

Reflective Teaching in EFL Online Classrooms: Teachers' Perspective

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Abstract—One of the noticeable changes in the tertiary education scene is the continuous quest for quality-driven teaching and learning that prepares students for the demanding employment market. At the heart of this increasingly transformative process is competitiveness. This shifting view has made teaching a multi-faceted and dynamic process that calls upon teachers to adjust their teaching and align their pedagogical practices and decisions to emerging circumstances and challenges. Online learning has become the 'new normal' formula in language classes across the Sultanate of Oman due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. This paper reports (N=49) teachers' perceived reflection and adjustment in online classes and the various strategies they adopted in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman. Data were collected from the responses of the participants to a semi-structured online survey. Data analysis showed that most teachers practiced reflection on action and for action more frequently while demonstrating lower awareness of reflection in action. The paper also draws on the significance of the spaces created by online teaching for reflection-driven action research to inform effective teaching for better learning experiences.

Index Terms—quality-based teaching, reflection, online teaching, action research, effective learning

I. INTRODUCTION

An observable feature of the changing reality in university teaching is the realization that teachers need to turn into effective catalysts for effective learning. Students can only learn effectively when their teachers form a deep understanding of their needs and use effective instruction (Nunan, 2004, 1989; Tomlinson, 1999), and this requires educators to reflect on issues that may obstruct students' learning and adjust their pedagogic practices accordingly. The post-covid era has witnessed an inclusive transformation in different aspects in the broad educational context, which has led to changes in students' needs. The response to the altering needs of students was limited to changes in the media of instruction and communication with less reconsideration of the teaching methods, practices, curricula and other components of the educational process as the pandemic-triggered and abrupt shift to online teaching has necessitated a quick resuscitation of the educational process without having the opportunity to reflect on all aspects of the newly-tested educational environment. This has undermined the quality of education to some extent. The unforeseen mutation in educational systems requires reflective practice as a much-needed approach to improve and sustain the quality of teaching and learning during the experimentation of a changing educational environment.

Researchers ascribe the notion of 'reflective teaching' to the seminal work of the American philosopher John Dewey (Zeichner & Liston, 2014; Zwozdiak-Myers 2012) first in his publication *How We Think* (Dewey, 1910), republished later with some revisions as *How We Think: Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (Dewey, 1933), and then in his publication *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916). Dewey (1916) introduced the term of 'reflective inquiry' as a strategy to investigate the effectiveness of teaching practices based on "personal observations and ideas as in effect to isolate mind and set it apart from the world to be known" (p. 360). The inquiry needs to be complemented with reflective practice which gives our teaching experiences their full meaning by trying to create a link between "what we try to do and what happens in consequence" (p. 187). Although inquiry starts with personal observations, "reflection lies upon keeping one's self out of the data" (p. 190), and this can happen by coupling one's observations with those of the learners. Dewey believes that a teacher can only rectify his/her theoretical knowledge "only by a pupil's own observations, reflections, framing and testing of suggestions" (p. 371). This complementarity between inquiry and reflection gives rise to experiential knowledge "as an outcome of inquiry and a resource in further inquiry" (p. 238).

Reflective teaching has several characteristics that need to be observed closely by the teacher. First, reflective thinking is organized and regular (Soodmand & Farahani, 2018) as it is based on a "systematic and protracted inquiry" (Dewey, 2010, p.23); second, reflective practice follows a consecutive as well as a cyclical pattern of thought and action (Afshar and Farahani, 2017; Barnard & Ryan, 2017; Larrivee, 2000; Loughran, 1996); third, reflective thought is flexible and involves no fixed practices or inertia (Ghaye, 2011) in developing one's knowledge or complementing it with experiential knowledge. Accordingly, reflective practice generates a new form of knowledge which is the result of

an inquiry or framing the issue, experimentation and reframing the issue (Schon, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 2014), planning, and implementation. The following paragraph provides a succinct description of the characteristics of reflective thinking:

Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence- a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each, in turn, leans back on its predecessors. The successive portions of the reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another; they do not come and go in a medley. Each phase is a step from something to something... The stream or flow becomes a train, chain, or thread. (Dewey, 1910, p.12)

