

# Reflective Teaching in ELT: Obstacles and Coping Strategies<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present study aimed to document the constraints and limits in applying reflective teaching principles in ELT settings in Iran from the teachers' perspective along with solutions and coping strategies to help remove the obstacles. 60 teachers teaching general English at 6 language institutes were selected through convenience sampling. First, the teacher participants filled out a reflectivity questionnaire. 49 were found to be reflective, from among which 25 participated in the semistructured interviews. Inductive analysis procedure resulted in the identification of 3 broad categories of obstacles of reflective teaching including institutional problems, self-directional problems, and problems with reflective teaching principles. In addition, for each category, solutions were offered by the teachers. Findings have implications for policymakers, administrators, and supervisors of language institutes, ELT teachers, and teacher educators to help foster reflectivity.

**Keywords:** Reflective Teaching; ELT, Obstacles; Coping Strategies

## 1. Introduction

With the disappearance of the concept of method from L2 teacher education discussions and the emergence of the postmethod era, researchers began to address teacher development from professional, cognitive and contextual perspectives. In the past, the dominant model for teacher education in applied linguistics was of a process product type where the aim was to promote student learning (Freeman, 2002). Teaching was defined as efficient performance seeking to achieve ends prescribed for teachers (Halliday, 1998), and learning to teach was thought of as having thorough knowledge of the content to be taught, together with

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its required methodology (Freeman, 2002). Teachers' agency and mentality were totally neglected as teachers were thought to enter their profession with a *tabula rasa* and to learn the essential teaching skills through a training program. Fortunately, there has been a positive change from superficial interpretations and behaviorist perceptions of the practice towards cognitive/social views of teaching (Johnson, 2006). In this new orientation, teaching is a sophisticated activity in which "teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (Borg, 2003, p.81). In fact, they are supposed to be engaged in "a cycle of thought and action based on their professional experience" (Wellington, 1991, p.4). Such critical, thinking teachers who base their practice in reflection over their professional experience have been technically termed as reflective teachers. Accordingly, reflective teaching has been defined as a teaching which involves constant examination of one's own teaching to take a more systematic approach to practices (Pickett, 1999).

Notwithstanding the heightened interest in promoting reflective teaching, it seems that this new conceptualization is suffering from a number of theoretical and practical problems which hinder its complete actualization in ELT settings (Akbari, 2007; Cuban, 1989; Grant & Zeichner, 1984). In this context, blind adherence to this view of teaching may lead to severe negative consequences (Akbari, 2007). To help facilitate a positive integration of reflective teaching into English language teaching contexts, teacher educators need to be equipped with a thorough knowledge of the constraints and limits in applying reflective teaching principles in ELT settings. A few studies have documented challenges English language teachers face in exercising reflective practice (examples are Akbari, 2007, 2008; Grant & Zeichner, 1984; Minott, 2010; Ostorga, 2006; Rashidi & Javidanmehr, 2012). Though valuable in elucidating the obstacles of reflective teaching in ELT contexts, these studies have largely neglected L2 teachers' voice in clarifying limitations which hinder them from being a reflective practitioner. As such, we can claim that ELT teachers' perceptions of problems with reflective teaching realization have not been adequately explored. The present study was carried out with the purpose of addressing this issue, namely ELT practitioners' understanding of obstacles of reflective teaching in English language teaching contexts.

## **2. Literature Review**

The thematic structure of this review divides the literature into two sections: The initial section has as its defining characteristic an explicit focus on theoretical issues concerning reflective teaching and the second section reviews related practical studies.

The emergence of reflective thinking has been recorded to be about a century ago when early philosophers and thinkers such as Dewey discussed the ideas on reflection or the idea of metacognition. Dewey (1933/1993) defines reflection as action based on “the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it” (p. 9). In his 1910 study, he had acknowledged the starting point for reflection to be, usually, a problem. In fact, he believed that people resort to reflection when they encounter problems which are too complex to be solved through mere logic. Munby and Russell (1990) call these problems, which function as the impetus for reflection, puzzles of practice.

