**Reflective Practice among MATESOL Graduates in the UAE: Theoretical Construct or Ongoing Benefit?**

**Abstract**

Many teacher training programs, including the MATESOL program at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in United Arab Emirates, encourage their trainees to reflect on their practice. However, whether or not reflection becomes a part of the trainees’ practice once they leave these programs is a thought-provoking question which formed the core of the current study. The study was qualitative in nature, using interviewing as its method of data collection. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with four AUS MATESOL program graduates, and investigated their perceptions of and engagement with reflective practice. The findings of the study indicate that the participants have generally developed an understanding of and appreciation for reflection and reflective practice, are aware of its values, and use different forms of reflection in order to reflect on their practice. However, some of them hold some uncertainties and misconceptions about reflective practice and its different aspects.

**Key words**: reflection, reflective practice, teacher training, pre-service teachers

**Theoretical Background**

The concepts of reflection, reflection thinking, and reflective teaching are not new in the field of education. Reflection and its usage in education can be traced back to Dewey’s educational theories about “traditional” and “progressive” education (Dewey, 1944, 1997a, 1997b). According to Dewey (1997a), the traditional view of learning treats knowledge as a static entity rather than a dynamic one, and a product rather than a process.. Dewey argues for a progressive view of education where reflection and reflective thought have a significant role. Reflective thought, to Dewey, pertains to “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the future conclusion to which it tends” (1997b, p. 6).

Another very influential figure who made a remarkable contribution to our understanding of the concepts of reflection and reflective practitioner was Donald Schön. Schön (1991), based on his earlier work in 1987, puts forward a discussion of two forms of reflection, “Reflection-in-action” and “Reflection-on-action,” and argues that reflection-in-action, which focuses “on the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action,” (p. 56) is a response to a situation where the results of our actions turn out to be surprising . Schön (1987) also argues that reflection-on-action takes place when our reflection is not directly linked to present actions; it takes place when we think back on our past actions in order to examine them and make sense of them.

**Reflective Practice**

The idea of reflective practice came into existence as a response to the notion of “teacher as technician,” which assumed that problems related to teaching did not require on-the-spot modification and could be generalized across different contexts. However, the problem of a technical approach to teaching is that “an over-reliance on technical problem solving often leads to frustration and disappointment” (Clarke, 1995, p. 257) simply because not every unique classroom problem could be addressed appropriately through such an approach. On this issue, Schön (1987, 1991) claimed that teachers’ jobs are beyond problem solving; teachers try to come to an understanding of their own contexts through the process of problem setting.

Researchers have different perceptions of the concepts of reflection and reflective practice. Gunn (2010) notes that the concepts of reflection and reflective teaching do not have a fixed definition that everybody agrees on. However, many researchers (e.g., Bartlett, 1990; Larrivee, 2008; Qing, 2009) define reflective teaching as critical reflection on one’s own teaching which results in improvement in one’s practice. For instance Qing (2009) notes,

Reflective teaching asks EFL teachers to stop, to slow down in order to notice, analyze, and inquire on what they are doing. It tells them to relate theory and practice, to evaluate both old and new teaching experience, and to make interpretations on the situations encountered. (p. 36)

**Significance of the Present Study**

Many researchers have investigated the attitudes of pre-service teachers toward reflection and reflective practice (e.g., Alger, 2006; Gunn, 2010; Pedro, 2005), and found out these teachers have a general understanding of the concepts of reflection and reflective practice, and are aware of the benefits of this approach to teaching. However, there has been little research, if any, conducted in order to follow up and find out whether student teachers who were continually encouraged to reflect in teacher training programs have chosen to continue to reflect on their practice once they leave the program and start teaching in their own classes. Regarding this point Alger (2006) points out, “For these students, …[reflection] is part of the language and culture of teaching. However, without the structure, audience, and collaboration provided in their teacher education program, how can student teachers progress when reflection becomes primarily a private endeavor?” (p. 299). This gap in the research formed the core of the current study. In this study, the researcher inquired into four AUS MATESOL graduates’ perceptions of and engagement with reflective practice and sought to answer four main questions:

1. How do the participating teachers perceive “Reflective Practice?”
2. Do they consider themselves “Reflective Practitioners?” Why or why not?
3. What forms of reflection, if any, do they use in their practice?
4. What factors determine their engagement with “Reflection” and “Reflective Teaching?”