Practicing reflection has become an indispensable requirement in academic institutions worldwide to raise educational standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning. This is why it needs to be incorporated in the discourse of teacher professional development to promote the professional experience of teachers by integrating theory with practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2015; Tarrant, 2013). A teacher needs to develop his/her practical knowledge by becoming a reflective practitioner, researcher, and extended professional (Hoyle, 1974; Johnson & Maclean, 2008; Stenhouse, 1975; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012), and academic institutions need to embrace this view to respond to the demands of institutional development, growth, and sustainability. Studies have shown that reflective teaching is not practiced on a high level in Middle Eastern countries and that it is overlooked in teacher professional development programs (Soodmand & Farahani 2018) adopted by higher learning institutions. We can further build on these studies by extending research on teachers' conceptualization and practice of reflective teaching and its impact on their professional growth. Academic institutions in these countries have a particular need to ensure the integration of reflective practice with teaching English as a Second Language (ESL)/ English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses that are not always taught by L2 specialists who can merge theory with practice. Oman is a Middle Eastern country that faces similar educational challenges to other countries in the region. Omani Higher Education Institutions have the challenge to embrace and support quality-enhanced reflective teaching to fulfill the Oman 2040 Vision requirements concerning education. According to the Education Council (2018) quality is one of the main pillars of the National Strategy for Education 2040 in Oman (see <https://www.educouncil.gov.om/downloads>). This strategic goal transforms not only the HEIs' social responsibility but also their objectives, priorities, and plans.

Despite the significance of reflective practices in teaching that is evident in the growing volume of research in general, there is a paucity of studies examining how teachers in Omani HEIs perceive and practice reflection in their profession. The present study seeks to examine teachers' understanding of the concept of reflection and the realization of that in their teaching practice. This study is significant and timely as it aims to investigate a neglected aspect of effective teaching at a time of high competition among academic institutions to achieve quality education and fulfill national and international academic accreditation standards. Enhancing teaching quality through reflective practice is not bound to Oman only, and thus, it is hoped that the study's insights can generate implications that can extend the usefulness of investigating reflective teaching in other similar contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Dewey (1910) defined reflective thought as an "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. 6). After the term 'reflective practice' was introduced by John Dewey in the early years of the twentieth century, scholars like Stenhouse (1975), Donald Schon (1983), Mezirow (1991), and others developed the notion of reflective practice and added new dimensions to its applications in pedagogic practices. In this regard, Zeichner and Liston (2014) reviewed the main contributions to reflective teaching from a historical and conceptual perspective. The authors explained how Dewey distinguished routine action and reflective action, calling teachers to strike a balance between the two in their professional practice. Routine action refers to practices that are controlled by a collective educational system and apply to general educational contexts, situations, etc. Conversely, reflective action refers to the active and personal experimentation of pedagogic practices by collecting evidence and accepting "many sources of understanding" (p. 10) rather than sticking to a unified static code for solving problems. As such, reflective action encourages a flexible approach to teaching away from embracing stagnant educational practices. Hence the term 'reflective teaching' requires teachers to review their pedagogic practices and reflect on them actively and critically for evidence-based analysis of existing issues in the teaching process and reconsideration of routine strategies and techniques.

Kolb (1984) and Schon (1983, 1988) were concerned about using reflective practices to contextualize and integrate instruction. Consequently, they highlighted the connection between reflective practice and action. Kolb (1984) developed a model for practicing reflection by teachers. This model is described as the model of "experiential learning" because it is based on reviewing and analyzing the teachers' concrete experiences in the three phases of reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Following the completion of the three phases, action will be adopted to update former practices and the new experiences will become the point of departure for a new cycle of experiential learning. On the other hand, Schon (1988, 1983) maintained that there are two types of reflective practice: reflection in action and reflection on action. Reflection in action takes place while the teachers are involved in the teaching process as they encounter certain situations in which their students react unpredictably. In this case, a teacher needs to reflect promptly to adapt their teaching to the emerging situation. Reflection on action happens in two

phases: before the action takes place (to prepare and plan) and after the action takes place (to assess and evaluate the impact/results of the action). These two types of reflection enable the teachers to reconstruct their knowledge (Mezirow, 1991; Larrivee, 2000) by adding new experimental dimensions to what they have already acquired academically and professionally.

