the last 25 years have challenged teachers' professional autonomy and brought the question of what it means to be a professional under increasing scrutiny" (Eraut, 1998, p. 5). Actually, we are currently experiencing an era of an increasing emphasis on standards, testing and classroom pedagogies that "teach to the test" (Gruenewald, 2003). This might prevent teachers having opportunities to experience their role as agents who constantly engage in critical reflection that leads to a change in their institutions and in their students as well. Actually, with the managerial system and the increase of accountability and auditing, the reflection practice by teachers has been approved fully or partially by presenting evidence such as filling papers, which can be a checklist or a questionnaire that should be kept in teachers' portfolio and presented to the audit committees. Such an idea has actually been promoted by academics (James, 2001; Richards & Farrell, 2005), who proposed a number of procedures to check if teachers have been reflective and accountable through various forms of lesson reports, checklists and questionnaires. Given that, reflection has been done for the sake of assessing teachers in regard to whether they should be kept in the system or not.

In addition, the increases in managerial structure makes teachers spend plenty of time on non-teaching tasks such as paperwork, which prevents them from even having time for reflection in case they want to do it. This



is to say that “when individuals cease to plan and control a large proportion of their own work, the skills essential to doing these tasks self reflectively and well, atrophy and are forgotten” (Apple, 1992 as cited in Eraut, 1998, p. 22). Actually, teachers are burning out in their schools because of their teaching and administrative work. This contradicts with what reflection is aiming to fulfill, which is the increase of autonomy and job satisfaction. Based on daily conversations with teachers, one can immediately feel that teachers are not happy and they are waiting impatiently to leave their jobs. Teachers are perceived as technicians whose role is merely to implement or deliver policy (Sachs, 1997 as cited in Hargreaves, 1998), meet the pre-specified achievement targets and present concrete evidence of their achievement. Thus, being an autonomous professional with an ability to make a decision is restricted. Under such working conditions, how is a teacher is expected to be reflective and think about ways to improve their teaching and students’ learning? Evetts (2012) highlights that such managerial structure might deprofessionalise teachers rather than empowering them since all means of being a professional teacher who is able to reflect is controlled by the institutional context.

Thus, the current managerial systems in most schools make them like factories that aim to socialise teachers (workers) to function well and without complaint in the hierarchical structure. Within such factory life, the human being’s feelings, emotions and thoughts are not that important. Reflection is “a complex cognitive and affective process which takes time and practice to develop and integrate in to one’s mind, heart and life” (Stanley, 1999, p.111). Consequently, teachers need to have a conducive environment where they can effectively and critically reflect on their practice and not be in an atmosphere where they are treated like factory workers who aim for nothing more than to contribute to the system.

To sum up, by problematising reflection, I am not trying to deny its importance but to stress the fact that when we apply any concept in our profession, we need to be careful and conscious about its limitations and misapprehensions (Akbari, 2007). According to Noffke and Brennan (2005 as cited in Burton, 2009), reflective practice has become something of a slogan term that enhances teachers’ professional development. To avoid this, reflection’s meaning and procedure should be made more explicit to teachers who are in the field in order to be truly a powerful approach to teachers’ professional development. In addition, as the idea of reflection has been mainly introduced in education to empower teachers and make them more autonomous, academics should break the gap between the theoretical and practical side of teaching as a profession. We live in an era of

accountability, auditing and standardisation, which creates more stress and challenges in our profession. Teachers are burning out in their schools with a lot of work being demanded from them and they have become like machines in a factory that cares more about products and marketing than about the humanistic aspect of teachers’ lives. In addition, the working conditions where teachers are currently experiencing negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, helplessness and lack of trust because of this managerial system make reflection impossible (Cole, 1997). I believe that reflection is a concept which will be constantly debated in the field of education. However, we should look at this debate as a “key to examining and clarifying the value of reflection for teacher education ” (Braun & Crumpler, 2004, p. 59) as “it is good to reflect, but reflection itself also requires reflection” (Akbari, 2007, p. 205).

#### 4. HOW REFLECTION IS ATTACHED TO MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

This part will shed light on how reflection is attached to my personal experience. Throughout my life as pre-service teacher, an English language teacher in a secondary school, and as an English language trainer and lecturer at college level, reflection has been always an aspect of my profession whether it has been successfully implemented or not.