**Methodology**

**Design of the Study**

The study was qualitative in nature, and relied on interviewing as the only strategy of data collection simply because generalization of the findings was not the aim of this study. On this issue, Marshall and Rossman (2006) note that studies that are aimed at making “more objective assumptions would triangulate interview data with data gathered through other methods” (p. 102). The interviews were semi-structured to allow further probing of the participants’ responses and comments.

**Context, Sampling, and Data Collection Procedures**

The American University of Sharjah (AUS) located in Sharjah, the United Arab Emirates, is an independent, coeducational institution accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) in the United States of America. AUS is a leading educational institution in the Gulf region serving students from the region and around the world. Students studying at AUS come from a wide range of countries such as Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, Tunisia, the United States, etc. The Master of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MATESOL) program offered at AUS aims at contributing to the professional development of practicing English teachers, as well as training graduates who want to become teachers of English. The students of the program range from prospective teachers with no teaching experience to practicing teachers with more than two decades of teaching experience.

For the purpose of this study, 11 AUS MATESOL graduates working at different universities in the United Arab Emirates were located. These 11 graduates were selected from 23 MATESOL alumni whose names and email addresses were listed in the AUS Alumni Book. The remaining 21 graduates were not contacted because their email addresses were not listed in the book; they were not in the UAE; or they were not working as practicing university teachers. Emails were sent to these 11 graduates. In the emails the researcher introduced herself as a student of the MATESOL program working on her thesis, explained about the study, and invited the graduates to participate in the study. Four graduates replied and expressed their willingness in being interviewed, and they all became the participants of the study. Further emails were sent to negotiate the time and place of the interviews. The interviews were conducted within a week in mid June, 2010. They took about 25 to 30 minutes each and they were conducted in the participants’ preferred location. Follow up discussions were conducted with three of the participants through phone calls and/or emails to clear up any ambiguity that emerged in the process of coding and data analysis.

**Participants**

The participants of this study were four teachers, three females and one male, teaching at two different universities in the United Arab Emirates. Ayesha[[1]](#footnote-1) is 41 years old. She is from Jordan and she has 20 years experience in teaching English at high school and university level. She had about 14 years experience in teaching when she joined the program and when she was a graduate student she was also teaching at high school. She graduated from the program in 2006 and since that time, she has been teaching at a university in the UAE. Maha is 38 years old. She is from Egypt and she has 10 years experience in teaching English at high school grades 10 and 11 as well as university level. She had about 6 years experience in teaching when she joined the program and when she was a graduate student she was not teaching. She graduated from the AUS MATESOL program in 2006 and since then she has been teaching English at a university in the UAE. She is also studying for her second Masters. Catherine is 57 and from the United States of America. She had no teaching experience before joining the program. She graduated from the program in 2009 (five months prior to the time of the interview), and after graduating from the program, she got a job at a university in the UAE, where she taught IELTS for one semester. Finally, Kareem is 53 years old from Tunisia. He has been teaching English at secondary and tertiary level for 24 years. Kareem had about 18 years of teaching experience when he joined the program and was a practicing teacher when he was a graduate student. He graduated from the program in 2006 and since that time, he has been teaching at a university in the UAE. He is now working on his PhD Dissertation. Although three of the participants graduated from the program in 2006, only two of them belonged to cohorts—a group of students who started the program together.

**Interviews**

The interviews conducted with the participants of the study consisted of three parts (see Appendix A). The first part aimed at getting background information about the participants such as their ages, their nationalities, years of teaching experience, and when they graduated from the MATESOL Program. The second part of the interview consisted of questions about the participants’ definitions of the concept of reflection and reflective practice basically because “definitions are the basis on which individuals explain their understanding of a particular concept” (Pedro, 2005, p. 56). In this section of the interviews the participants were also asked about their experience with reflection as students, because as Richards and Lockhart (1994) note, one of the sources of teachers’ educational decisions is their own experience as students. In the third part of the interview, the participants’ were asked about their engagement with reflection and reflective teaching as current teachers, whether or not they consider themselves reflective teachers and why, forms of reflection they use in their classes, and the benefits and problems of refection and reflective teaching as perceived by them.