Other research focused on extending the aspects of reflection. Thompson and Pascal (2012) added to these two levels of reflection a third level which they described as 'reflection for action', maintaining that effective reflection requires thinking and planning for improvement and flexible management of the teaching process whenever needed. Zeichner and Liston (2014) described the newly-acquired knowledge using the term teachers' "practical theories" (pp. 25-35), and they criticized Schon's account on 'reflecting in action' and 'reflecting on action' for falling short of incorporating the notion of 'collaborative reflection' in which teachers discuss their practices and reflective ideas with other professionals on the institutional level. This type of reflection allows the teachers to co-construct their knowledge by cooperating with other colleagues "through reflective dialogue on the participants' personal theories" (Moreira & Ribeiro, 2009, p. 64). Teachers may also need to create communication channels with the community outside the educational institution to create "contexts for collaborative action" (Zeichner and Liston, 2014, p. 22). The researchers also remark that:

although reflection can at times be a solitary and highly individualistic affair, it can also be enhanced by communication and dialogue with others. Second, reflection needs to focus not only within the classroom but also on the contexts in which teaching and schooling are embedded. (p. 24)

The ultimate objective behind practicing reflective teaching is to improve the quality of education and help pedagogues keep an objective distance from routine, entrenched practices that may not provide optimal solutions to all educational problems. As such, critical reflection is suggested as a response to a problem that is observed by the teacher (Dewey, 1910; 1916; 1933; 1938) and it involves several steps such as reviewing, analyzing, and evaluating past and present practices. Zwozdiak-Myers (2012) defined the reflective practice as "A disposition to inquiry incorporating the process through which student, early career and experienced teachers structure or restructure actions, beliefs, knowledge, and theories that inform teaching for the purpose of professional development" (p. 5). According to Zwozdiak-Myers (2012), teachers' practice of reflective teaching needs to be guided by 'the framework of reflective practice. This framework marks a departure from earlier theories on reflective teaching in that it does not necessarily require teachers to confine their reflective practice to the occurrence of a problem in the classroom (problematizing the educational process). Accordingly, practicing reflection becomes an inherent part of effective teaching (Brown & Atkins, 2002; Martin-Kniep & Picone-Zocchia, 2009; Hunt, Wiseman & Touzel 2009), regardless of the existence of challenges or issues, which gives a protracted scope for improvement and experimentation of new ideas and strategies. The framework of reflective practice comprises the following dimensions:

1. Examining one's teaching for improvement;
2. Evaluating one's teaching by embracing classroom research activities
3. Integrating theory and practice
4. Questioning one's theories and practices
5. Openness to alternative practices
6. Experimenting new strategies
7. Maximizing the learning potential of students
8. Enhancing the effectiveness of one's teaching
9. Continuous improvement of teaching

Larrivee (2000) maintained that there is a relationship between critical reflection and the ethical considerations of the teaching practice because teachers develop unintended presuppositions which are the result of their filtering of situations as per their prior experiences, sets of beliefs, assumptions, feelings, personal agendas as well as aspirations. These presuppositions need to be challenged and reformulated based on an experiential systematic inquiry. The researcher stressed the importance of reflexive awareness, inquiry, and reflection for teachers but at the same time called for involving other professionals in the process of reflection to avoid confrontational feelings or disputes within the educational community. This tendency to involve others in reflective practice is called collective or group reflection. According to Elbaz (1988), practicing reflection to improve teaching and learning should occur as part of educational research in collaboration between the teacher who practices reflection in the classroom and a researcher (teacher educator) studies and analyses the reflections of teachers to elaborate on their experiences and empower them objectively. Teachers who practice self-reflection feel that the investigation of their practices "is not altogether legitimate as a research activity" (p. 171), hence the importance of group reflection. Besides, they have a preemptive tendency "to search out immediate solutions, before the issue at hand has been analyzed" (p. 171).

The suggested collaboration between teachers and researchers is expected to lead to actions that benefit teachers in reconstructing their knowledge and students in learning effectively. Practicing collective reflection (Moreira & Ribeiro, 2009) does not only contribute to the professional development of teachers. It is also the road to institutional development. Research on the robust relationship between reflective teaching and quality education started with contributions that addressed the situation on the level of schools. Recently, practicing reflection to improve teaching practices and achieve professional development has become an indispensable requirement for college teachers (Biggs,

1999; Lyons, 2006) and higher education institutions in their quest to provide quality teaching and achieve quality learning (Biggs, & Tang, 2007; Brockbank & McGill, 2007), as a step towards international recognition and accreditation. According to Biggs and Tang (2007), reflection on teaching challenges provides a contextualized understanding and treatment of teaching problems as long as it embraces the framework of constructive alignment between reflective practices and the intended learning outcomes. This cannot be achieved without synergy between reflective teachers, staff developers, and the administration, as a whole, because teachers' practices are not only informed by their personal choices. They are also guided by the priorities of their institutional administration.