##### A. During my pre-service training

To start with, during my training as a pre-service teacher, many courses including teaching methodologies and practicum were rooted in implementing reflection. Each tutor had his or her way to implement reflection during the course. The activities I did range from filling in checklists, writing reflective journals and keeping a hard or electronic portfolio. The guidance I received varied from one course to another. Some teachers asked me to base my reflection in describing what happened during fulfilling any activity and then detail what I had learned. Others emphasised the importance of including my feelings and not solely describing the events, whereas others stressed the importance to relate what I had reflected on to the theories in teaching and learning. Some asked me to do my reflection in a cyclic nature starting from identifying a concern or a problem, analysing it, thinking about ways to overcome it, and then evaluating these ways. These varieties of how to reflect offer evidence of what I explained earlier in this paper: that reflection’s meaning is vague and can be open to various understandings. In Jay and Johnson’s words (2002), when they talk about reflection, “the concept is not clearly defined. If the concept itself seems difficult to characterize, it is even more difficult to teach” (p. 1).



Moreover, reflection is not a purely cognitive activity but rather it “involves intuition, emotion, and passion and is not something that can be neatly packaged as a set of techniques for teachers to use” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 9).

Another aspect that I wanted to highlight regarding reflection during my pre-service training is that most, if not all, of my reflections were considered as summative assignments. Hobbs (2007) questions the effectiveness of reflection as a means to enhance students’ criticality in pre-service training since most reflective exercises are done for the sake of assessment. He explained that most trainees were forced to be reflective despite their beliefs and attitudes towards the usefulness of reflection in their learning process. Personally, during my pre-service training, I knew that increased evidence of reflection would reward me with a better grade and feedback from my tutors, so I tried to be as reflective as I could to please my tutors and obtained good marks regardless of whether I believed in what I wrote or not. According to Hobbs (2007), the practice of being reflective for assessment purposes constrains its effectiveness and authenticity. This is because reflection becomes merely an exercise in perfecting pre-service teachers’ capability to meet their tutors’ expectations and get good grades rather than seeing reflection as a tool towards self-growth and improvement.

#### *B. During my career as an English language teacher*

Regarding my profession as an English teacher in a high school, reflection was considered as a crucial thing to do after each lesson. This is because our preparation book was designed in a way where a specific space towards the end of each preparation page was located for reflection. Honestly speaking, the kind of reflection I wrote in my preparation book was mainly descriptive, highlighting at least one aspect that went well and one aspect that did not. I sometimes wrote a few sentences about how I taught and how the students reacted. I occasionally benefited from this reflection in terms of avoiding the weakness in the coming classes. The reflection I wrote did not articulate how to solve problems that I encountered and it did not show how I got a deeper understanding of my teaching through writing reflection. Thus, frankly speaking, the reflection I was writing that did not show a lot of criticality. Moore and Ash (2002 as cited in Hobbs, 2007) asserted that many new teachers choose not to reflect on their practice constructively and critically, preferring to fall back on pre-conceived understandings of how they and their pupils should conduct themselves in the classroom.

Recalling and reflecting on these school days shows me that I was not taking the reflection that I wrote in my preparation book seriously for several reasons. Firstly, I was required to write reflection in the provided space in

my preparation book after each and every lesson I taught. Thus, the repetitive nature of the reflection process I had to do created a negative attitude towards it and I ended up viewing it as meaningless and boring. Second, sometimes I felt that writing my reflection was very demanding since my writing ability sometimes prevents me from articulating my reflection. This is in line with McGarr and Moody (2010), who found that students’ writing ability prevents them from articulating their reflections and makes them fail to reflect the depth of understanding and insight gained during their teaching process. Al-Lamki (2009), in his study about the means of professional development in Oman, quoted one teacher who described the teachers’ reaction towards reflection, saying that “we have reflection sheets on our preparation books. I reflect on my lessons and find strengths and weaknesses of my teaching. I can then improve myself. But sometimes we do not use it properly. We write it because it’s required by the system.” (p. 121). Al-Lamki (2009) concluded that it was really surprising that reflection was required by the system but the teachers did not consider it as a real means of professional development. In his study, when teachers were asked about types of professional development, they mentioned training courses, workshops, seminars, observations, attending conferences, supervisors’ visits and team teaching. The aspect of reflection as a means of professional development is totally absent. Al-Lamki (2009) explained that the teacher’s preference is for formal professional development. He also attributed that to the centralised system we have in Oman, whereby teachers have become accustomed to having professional development provided to them in the form of formal training courses. Furthermore, teachers’ beliefs about reflection as not being a real means of professional development might be attributed mainly to the lack of the awareness-raising of the importance of reflection, as Al-Lamki (2009) explained. However, I disagree with Al-Lamki (2009) that teachers in Oman did not consider reflection as a means of professional development because of a lack of awareness. Based on my knowledge, most teachers took in their in-service training courses about reflection, its importance and how it enhances their lifelong career. However, going to schools, with all of their factors, including “large class sizes, unreasonable curricular and other professional demands, lack of resources and support, and numerous and persistent outside interference” (Cole, 1997, p. 15), this created unpleasant emotions through which thinking about being reflective is impossible, as I explained previously in this paper.