**Data Analysis Methods**

The interviews were transcribed within one day of the interview day and analyzed right after that, in order to reduce the effect of “data dominance factor” (Richards, 2003, p. 91). In order to analyze the data, the transcripts were examined several times and the participants’ perspectives on the issue being discussed were summarized and coded. The codes emerged from three sets of sources: the data the participants provided, the questions asked during the interviews, and the literature. Then the codes were reviewed, the redundant or repetitive ones were removed, some were renamed, read once more, and organized into hierarchical categories including larger categories and subcategories (Lichtman, 2006). Then the categories and subcategories created for all the participants were compared and the results are presented in the findings and discussion section.

**Findings and Discussion**

An initial analysis of the data revealed that there were six major categories that were discussed during the interviews. The sources of these categories were the interview questions. The categories are Participants’ Experience with Reflection as Students, Participants’ Definitions of Reflective Practice, Participants’ Self-perception as Reflective Practitioners, Participants’ Forms of Reflection, Benefits of Being Reflective Practitioners as Perceived by the Participants, and Problems of Being Reflective Practitioners as Perceived by the Participants. In the following section, the participants’ perspectives regarding each of the categories described above are presented, discussed, and related to theory. In addition, other findings that were identified within the transcripts are examined.

**Participants’ Experience with Reflection as Students**

Analysis of the participants’ answers to the question that asked them about their experience with reflection as students of the program revealed that they had different experiences with reflection as students. Ayesha referred to her experience with reflection as “an interesting challenge,”[[2]](#footnote-2) and explained,

When you reflect on your performance basically you are looking for your strengths and your weaknesses. So it reinforces the good practices and it helps you hmmm probably do much better the next time and try to avoid hmm those weaknesses.

Kareem referred to his experience with reflection when he was a student of the program as a challenge with “paradoxical characteristics,” where he had to forget his old habit of teaching and acquire a new one. He referred to his own teaching and reflection as “two different habits” and said that it was not easy for him to “overcome an old habit which is no longer appropriate, and substitute it with another one, which is reflective teaching.”

In response to the same question, Maha replied that reflection did not mean much to her when she was a student of the program. Maha explained,

When I was a student, I wasn’t really interested in the point of reflective teaching, because from my previous experience at schools, it didn’t mean that much. So what? What do you mean by reflective teaching? So it did not engage me when I was an MA student.

Catherine described her experience with reflection by giving the example of experiencing the taste of chocolate, and the difference between reflective activities as explained to her, and reflective teaching as experienced by her in the real world of teaching. Catherine said, “If somebody tells you what chocolate is, you don’t know what chocolate is, until you eat it. Then it is a very different experience.”

While Ayesha and Kareem described their experience with reflection as MATESOL students as a challenge, Maha and Catherine referred to it as something that did not mean much to them at that time. But now that they are teaching they are able to understand how helpful it is to reflect on their teaching. The difference between the participants’ experience with reflection can be attributed to their teaching experience when they were MATESOL students. When Ayesha and Kareem were students of the program, they were teaching at schools at the same time. This could be why they had more meaningful and conscious approaches toward reflection and were more aware of the reasons behind reflective activities; while those who were students and were not teaching had difficulty with understanding the meaning of reflective activities. In fact, Ayesha’s and Kareem’s description of their challenging experience with reflection and their attempts to explore their practice, identify their uncertainties, question their assumptions about teaching, search for new ways of effective teaching, and apply change in their practice is what Bartlett (1990) refers to as “mapping,” “informing,” “contesting,” “appraising,” and “acting” which are the components of the cycle of reflective teaching. The participants’ engagement with reflection as students of the MATESOL program, or lack thereof, can also be attributed to their years experience in teaching. While Ayesha and Kareem had respectively about 14 and 18 years experience in teaching English when they joined the program, Catherine and Maha had 0 and 6 years experience in teaching. This could be why Catherine and Maha found it difficult to understand the meaning of reflection and reflective activities as students.