Biggs and Tang (2007) believe that in order for reflection to be practiced effectively, it must be transformative leading to an improved learning environment that creates and maintains high levels of motivation among students. Transformative reflection is in harmony with the accounts of earlier research, discussed above, on reflection for action. Reflection can be transformative when it is practiced within the framework of action research. Action research is an educational strategy used by researcher teachers to introduce positive changes to the teaching-learning process. Practicing transformative reflection means acquiring new strategies which empower teachers and help them survive in a highly competitive educational environment. Larrivee stated that "Effective teaching is much more than a compilation of skills and strategies. It is a deliberate philosophical and ethical code of conduct... to invent new strategies" (p. 294). Such strategies enhance the learning experience of learners and teachers alike, as expressed in the following paragraph:

The 'learning' in action learning refers not only to student learning, or even to learning about teaching, but to learning about oneself as a teacher and learning how to use reflection to become a better teacher. Learning new techniques for teaching is like the fish that provides a meal today; reflective practice is the net that provides meals for the rest of your life. (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 43)

Action research involves the virtuous cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, and acting. Reflective practice is one pillar in action research and it employs different types of research tools. For Biggs and Tang (2007), teachers can keep a record of their reflective practice by using reflective diaries to record critical incidents and any other observations throughout their practice. This will help the teachers relate their academically and professionally acquired knowledge to their teaching practices, on the one hand, and the intended learning outcomes of their courses, on the other hand. The authors believe that practicing reflection is not limited to teachers. Rather it should be supported with evidence collected from the point of view of learners. Students' perceptions can be incorporated with the collected evidence using strategies like questionnaires, focus group discussions, and reflective journals which the learners can use to record any critical incidents or observations on the course they are studying.

Practicing reflection is not limited to the two main parties of the educational process: teachers and learners. It is an overarching practice that needs to be consolidated at the institutional level. Biggs and Tang (2007) highlighted the significant role played by the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in promoting transformative reflection. According to SoTL, institutions should not overlook the importance of researching teaching and learning activities. SoTL (Perry & Smart, 2007; Murray, 2008) is a recent research practice which most academic institutions do not recognize or recognize only theoretically. In other words, most academic institutions attach importance to the research endeavors of academics without relating them to their teaching practices. For instance, academics get promoted based on the number of publications, without regard to creating or encouraging the teaching/research nexus with transformative reflection at its essence. Institutions can promote SoTL by adopting policies that sponsor teaching development grants and recognize teaching-based research as equally important promotion criteria to content research. Research projects which investigate and aim to develop teaching practices make use of action research to develop the curricula, enhance independent learning among students, reform assessment methods, constructive alignment between ILOs and pedagogic practices, etc.

In an attempt to bridge the gap in promoting teaching and learning activities, universities created teaching and learning development centers with the task of improving the teaching practices and skills of teachers by running training or professional development workshops that are used to measure the performance of teachers based on the number of workshops they attend. Recently, the role and activities of teaching and learning development centers have changed positively by involving staff developers from the concerned departments. These staff developers are also knowledgeable about the subjects offered in their departments and the related assessment policies and this enables them to provide informed insights that can foster staff professional development. Participating in activities and programs organized by the teaching and learning development centers is an opportunity for the staff developers themselves to reflect on their practices, assess their experiences, and empower others by enhancing their reflection capabilities. Reflection should be the essence of all activities oriented toward promoting staff growth and improvement of the institutions' performance.

Some mechanisms which academic institutions can adopt to improve the quality of teaching and encourage reflection practices include teaching portfolios, teacher peer review, department-level teaching and learning committees to design courses and programs, regular departmental sessions to discuss problems and solutions using constructive alignment, consultations with teaching and development centers as well as student feedback on teaching. Students need to have representation in committees on teaching and learning and there have to be student-staff consultative committees to exchange views about the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Biggs and Tang (2007) believe that student feedback on teaching should be conducted "through the department, not the faculty or central administration. Questionnaires should be worded to be supportive of constructive alignment: for example, are students clear about the ILOs... the

TLAs in their experience really help them to achieve the ILOs” (P. 271). As for peer review, the researchers believe it should not be centralized by the administration or the department. Rather it is expected to take place collegially like when “A teacher invites a colleague, a critical friend, to observe his/her teaching and/or teaching materials to provide feedback for reflection and improvement: in effect a QE process through action research of your own teaching” (p. 269).