Consequently, teachers tend to perform reflection mechanically in order to complete paperwork without any clear focus or genuine intended outcomes (Al-Hakmani, 2011). Thus, she concluded that such practices



“limited their contribution to their reflective practice and therefore this affects their performance and professional development” (Al-Hakmani, 2011, p. 4). She also found that teachers are rarely involved in critical reflection that requires deeper thinking and reasoning. Furthermore, they tend to do more of reflection in action rather than reflection on action where they identify the problem, analyse it, look for alternatives, and assess them in order to ameliorate their teaching practice. I remember that I once applied the concept of reflection on action during my teaching in high school. I observed that my students’ writing ability was very weak. Thus, I tried to analyse the problem of why my students’ writing was not good. One of the reasons I found through talking to my students that they had insufficient knowledge about writing organisation. Then, I looked for ways to teach writing organisation through contacting teachers through one of the websites and they suggested the usage of ‘graphic organizers’. I went and read about the technique to enrich my knowledge and this enabled me to do it. To assess the effectiveness of ‘graphic organizers’ in teaching writing, I applied it with only one class for the whole semester, which was 15 weeks, whereas with other classes I taught I followed the traditional procedure that was explained in the teacher’s guide. Then, I conducted a post-test for all my classes and I found that the class which was introduced to the ‘graphic organizer’ did much better in terms of organising their writing than the classes in which I did not implement it with them. I summarised my findings through writing a report and submitted it to the school administration and I shared the findings with my colleague as well. Although this project took a lot of time and energy, the results in terms of students’ performance were really encouraging. However, I felt that the school administration did not appreciate what I did, as I had expected. Thus, a conclusion can be made that even if the teachers want to be engaged in reflection on action, the managerial system where “the research culture does not exist. Research is not actively sought to provide insights into problems or issues, nor are its findings incorporated in meaningful ways” (Syed, 2003, p. 40) makes teachers rely on their routine teaching.

### C. During my career as an English Language Teacher Trainer (ELTT)

Regarding my career as an ELTT in the Ministry of Education, reflection has been always incorporated in most course sessions that I have delivered. There was a reflection form where teachers were asked to think about the training sessions such as what they like and why, what aspects that they think could be implemented in their classes and which aspect they think that would not fit. The teacher never filled in the form and they never took it seriously. Their excuse was that they were busy with their teaching and school life and they never had

time to do it. Sometimes, I asked them to do it orally at the end of the session, and again the kind of reflection they came up with was more descriptive. Hatton and Smith (1995) stated that, due to the complexity of reflection, most teachers had trouble making distinctions between descriptions, analysis and reflection. Going back to idea I mentioned earlier in this paper, some teachers even failed to identify an aspect that they considered to be problematic in their practice. In other words, teachers seemed to be incapable of identifying part of their teaching to be explored further so they would be able to critically reflect on it. This might be because teaching is a kind of profession with countless acts that are essentially habits that teachers take on without thinking about them. Teachers no longer question the underpinning assumptions of their actions. For example, teachers tend to give homework at the end of each lesson and when they are asked why, they rarely know the answer (Hinchey, 2004). How are teachers expected to be reflective when they are unable to fulfil the first step of reflection, which is identifying the problematic element in their practice?