Residing in these early ideas, a reflective teacher is defined as “one who critically examines his or her practices, comes up with some ideas as to how to improve his or her performance to enhance students’ learning, and puts those ideas into practice, what Schon (1983) calls the cycle of appreciation, action, and re-appreciation” (Akbari, Behzadpoor, & Dadvand, 2010). And the term *teacher reflection* points to teachers’ thoughtful decision making which contributes to improving personal development and academic performance of students (Bennett-Levy, 2003). Throughout this thinking process, teachers continually alternate between thought and action based on their professional experience (Wellington, 1991). In fact, reflective teaching links what teachers think about their teaching practices to what they do in the actual classroom settings. As such, reflective practice involves constant inquiry about one’s own teaching and then attempting to take a more systematic approach to practices and, at times, to work with others who had such common interests and questions as yours (Pickett, 1999).

Teacher reflection has been viewed to be of three related types based on the flow of thought and action the teacher follows. One type of reflection occurs during the class practices; another type happens in consequence to the class events and the last type precedes the class actions. Pickett (1999), Killon and Todnew (1991), and Schön (1983, 1987) have clearly explicated different types of reflection. According to them, the times when teachers are perplexed over puzzling class activities, while carrying them out, and need to make on-the-spot decisions, they need to apply reflection-in-action to resolve the problem. In fact, this type of reflection happens during the events in the classroom while teachers, for any reasons, cannot resort to the routine actions they perform in similar situations. The times when teachers reflect back on what happened in their classes, analyzing them consciously in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of roles of the teacher and student, the motivations and behaviors in the learning context, they are involved in reflection-on-action. Contrary to these two types of reflection, in which teacher thinking targets at current or past class routines, in reflection-for-action, teachers’ thinking is directed

at future courses of action. Teachers, in this type of reflection, benefit from the other two types of reflection in planning their future courses of actions.

To succeed in various types of reflection, teachers need to be equipped with three main characteristics, that is, open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. According to Dewey (1933/1993), open-mindedness relates to teachers' receptiveness to new ideas. In other words, open-minded teachers listen to and recognize the views and knowledge of others about their class events. Dewey defines responsible teachers as those who pay wise heed to the consequences of their actions, and wholehearted teachers as those who take risks in bringing meaningful changes in their students and schools. Farrell (2007), further, elaborates on attributes of reflective teachers by maintaining that reflective teachers carefully consider various aspects of their classes, including what they are doing, why they are doing this, and what will be the consequences of their conduct. Finally, by reflecting on these questions, as Salmani-Nodoushan (2006) also maintains, reflective teachers will be able to initiate necessary changes in their teaching and subsequently to take high control of their classes.

Notwithstanding the merits attributed to reflective teaching, a review of literature shows that this new perspective is suffering from a number of constraints, knowledge of which is a prerequisite to fostering reflection in educational setting (Akbari, 2007; Harun & Al-Amin, 2013). To help uncover the barriers of reflective teaching and, in consequence, to promote this practice, a number of scholars have recently turned their attention on this issue.

In the most comprehensive critique of reflective teaching, Akbari (2007) highlights the conceptual and practical flaws in reflective teaching. Among the conceptual flaws he enumerates are the vague and contradictory nature of reflection and ignorance of the critical dimensions thereof. He elaborates that historically and theoretically, reflection has been influenced by many trends and philosophies which make the term open to different interpretations, and that the current reflective views lack a critical dimension because the emphasis has mostly been on rational aspects of the term. Besides the theoretical problems, Akbari expresses dissatisfaction with how reflective teaching is practiced. The excessive attention to the retrospective aspect of reflection instead of the prospective, creative aspects of the concept and the lack of any evidence regarding the contribution of reflection and reflective teaching to professional development and improved teacher or student performance are among the main practical problems of reflective teaching he mentions. In his another study, Akbari (2008) reviews more detailed issues like limitations of textbooks and the tests, financial and administrative constraints, and disqualifications of some teachers to teach reflectively to be among practical obstacles of reflective teaching.