Online education provides both opportunities and challenges for reflective practice. Salih and Omar (2021) stated that “During the crisis, all those involved in the educational process need to think outside the box” (p. 65). With the intrusive shift to online teaching platforms and the growing competition among academic institutions to meet the criteria of effective education, reflective practice has re-emerged as an approach to reform different aspects of the general educational context and respond to the relevant challenges. Lamaster and Knop (2004) researched the challenges teachers encounter in distance learning environments and pointed out the teachers’ need to reflect on their teaching practices to update them following the requirements of the new educational context. On the other hand, online learning environments are resourceful in the digital tools they provide to practice reflective effective teaching (see Karchmer-Klein & Pytash, 2020). Pawan (2003) clarified how online education encourages reflective practice among teachers as it provides them with access to rich content which they can analyze individually or collectively to enhance their reflective endeavors, as explained in the following passage:

The nature of many of asynchronous and synchronous discussion environments used in online distance education courses, in which all forms of communication and interaction in textual form is recorded and archived, provides a conducive medium for engaging in reflection (p. 30)

Although research has explored reflective teaching in-depth in varieties of contexts in HEIs worldwide, little is known about the practice of reflective teaching by Omani HEIs teachers. The present study seeks to extend scholarship into this vital area and shed more light on how teachers in Omani HEIs understand reflective teaching and practice it as a part of their alignment of teaching especially in the COVID-19-prompted online learning. The study is set to answer the following questions:

1. How do language teachers perceive adjustment of teaching as a process of reflective practices?
2. What aspects of teaching do language teachers relate to reflective practices?
3. From the language teachers’ perspective, what is the impact of reflection practices on their performance?

III. METHOD

The present study is exploratory in nature and it draws on a qualitative method with minimal statistical analysis as it attempts to provide a preliminary investigation about aspects of perceived quality-enhanced online teaching through reflection and possible adjustments from language teachers’ perspectives. Teachers’ perspectives were collected by administering a survey that was distributed to the participants who were teachers in Omani higher learning institutions.

A. Participants

Participants in this study were forty-nine teachers in Omani HEIs. All participants were highly qualified in terms of academic backgrounds and teaching experience. The (49) participants have experienced teaching online since the outset of the pandemic. They were asked to respond to a survey after the end of the Academic Year in the Spring Semester.

B. Study’s Instrument and Analysis Procedures

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to understand how teachers in Omani HEIs perceive and practice reflective teaching and the impact of that in the adjustment of their teaching. To serve this objective, an open-ended survey was distributed to the participants (N=49). Under the qualitative method, participants are encouraged to share their views using open-ended survey questions (Creswell, & Creswell, 2018; Silverman, 2013; Kumar, 2011). The survey was designed to elicit the respondents’ understanding of reflective teaching and how they initiated it in their practice. The survey also focused on the types of reflection the participants were familiar with and aware of. That is the types of reflection relevant to the participants’ teaching environment. In addition, the survey addressed the participants’ reported effects of reflection on their teaching. The respondents’ answers were collected and analyzed for an understanding of the level of awareness of reflection among teachers, the type of reflection they practiced as well as the relation between reflective teaching and the actual teaching practice. It is hoped that the insights gained from this study would initiate useful implications for reflection practices in Omani HEIs and other similar educational contexts in need of such transformative initiatives to improve their performance, meet their students’ needs, and contribute actively to the national strategic priorities and programs.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the study’s first question— “How do language teachers perceive adjustment of teaching as a process of reflective practices?” — the 49 participants were asked when they felt the need for change in their teaching. The rationale behind this question is to examine teachers’ awareness of factors that may cause reflection. The participants’ responses were grouped into cases and factors which triggered awareness for change and adjustment together with their corresponding period of possible reflection and its type. TABLE 1 summarizes the participants’ perceived sources of change and adjustment in teaching and their possible time of occurrence of reflection. The reported sources enabled

identifying corresponding types of reflection practiced by the participants. In addition, the frequencies of each reflection type were quantified to determine the most frequently or less frequently practiced types of reflection by the participants (see TABLE 2).

TABLE 1
FACTORS TRIGGERED ADJUSTMENT REPORTED BY THE PARTICIPANTS (N=49)

Cases	Incident	Frequencies	Type of Reflection
1. Change in course content	Cyclical review	7	On/for action
2. When lesson objectives are not met	Post teaching	7	On/for action
3. Student feedback	Post teaching	35	On/for action
4. Peer feedback	Ongoing	14	On/for action
5. Plans by management	Ongoing	35	On/for action
6. Self-initiated	Incidental	7	In/on/for action
7. When class turns less interactive	Incidental	28	In/on/for action
8. Assessment outcome	Post teaching	42	On/for action
9. Online teaching skills	During	3	In/on/for action
10. Students' low motivation	During	21	In/on/for action

The 49 participants reported different cases and factors of multiple sources that function as triggers for change and adjustment of teaching. These factors cover different aspects of teaching, learning, and management support and are classified to correspond to a specific period of the occurrence referred to as an incident. Thus, change in course content as a case that triggers the need for change matches with cyclical review as an incident (time of occurrence or happening) in teaching. In their responses, the participants reported that factors that initiate the need for change and adjustment differ and vary. One of the participants stated that,

I feel I need to change something in my teaching and adjust a) whenever the students are not interactive, b) when the students' results do not reflect variation in level and skills, and c) whenever there is a change in course content.