Another aspect related to teachers being less reflective during the in-service training was the personal beliefs that they have with regard to their expectations of such training. Most of them came to the training course because they were looking for the **best practice** rather than critically looking at their teaching. It was obvious when they asked me shocking questions like what is the best way to teach grammar. What is the best way to deal with the low achieving students? It took me time to explain that there is no best practice and that all solutions depend on their contexts. I could latterly understand that the teachers came from the background where most pre-service training and in-service training courses are based on *hows* rather than *whys* (Hinchey, 2004). Despite the fact that most of the training courses were centrally designed, I tried my best to engage teachers to critically reflect on their teaching through dialogue, sharing experiences with each other and asking for their opinions about certain approaches in teaching. However, I remember that some teachers did not take what I was trying to do with them seriously because of their expectations that my training course could provide them with solutions to the problems they encounter in their teaching. This could be due to the fact that teachers perceived themselves as second-class citizens who had no real voice in their schools and they had been implicitly or explicitly trained to base their teaching on what experts told them, not on what they had experienced.

On the other hand, during my job as an ELTT, I met teachers who critically looked at their practice and were able to identify problems or concerns. They were able to conduct reflection on action where teachers continually



compare new experiences with previous ones in order to find useful precedents, examples and ideas, and increase the range and influence of their actions. However, this kind of reflection was not done repeatedly, as teachers always complained to me that they were busy with a lot of administrative work. In addition, such teachers received little appreciation in their environment, which cared more about fulfilling the tasks that lead to better outcomes in terms of tests. This is in line with Burton (2009), who stated that teachers have little time or obtain little reward for writing about their reflections. Thus, within such a system, teachers teach to train learners for the test through memorising the language's lexical and grammatical chunks independently of any meaningful context (Al-Issa, 2002).

#### *D. During my career as a language teacher at a college level*

Regarding my career as a language teacher at a college level, I think reflection has not been implemented as a powerful means of professional development for several reasons. First, routines have been part of the higher educational system in my country, including my college, where they are imposed to the extent that teachers should sign in and sign out when they arrive and leave the college. Thus, the administrative people are able to keep an eye on teachers and reward or punish them as if we worked in a factory and punctuality is the only criteria applied to the effectiveness of the workers. Within such an environment, teachers are less likely to reflect on their assumptions in order to alter and improve their situation. If the teachers start to question certain assumptions at the macro-level (why managers need to keep an eye on teachers' arrival and departure, why exams are set by experts at the ministry level, why the curriculum is coming from the USA and the UK) or at the micro-level (why teachers should include one topic in the writing quizzes, why they design digital materials, why they need to give homework at the end of each lesson), then they might experience frustration caused by these ill-founded routines (Hinchey, 2004). Thus, teachers in my college tend to blindly follow these routines without questioning them in order to be on the safe side emotionally (to avoid unpleasant feelings) and practically (to keep their jobs) especially in a managerial system where teachers are powerless and voiceless.

Another reason that can contribute to the fact that teachers in my college are not engaged in critical reflection that leads to or initiates change is that most teachers are contracted expatriate teachers who are less likely to care about reflection. According to Syed (2003, p. 339), "contracted expatriate teachers are less motivated to critique existing systems and they have little impetus to innovate or initiate change". With such types of teachers, their focus will be on transmitting their

knowledge to the students through lecturing, by making students memorise what is going to be in the test rather than questioning or examining their own practice. Thus, the "watchfulness and criticism" that Dewey advocated is totally absent from their teaching profession.

Additionally, those teachers are given descriptive details by the system including what to teach week by week. Pre-elementary, elementary, intermediate and advanced level teachers are conducting meetings every two weeks to make sure that everyone is following the syllabus and they are covering all topics at the same time. I remember that, when I tried to do different things with my students in order to enable them to comprehend any ideas in a better way, I would then attend such meetings where I found myself behind all of the other teachers, which made me behave differently. The next day, I tried to cover the maximum ground I could, so my students and I were at the same track, like the other teachers and students, especially since the tests are central and students need to get an idea about all of the topics. Within the current managerial cultures in Oman, and other contexts as well, teachers have become like factory workers, experiencing their workplaces in quite similar ways. For instance, both work in bureaucracies and both appear to contribute to a 'bigger whole' from a relatively isolated position (Pohl et al., 2009). Under these conditions, teachers rarely think of being reflective or think about their professional development since they are busy fulfilling activities that are coming from the hierarchy above.