**Participants’ Definitions of Reflective Practice**

According to the participants comments, reflection to all of them entails retrospection and equates with thinking back on their practice, contemplating what went well and what did not go as they expected, and consequently trying to improve their practice. For instance, Catherine explained that reflection to her is thinking back about her teaching, her interaction with the students, the things that happened during the class, the things that worked well, the things that did not work as they were expected, and thinking about “how you would utilize what happened, next time.” This definition of reflection and reflective teaching, common among all the participants, is in line with Schön’s (1987, 1991) definition of reflection-on-action which pertains to “thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome” (p. 26). It also matches Boody’s (2008) explanation of reflection as retrospection, where the teacher carefully considers his or her prior experience and thinks about it in order to learn from it and improve his or her performance. Apart from that, Ayesha stated that reflection to her is “some sort of self talk,” where she talks to herself and discusses the alternative ways of doing things in her classes. This finding is in line with Prawat’s (1991) description of “conversation with self” which is an internal reflection within an individual, motivated to discover and sort out “the most valid or productive” (p. 740) ways and choices.

Although all the participants defined reflection and reflective teaching as retrospection, the findings show that Maha uses reflection for other purposes as well. The story of her engagement with reflective teaching indicated that she uses reflection and particularly her students’ feedback for problem solving. In other words, she continually asks her students for their feedback on her teaching and tries to improve her practice based on the students’ feedback. This definition of reflection matches the description of reflection as problem solving exemplified by Dewey (1944). As Dewey notes, reflection entails “the sense of a problem, the observation of the conditions, the formation and rationale elaboration of a suggested conclusion, and the active experimental testing” (p. 151).

**Participants’ Self-perception as Reflective Practitioners**

All the participants of this study said either implicitly or explicitly that they consider themselves reflective practitioners, although they gave different reasons for that. While Ayesha said that she believes in the usefulness of reflective teaching, she continually thinks about how things go in her class, and that is why reflection is now part of her practice, Catherine said that she considers herself a reflective teacher “to some degree” because she is not sure what makes a teacher a reflective one. Catherine explained,

Certainly I mean, there is, you know, is it thinking about what you’ve done in your classroom? Does that make you reflective? Or are you reflective when you commit those things to paper or to? I don’t know. You know, you would have to, you know, make the distinction, you know. How do we define that reflection, that process?

Maha, in reply to this question said, “We have to [be reflective]! Or else you would end your career. You have to!” Regarding this issue, at the beginning of the interview Maha told me the story of her engagement with reflection as a teacher who had just graduated from the MATESOL Program and got a job as a university teacher, and how reflection changed her teaching philosophy. Maha stated that she used to be a very serious teacher with certain set standards and she was not flexible with her students’ lateness, attendance, absence, and the use of mobile phones in class. She spent a lot of time arguing with her students about these issues and as a result of being very strict and inflexible during the first semester of teaching at university, she got very poor feedback from her students and she was about to lose her job.

Maha explained that in order to keep her job, she started working on the problems. She went to one of her experienced colleagues and asked for help. After discussing the issue with her colleague, Maha started observing her colleague’s classes and her colleague observed Maha’s classes. Then together, they thought about the different ways Maha could establish rapport with her students and overcome those problems. She said that based on her colleague’s suggestions, she started giving informal feedback forms to her students and asked them to comment on her teaching. This was how she recognized that there were problems regarding the way she was teaching. For instance, her students wrote that she explains the lesson very quickly or she speaks very fast. When she became aware of these problems, she tried to overcome them with the help of her colleague. She said that since that time she has been trying to work out all the problems her students refer to in the feedback forms.

An in-depth analysis of Maha’s description of her teaching practice revealed that the most important reason why she has become reflective is “to get a better evaluation.” Regarding this issue, she explained, “You have, at the back of your mind, you only think of the evaluation and how the administration will look at you. So, I just can’t use the same thing.” That is probably why getting feedback from her students is very important to her. Although getting feedback from students is encouraged in the literature (Gunn, 2005; Reid, 2002), it seems that Maha gives so much importance to her students’ feedback that she is actually trying everything she can in order to satisfy them, and consequently get higher evaluations from them. This finding might be due to this point that it was her students’ feedback and implementing their suggestions that helped her keep her job as a university teacher.