The three causes of change reported above correspond to specific instances of the incident which indicate certain reflective practices. In this regard, the case (a) above can be related to an incidental cause in the teaching process that triggers reflective action during the teaching process, i.e. reflection in action, while case (b) corresponds to post teaching which indicates a tendency for reflection on action/for action, and the case (c) can be related to a feedback-based cyclical review of a course which triggers reflection on/for action. An emerging finding of significance to report here is a feature common to all these factors implying that they are somehow feedback-based. That is, the cases for change and adjustment reported by the participants have a link to the feedback of some sort. Feedback as an element of multiple sources and types is an essential feature of quality-enhanced teaching that needs to be utilized to empower teachers' reflective practices. An awareness of the significance of feedback as a source of reflection for improvement of teaching is expected to empower teachers and encourage them to plan for implementing reflection as an essential agenda of their teaching. More research is needed to broaden our understanding of the most effective sources of feedback that drive teachers to embrace reflective teaching. For instance, future research may investigate the best mechanisms to utilize students' feedback and peer feedback on teaching as well as self-identified needs as sources for systematic reflection and an integral part of teacher professional development programs.

TABLE 2
FREQUENCY COUNT BY TYPE OF REFLECTION

Type of reflection	Frequencies
Reflecting in action	59
Reflecting on action	199
Reflecting for action	199

The result of the analysis reveals that the participants were able to identify causes of change and adjustment of teaching about the need for reflection. Thus, in principle, the participants were aware of the need to adjust and reflect on one's teaching practices. Teachers need to be empowered to be able to take action and decide what fits their teaching context and can help students maximize their learning. The equation of quality-enhanced teaching rests on the principle that for students to practice deep learning and depart from surface practices, teachers have to base their teaching on non-surface teaching practices which are limited to the prescribed principles of teaching without relating to the reality of the classroom and teachers' reflective practices. Research that correlates dimensions of reflective practices to teaching is imperative. More research is needed to uncover teachers' awareness of and practice of reflection concerning dimensions of reflective practices.

To address the second question— "What aspects of teaching do language teachers relate to reflective practices?" — The participants were given five areas and were asked to identify what they feel more flexible for adopting changes and adjustments based on their experience. TABLE 3 summarizes the frequency counts of the participants' responses in rating the five areas given.

TABLE 3
FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF IDENTIFIED AREAS FLEXIBLE TO CHANGE AND ADJUSTMENT

Areas	Frequency
1. Teaching methods and strategies	42
2. Assessment plan	14
3. Class activities	42
4. Research plan	7
5. Course syllabus	14
6. Other (please specify)	0

TABLE 3 demonstrates that the majority of the participants (42) selected both teaching methods and strategies and class activities (89% each) as the most flexible areas that adopt changes and adjustments (see Figure 1). This finding suggests that teachers can reflect on issues related to teaching methods and students' learning through class activities whenever a change is deemed significant. Viewing teaching strategies and class activities as the most flexible areas for change is significant and can be used to empower teachers to embrace more reflective practices which can lead to more effective class decisions that can improve teachers' performance. Sharing class experiences about changes in both teaching and class activities and other aspects is imperative. Teachers need to share their class experiences so that others may reflect on them as well. Hence the importance of keep a reflective diary by the teacher to make a record of interesting incidents and examples that could be reflected upon collaboratively during exchanges with other colleagues. Interestingly, the online environment facilitates the process of keeping records of examples and incidents since the interactive sessions are recorded and can be published/shared publicly with other colleagues as samples of learners/instructors' exchanges to reflect upon collaboratively. Besides, the class environment is dynamic and variable and so is any class session. Thus, sharing reflection-based class experience and adjustment will raise teachers' awareness and prepare them to deal with any unexpected circumstances about the learning process.