#### **5. LOOKING FOR ALTERNATIVES**

As teachers are professionals and educators, we should always look for alternatives, especially since there is little evidence that engaging in reflection leads to better teacher performance or improved student learning (Akbari, 2007; Cornford, 2002). As educators, we are currently experiencing a growth interest in the sociocultural paradigm, which is rooted in the fact that learning is situated in the actual practice of the teachers who work collaboratively to construct meaning out of their experiences and discussions (Kiely & Davis, 2010). Within this understanding, one way to promote teachers' desire for professional development is to enhance interaction and collaboration among teachers in educational institutions (Farrell, 2007). Such collaboration can take place on various levels including team-teaching, peer observation and coaching, support groups and development discourses. Such endeavours give teachers opportunities to engage in critical reflection, modelling aspects and scaffold each other (Mann, 2005). In fact, such interaction gives teachers opportunities to share and reflect on real examples based on their daily practice (Al-Lamki, 2009). In addition, Al-Hakmani (2011) found that teachers tend to be involved



in critical thinking more if they do it with their peers. Most importantly, by collaborating, teachers return back to the humanistic aspect of teaching as a profession, which is in danger of being lost because of the nature of current educational institutions where standardisation and working for the products rather than the process is common.

To give concrete examples of how reflection through collaboration can be maintained in Oman, I posit that teachers should conduct meetings with each other every two weeks where they discuss their concerns and issues (Al-Lamki, 2009). Teachers can pick a common concern and conduct a collaborative reflection where a dialogic and discursive atmosphere is able to promote their reflective ability. A note of caution, however, can be suggested, which is that such meetings cannot succeed in promoting reflection unless they are operated by a meeting facilitator who is able to engage people in reflection. S/he should be aware that there are teachers who are shy about talking while others are more talkative and dominate the discussions. S/he should have more explanatory guidance for reflection, which can help people to critically question underpinning their beliefs and assumptions or uncertain practices (Copland, Ma & Mann, 2009). In such meetings, teachers should be given opportunities to build on their existing knowledge, offer potentialities for problem solving and be encouraged to be more autonomous (Mann, 2005). In addition, within such meetings the facilitator can bring articles that talk about any issue related to teaching and learning processes, so teachers can then be engaged in shared reading where they read together, whereby they are able to critically discuss the usefulness, possibilities and challenges they may face if they implement what is in the article (refer to Kiely & Davis, 2012).

It is worth mentioning, however, that such alternatives cannot be put into practice unless teachers have got enough time to do these tasks within school overload activities, whereby an adequate model is designed to fulfil collaborative tasks such as team teaching and a discursive collegial environment where teachers can support each other. Furthermore, teachers and administrators in any educational institutions should realise that “to be a professional is not to have all the answers. Rather, a professional is someone who can reflect on tentative solutions, collaborate with others on the possible avenues available, and risk making mistakes because mistakes are an inevitable part of building new roads” (Lester & Mayher, 1987, p. 209).

## 6. CONCLUSION

As we see, there are many components that contribute to the ineffectiveness of reflection as a means of teachers’ professional development based on my experiences. These include the ambiguous meaning of

reflection, the unclear procedure of how to implement it, and the managerial system implemented in my country. Teaching is an isolated activity (Fullan, 1991 as cited in Kiely & Davis, 2012) with teachers rarely sharing information with colleagues about the concerns and challenges they face in their classes. Teachers tend to teach either instinctively or mechanically “without ever exploring or rationalizing it [and] without understanding their pedagogy through explaining it to others” (Kiely & Davis, 2012, p. 281). Thus, encouraging teachers to work collaboratively, as I have explained above, can enhance their ability to engage in critical reflection, which can lead to amelioration in their practice. In addition, such collaboration between teachers can encourage them towards independent professionalism, as Leung (2009) described, in which teachers independently and reflectively form their own practices as they cooperate with other educators who share the same concerns. We are in need in an era where teachers are given trust, autonomy and responsibility in their careers to form and fulfil their lifelong professional development. This is because today teaching is increasingly complex work, and we require the highest standards of professional practice in order to perform well (Danielson, 2007).

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