Finally, Kareem took a very different approach is answering this question and said that he cannot answer this question himself because “we only see our images through other people as told to us,” but then contradicted himself by saying that being a reflective teacher is not his choice. Rather, it is something personal and it is part of his personality. Kareem’s appeared to be a very modest person. In fact, several times during the interview Kareem avoided giving clear responses to the interview questions and only when his responses were probed and he was asked for more clarification did he reply to the questions and expressed his true feelings about the issue being discussed. Kareem had a wide range of knowledge about different forms of reflection and aspects of reflective teaching. Therefore, the way he responded to the questions cannot be attributed to his lack of knowledge about the issue. Rather, it could be due to the point that although Kareem had a good understanding of the concepts of reflection, reflective teaching, and different modes of reflection, he wanted to be modest. That is probably why he said that he cannot say whether or not he is a reflective practitioner. However, his comment about reflection being a personal issue is quite in line with the literature that suggests that “the degree to which any one teacher will actually engage in reflection depends on their individual propensities and abilities” (Richardson, 2004, p. 431).

**Forms of Reflection Used by the Participants**

Analysis of the participants’ answers to the question of “What forms of reflection do you use as a teacher?” revealed that thinking about their practice, students’ feedback, and discussion with colleagues are the most common forms of reflection among the participants. All the participants mentioned that they continually think about their actions and their classroom problems through unstructured reflections without documenting their thoughts, mostly because they are busy and they do not have time. For instance, Catherine noted that she continually thinks about her teaching, her teaching materials, her interaction with her students, and reflects on them in the form of “a lot of thought, maybe not always committed to paper.” On the same issue, Kareem said that he does keep a journal although he does not have time to make daily entries; however, he thinks about his practice and reflects on it daily.

Although thinking about their performances in classrooms makes teachers aware of their practice, it does not necessarily result in solving any problems. In fact, it can sometimes “lead to an intensification of unpleasant emotions without suggesting any way forward” (Wallace, 1998, p. 14). In order to make reflection more constructive, Wallace suggests that teachers use more structured forms of reflection such as conducting research.

As the findings of this study suggest, getting feedback from students is a very popular form of reflection among the participants of the study. In fact, the formal and informal feedback that these teachers get from their students helps them to involve students in decision-makings and engage them in their own learning process. On this issue, Gunn (2005) and Reid (2002) note that asking students for their feedback on classroom issues increases both parties’ understanding of classroom life, gives students a sense of belonging, and improves the quality of teaching and learning. The findings of the study also suggest that discussion with colleagues is one of the participants’ preferred forms of reflection. Although some of the participants stated that these discussions are not systematic, they do not happen very often in their working places, and they usually happen when teachers share teaching materials with each other or they are teaching the same thing, their descriptions of their discussions somehow match Qing’s (2009) definition of reflective inquiry group, where teachers discuss with each other classroom-based problems, brain storm different interpretations, and plan appropriate actions.

Apart from these three modes of reflection—thinking, discussion with colleagues, and students’ feedback—which were common among all the four participants of the study, there were other modes of reflection named by some of the participants. Kareem referred to reflection through reading the literature as one of the ways he reflects on his performance. This form of inquiry which is discussed in the literature as “literature search,” is when the interested individual “tap[s] into other people’s ideas in a much more directed and purposeful fashion” (Wallace, 1998, p. 214). Kareem also stated that he keeps a teaching journal although he does not make regular entries in his journal. Furthermore, Catherine said that she keeps a teaching portfolio where she keeps her teaching materials and comments on them for her future use. Ayesha said that she conducted research to come to a better understanding of an issue related to language teaching. In addition, her explanation of the way she documents her teaching techniques indicated that she keeps lesson reports. Thus, the participants’ replies to the question that asked them about different forms of reflection they use in their classes revealed that they use a variety of different modes of reflection discussed in the literature.