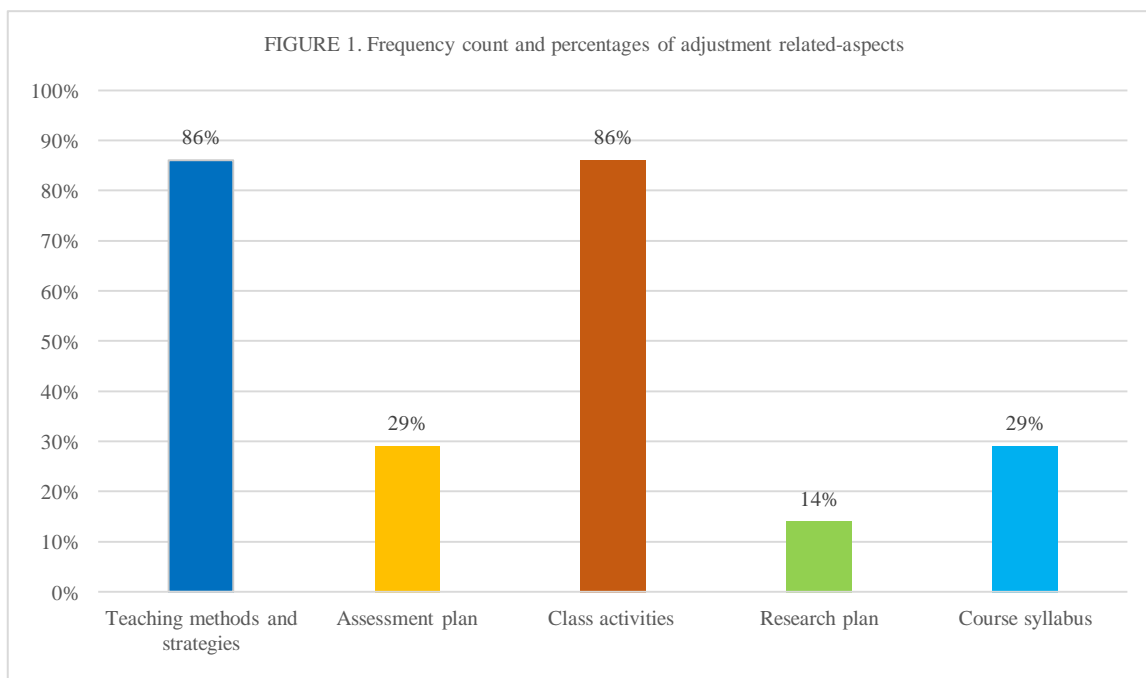


FIGURE 1 demonstrates that the participants also identified the assessment plan and course syllabus (29% each there is a problem in calculating this figure) as other areas perceived flexible for change and adjustment. This finding is significant as it suggests that the participants considered these two areas as less flexible in offering reflective practice. This could be interpreted in many ways. For example, it could be attributed to teachers' perception towards assessment plan guidelines and course syllabi design by quality assurance agents as fixed guidelines that are hard to change and a 'taboo' that should be avoided. Although teachers are heavily involved in the course design and syllabus development process and are autonomous in setting their tests and assessment plans, that happens within quality assurance and institutions' rules and guidelines. In addition, the outcome of these two aspects will only be felt at the end of the term or when teaching a specific unit or area is complete. The feedback on an assessment element will only be received after the assessment is run or administered. Another reason could be the teachers' satisfaction with these two aspects as their comfort zone. As for research, 14% of the participants reported it as a flexible area for change and adjustment making it the least-perceived flexible area among the other areas. When teachers do not establish a strong link between teaching and research, reflection-driven research will remain a less important alternative. Teachers need to reflect to initiate an inquiry into their teaching and students' learning by investigating classroom phenomena to establish the ground for realistic reflective practice. This interrelation between teaching and research is vital in establishing an effective teaching

research which can enable teaching to underpin research and vice versa. It is worth mentioning that the online learning environment provides rich sources of data for teaching-based research including quantified accounts of students' results which facilitate the research process and save the time of the teacher-researcher (Omar, 2021), and venues for students' input which can function as students' journals to reflect on action and for action. An example of this is the students' forum. It is believed that students' assessments used in online learning are still adopting conventional assessment methods. Using students' forums needs to be activated as a credible assessment component in online teaching because it can be utilized as an effective source of data for reflection-based action.

To address the study's third question — "From the language teachers' perspective, what is the impact of reflection practices on their performance?" — The data analysis focused on the participants' observation of the effects of online teaching on three significant areas namely, teaching, learning, and institutional support. The participants were asked to identify differences between online teaching and physical teaching, new learning habits and behaviors by students, and institutional support in enhancing needs analysis-based reflection.