**Benefits of Being Reflective Practitioners as Perceived by the Participants**

All four participants of the study stated that their engagement with reflection and reflective teaching results in their professional development and helps them become better teachers. This finding is very much in keeping with the literature, where reflection and reflective teaching is considered to be a step toward professionalism (Alger, 2006; Amobi, 2003; Bean & Stevens, 2002; Pollard, Anderson, Maddock, **Swaffield,** Warin, & Warwick, 2008). Moreover, three participants, Maha, Kareem, and Ayesha, pointed out that being reflective teachers helps them to know themselves, their weaknesses, and their strengths. On this issue, Pollard, et al. state that a very important aspect of reflective teaching is knowing one’s self. They point out that teachers have weaknesses and strengths and “classroom life tends to reveal these fairly quickly” (p. 104). They add that reflective teaching is about “facing such features of ourselves in a constructive and objective manner and in a way which incorporates a continuous capacity to change and develop” (p. 104). Finally, on the benefits of being a reflective practitioner, Maha stated, “[Now] I’m much more confident than the first [semester]. I know my potentials.” Richards and Farrell (2005) also note that increased confidence can be an outcome of reflective teaching.

**Problems of Being Reflective Practitioners as Perceived by the Participants**

The participants all stated that they feel very comfortable with reflecting on their teaching. However, some of the participants said that they sometimes find it difficult to reflect on their teaching. For instance, Catherine said that “reflecting on something painful” is hard for her and sometimes she wants to “turn it off.” She further explained that it is difficult for her to reflect on something unsuccessful on which she has been working with her students. Catherine’s comment is in fact in keeping with the literature. Regarding this point, Stanley (1998) states that it might be difficult for teachers to sustain their commitment to reflection since reflection might uncover some unpleasant things about one’s practice. Stanley explains, “In going deeper into reflection on one’s teaching, it is not unusual to begin to find issues of prejudice or favoritism toward certain students, learning styles, or theories of teaching and learning” (p. 587). On the problems of being a reflective practitioner, both Ayesha and Kareem said that they do not have time to make daily entries in their journals. This finding is in line with Qing’s argument, where he states that the process of becoming a reflective teacher takes “time, patience, responsibility, endurance, commitment, [and] encouragement” (2009, p. 39).

**Misconceptions**

An in-depth analysis of the participants’ remarks about different aspects of reflection and reflective teaching revealed a number of misconceptions. First of all, Kareem referred to reflective teaching as “the vogue.” However, according to the literature on the history of reflection and reflective teaching, the concepts of reflection and reflective teaching are not new in the field of education, and they have been around for more than 50 years (Qing, 2009). This misconception is probably because these concepts are new to Kareem, who was already an experienced teacher of English when he joined the program. In other words, this misconception might have originated from the fact that reflection and reflective teaching were introduced to him for the first time when he was an MATESOL student. In fact, the point that reflection was introduced to them for the first time in the MATESOL program was confirmed by all the four participants of the study.

In addition, Ayesha said that she keeps a “journal” where she usually takes notes of the successful and unsuccessful techniques that she uses in her classes in order not to forget them. However, note taking and journal writing are two different things, and “the journal is a place to go beyond notes by exploring, reacting, making connections, and so on” (Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, & Conard, 1990, p. 229). In fact, Ayesha’s description of the notes she takes matches Richards and Farrell’s (2005) definition of a lesson report. Richard and Farrell point out that teachers should try to answer these three questions while writing a lesson report (p. 39),

* What aspects of the lesson worked well?
* What aspects of the lesson did not work particularly well? Why?
* What aspects of the lesson should be done differently next time?

In other words, although Ayesha keeps a written document of her classroom actions in order to reflect on it later, her term “journal” does not match with the definition of journal found in the literature.

Ayesha also told me that once she undertook action research in order to identify the most common errors in Arab students’ writing originating from their L1 (first language, which is Arabic here). However, her description of what she undertook fits Burns’s (2002) description of basic research where the purpose of the research is “to establish relationships among phenomena, test theory, and generate new knowledge” which will subsequently result in “development of theory.” While the purpose of action research is “to develop solutions to problems identified within one’s own social environment” which will subsequently result in “development of action to effect change and improvement, and deeper understanding in one’s own social situation” (p. 291). In other words, Ayesha’s research was not aimed at solving a problem, which is usually the aim of action research; nor did it involve the cycle of action research, which is identifying a problem, giving a treatment, and observing the results. Therefore, although Ayesha took a step further and undertook research, her use of the term “action research” does not match with the definition of action research discussed in the literature.

Analysis of Maha’s remarks revealed another misconception regarding different modes of reflection. In reply to my question where I asked Maha about the forms of reflection she uses, she mentioned students’ feedback, and when I asked her what other forms of reflection she uses, she showed me another student feedback form. It seems that she recognizes students’ feedback as the only mode of reflection. This finding, once more, highlights the importance that students’ feedback plays for Maha, which is probably due to the difficulties that she experienced during her first semester of teaching at university. Moreover, when I asked Maha whether she keeps a teaching portfolio she asserted that a portfolio is a combination of course material and it does not have anything to do with reflective teaching. However, a portfolio is not only limited to a combination of teaching materials. In fact, lesson plans and teaching materials form only a part of a portfolio. Teachers can include other things such as a statement of their teaching philosophy, a list of their strengths, and even rationales behind including any of these documents in a portfolio (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001). This finding suggests that Maha is not completely aware of different modes through which a teacher can reflect on her teaching.

Although Maha only referred to the feedback she gets from her students as her form of reflection, she said that she regularly talks to one of her colleagues, asks for her suggestions, and discusses her classroom problems with her. She also pointed out that she observes classes to see what other teachers do and compares her practice with theirs. All these activities are very valuable modes of reflection that are widely discussed in the literature (e.g., Bailey, 1990; Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 1998; 2001; Day, 1990). Nevertheless, Maha does not count them as modes of reflection that she uses as a teacher. This is probably because she is unaware that undertaking these activities also makes a teacher reflective. This finding in evident in Catherine’s comments as well, where she expressed her uncertainty about what makes a teacher reflective. She specifically asked me whether thinking about one’s practice makes one reflective, or whether committing those thoughts to paper and documenting them makes a teacher a reflective one. These findings suggest that these two participants have some uncertainties and misconceptions about different modes of reflection.

**Conclusion**

In the following sections, the four posited research questions that guided the study are answered.

**How Do These Current Teachers Perceive “Reflective Practice?”**

The results of the study indicate that the participants have a general understanding of and appreciation for reflection and reflective teaching, and are aware of the benefits that a reflective approach can bring about. Although they used different words in order to define reflective teaching, reflective teaching to them is thinking back on their practice and examining it in terms of what went well and what did not go as they had expected, in order to improve their performance, become aware of their weaknesses and strengths, and subsequently become better teachers.

**Do They Consider Themselves “Reflective Practitioners?” Why or Why Not?**

The participants of this study said that they consider themselves to be reflective practitioners for different reasons. While Ayesha said that she considers herself a reflective teacher because she continually thinks about how things go in her classes, Maha said that she has to be reflective if she wants to keep her job and be a teacher. In addition, Catherine said that she considers herself a reflective teacher to some extent because she is not sure what makes a teacher reflective. Finally, Kareem implied that he is a reflective teacher—but did not say that explicitly—and said being reflective is part of his personality.

**What Forms of Reflection, If Any, Do They Use in Their Practice?**

According to the results of the study, thinking without documenting their thoughts, getting feedback from students, and discussion with colleagues are the most common ways through which the participants reflect on their practice. In addition to that, keeping teaching journals and teaching portfolios, writing lesson reports, conducting classroom observation, undertaking research, and reading the literature are other ways of reflection mentioned by some of them.

**What Factors Determine Their Engagement with “Reflection” and “Reflective Teaching?”**

As the results of the study suggest, having enough time to reflect on their teaching and documenting those reflections is a determining factor in the participants’ engagement with reflective teaching. In addition to that, the ability to think about their performance objectively and open-mindedly is another factor that determines their engagement with reflection and reflective teaching. Moreover, believing in change as well as the usefulness of reflective teaching are essential factors in their involvement in reflection and reflective teaching.