The 49 participants identified certain features of differences between online teaching and physical teaching. According to them, online teaching has posed several challenges to teaching. The participants reported that they found online teaching less interactive, demanding in terms of preparation, as well as being associated with difficulty to ensure quality assessment and full implementation of academic integrity guidelines. In addition, the participants reported difficulty in assessing the actual level of students' motivation, an absence of physical presence, lack of spaces for peer activities as challenges of online teaching. On the other hand, the participants also reported some facilitating aspects of online teaching such as asynchronous teaching which enables students to access taught classes anytime and for an unlimited number of times.

The data also reveals that teachers realized in online teaching students started to reflect on their learning styles. The participants reported changes in the students' learning behaviors and strategies as shown in TABLE 4 below.

TABLE 4
STUDENTS' CHANGING LEARNING BEHAVIOURS REPORTED BY THE PARTICIPANTS

Learning activities	
1.	Technology-assisted vocabulary learning
2.	Autonomous use of online learning sources
3.	Online communication skills
4.	Shy and reserved students participation

The participants reported active use of machine translation by their students for learning vocabulary and finishing other related class tasks. The extended use of online learning sources by students can be utilized to help students learn outside the classroom. Such a tendency by students to dependence on online learning materials can be sustained to help students establish a virtual community of learners. In addition, the student's active engagement in online correspondence with their teachers is an indication of the students' understanding of the significance of developing communication skills and negotiation strategies. Students need such skills for their future careers. It is significant to see that enrollment in online teaching and learning made the shy students move out of their comfort zone and break the culture of silence to participate. Online teaching practices and beyond should always design teaching strategies and class tasks that accommodate the majority of students and encourage the less confident ones to contribute to the learning process. Most of the participants addressed the gap in the institutional support by reporting that their institutions could have helped them reflect by allowing for a wider scope of flexibility in introducing adjustments to their teaching activities. The fact that the shift to online teaching triggered a wave of panic and destabilization among faculty and students alike enforced the need by the administration to dictate an online teaching protocol to be implemented across the board. The objective behind the online teaching rules and procedures was to organize and stabilize the education process during the transitional period, which restricted teachers' flexibility and narrowed the horizon for reflection action. In other words, the sudden transformation from conventional learning to online learning was a blessing and a curse at the same time for the reflective practitioner in that it triggered the need for practicing reflection cyclically, yet confined the scope to do that effectively.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study has attempted to examine aspects of reflective practices by teachers of English who experienced online teaching in institutions of higher learning in Oman. The COVID-19-led sudden switch to online learning and the subsequent changes in the teaching practices have triggered language teachers' awareness for reflection to an extent. It is evident that online learning has opened horizons for changes in many traditional teaching practices and challenged educational institutions to review their practices, assess their performances, and give more focus to quality teaching and learning. The changes brought about by online learning drew teachers' awareness to the crucial changes taking place in both teaching practices and learning activities. While reflection has become imperative for effective teaching that encourages effective learning, the current situation reveals that the most common modes of reflection happen to be a reflection on action and for action but less frequently reflection in action with teachers being more reactive than

proactive. This implies that online teaching triggered teachers' awareness for reflection. They were forced to reflect but in a limited way thus projecting an incomplete cycle of reflection.

Institutions of higher learning need to embrace the reflective practice as an institutional requirement for quality assurance. There is also the need for measuring reflective practices by both teachers and learners alike. Research that explores and analyzes the needs of teachers and students for transformative reflection is imperative. Reflective practices can create a common ground for both teachers and students to set the appropriate agenda for learning, assess their performances, and improve areas that need more attention in curriculum, students' learning styles, and teaching strategies. To empower teachers to embrace reflective practices for effective teaching, research is needed to develop an inventory of reflection for teachers. In addition, institutions may conduct training workshops on practicing reflection to acquaint teachers and learners with the concept and how to apply it to implement it. Teachers also need to collaborate and facilitate collegial workshops on reflectivity. Teachers may also keep dairies of classroom experience as a source of action research. Academic departments in institutions of higher learning together with centers for continuous learning and enhancement of professional development may need to engage teachers in programs for transformative action learning and promote action research for effective teaching and learning. The study is subjected to certain limitations due to its type of population which means that the findings cannot be generalized to content area subjects other than English. Also, the data was collected via an open-ended survey only and many variables were eliminated. However, the study derives its value from its attempt to examine aspects of quality-enhanced online teaching as perceived by language teachers in OHEIs and to shed light on how teachers relate reflection to teaching and learning improvement.

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