**Implications**

The findings of this study have implications for trainers and instructors in teacher education and TESOL programs and the way reflective practice is being exercised by them. Although the participants of this study have developed a general understanding of reflection and reflective teaching, some of them have some misconceptions about reflective teaching and different ways through which teachers can reflect on their classroom actions, or are uncertain of what makes a teacher reflective. These misconceptions or uncertainties might be indications of the participants’ inaccurate or insufficient information about reflective teaching and its different aspects, which in turn highlights the necessity of providing student teachers, novice teachers, and participants of teacher training courses with necessary and sufficient input on reflection and reflective teaching.

In addition to that, the results of the study highlight the significance of meaningful and conscious engagement of pre-service teachers and students of TESOL programs with reflection and reflective activities so that even those who are not teaching or who have never taught before can be engaged in the activities, feel the activities’ practical value, and as a result, feel more comfortable with reflecting on their teaching once they start teaching real students in real classrooms. This can be achieved through providing students with ample opportunities to observe different teachers, discuss different teaching scenarios with their peers, undertake peer-teaching and supervised teaching, keep written documents of their practice and reflect on them, engage in reflective dialogues and subsequently become familiar with reflection and reflective teaching.

Another implication of the study is for the way instructors teach their students to reflect. To be more specific, requiring students to reflect on their practice without giving them adequate instruction and simply hoping for the best to happen will not make them reflective teachers. On this issue, Russel (2005) notes, “Professional educators often advocate reflective practice; it is less clear that they model it and provide explicit instruction” (p. 199). Hushu, Toom, and Patrikainen (2008) also argue that “reflective analysis does not come naturally; it requires dialogue with the help of a particular method” (p. 40). Therefore, it is crucial that instructors provide students with explicit instruction, help, and support in the course of becoming reflective practitioners.

Finally, the findings of the study, particularly Maha’s case, have implications for university administrators, and highlight the importance of having mentors at university level. Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001) note that not only novice teachers, but also experienced teachers may find it helpful to work with a mentor. In fact, they state that teachers who are teaching a new level or a new type of students need an experienced teacher to help them become familiar with the new environment. Therefore, it is suggested that university teachers, especially the ones who have just started their career, be assigned mentors so that they can discuss their problems with an experienced colleague who can provide them with support and advice where necessary.

**Final thought**

According to the findings of this study, the participants have generally developed an understanding of and an appreciation for reflective teaching, are familiar with its values and drawbacks to some extent, and practice it in their own classes through different ways. Although these teachers do not necessarily commit their reflections to paper, they continually think about their classroom actions and try to improve them in order to become better teachers. In addition, they discuss different issues related to teaching and learning with their colleagues and try to come up with well-informed decisions. More importantly, by involving their students in decision-makings and asking for their feedback, these teachers promote reflective learning among their students.

To conclude, I would like to answer the question posed in the title of the article, “Reflective Practice **among MATESOL Graduates in the UAE**: Theoretical Construct or Ongoing Benefit?” The results of the study that I undertook revealed that engaging themselves in reflective activities has been a rewarding experience for the four participants of the study. Their comments indicated that they can feel the blessings that reflection has brought about for them. Therefore, here is the answer: “Definitely ongoing benefit!”

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**Appendix A: Interview Guide**

Part 1

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. What is your mother tongue?
4. How long have you been teaching? Where? What levels?
5. When did you graduate from the MA TESOL program?

Part 2

1. What does “Reflection” mean to you?
2. What does “Reflective Teaching” mean to you?
3. When you were a graduate student, were you encouraged to reflect on your practice? Tell me about your experience with reflection during the program.
4. What did you like about reflecting as an MA TESOL student?
5. What didn’t you like about reflecting as an MA TESOL student?

Part 3

1. Now that you are teaching in your own class, do you consider yourself a reflective practitioner?
2. Why did/didn’t you choose to continue reflecting on your practice?
3. What forms of reflection do you use? Why?
4. Have you ever shared your reflections with anyone? Why or why not?
5. What are the advantages of being a reflective teacher?
6. What are the disadvantages of being a reflective teacher?
7. Have you ever found yourself resisting reflection? Tell me about it.

Is there anything you would like to add? Thank you.

1. In order to preserve the participants confidentiality pseudonyms are used for them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The participants’ words have not been edited. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)