In addition to Akbari (2007, 2008), a growing number of empirical research projects have been conducted to investigate obstacles of reflective teaching in ELT contexts. Grant and Zeichner (1984), for instance, found that shortage of the class time and the conflict between the dominant institutional norms of the teaching place and the desired course of action are the main challenges reflective teachers face in their practice. To remove these problems, they proposed that reflection does not necessarily need to take place within the classrooms. In fact, it can occur out of the class (i.e., prior and posterior to the class for lesson planning and evaluation). Besides, to decrease the negative effect of the mandated policies, they suggested that an active role be given to teachers in the teaching place so that they can actualize their potential to act upon their beliefs even if they conflict with the dominant viewpoints in a given setting.

Giving an active role to teachers has additionally been favored by Ostorga (2006). In his study of the problems with implementing reflective teaching, he mentions that teachers are often stripped of their professional voice and given little freedom to make pedagogical reasoning. To actualize reflective teaching, he suggests that teachers be guided to develop their critical thinking so that they can reflect on their practice and make decisions based on sound reasoning. Besides the constraints imposed on teachers by the institutes, Ostorga recognizes the high demands reflective teaching makes of teachers as a second major obstacle of being reflective. To him, reflective teaching requires teachers to have high cognitive ability and conducive beliefs, values, and emotions. He exemplifies that the tasks required of reflective teachers (e.g., like composing reflective journals) are difficult for them to complete.

A few years later, Minott (2010) considered teachers' heavy workload, mandated policies or administrative requirements, disagreement with colleagues, poor student behavior and inadequate interpersonal relational skills as factors inhibiting reflective teaching. To overcome such negative factors, he proposed some coping strategies: to reduce the time teachers spend on lesson planning and in consequence to decrease their workload, he suggested that teachers use prepared lesson plans like those on the Web; to free teachers of administrative requirements, Minott proposed that the institutes hire more support/specialist staff to help relieve teachers of certain tasks; to deal with the mandated policies of the institutes, he recommended that teachers take adaptive behaviors and to perform subtle forms of resistance instead of open rebuttal and defiance of school policies; to handle poor student behavior which puts a strain on teacher-parent relationship, he proposed that teachers cultivate the social-emotional climate of the classrooms by fostering positive manners like friendliness, understanding, warmth and courtesies; and finally, to compensate for the inadequacy of the interpersonal skills in teaching

context, Minott suggests that teachers consider teaching as a social activity involving interpersonal relational skills.

More recently, Harun and Al-Amin (2013) explored the reasons for the unwillingness of the English teachers in Bangladesh in doing reflective teaching in their classes. They found that due to lack of proper pre-service and in-service teacher education programs especially in rural areas, the majority of the teachers do not know about reflective teaching techniques and practices. Besides teachers' lack of understanding of reflective teaching principles as being conducive to their unwillingness to be reflective, Harun and Al-Amin referred to time factor, power problem and contextual factors as other main inhibiting factors. They explain that teachers cannot manage class time to implement reflective teaching; they resent power conflict which may arise when working with colleagues in their reflective journey; and, they do not enjoy positive educational atmosphere and logistic support much needed for being reflective.

As the above studies indicate, a full realization of reflective teaching practices has not been achieved in different parts of the world due to both theoretical and practical problems. Few similar studies, to our knowledge, have been conducted to document challenges Iranian ELT teachers face in applying reflective teaching principles in their practices. For instance, in their study of the status of reflective teaching in Iran, Rashidi and Javidanmehr (2012) interviewed ELT teachers to find out the main issues contributing to lack of reflectivity in their teaching context. They found that the teachers' ignorance of reflective teaching principles which stemmed from the failure of Iran's educational system in fostering reflective teaching and developing reflective teachers was the main reason why the teachers were not reflective.

Overall, as the review of literature clarifies, despite extensive research on reflection and reflective teaching, the number of research on the existing obstacles and challenges in implementing reflective English teaching, especially from the teachers' point of view, is limited and L2 teachers' own perceptions in this regard have not been adequately explored. To attend to this neglect, this study was conducted to document a number of English language teachers' understanding of the obstacles and limitations in implementing reflective teaching in Iranian classrooms as well as the solutions they offer to these issues.

### **3. Methodology**

The current study aimed to find out the obstacles ELT teachers in Iran face in implementing reflective teaching and the solutions they offer dealing with these challenges. This part elaborates on the participants of the study, data collection procedure, and data analysis.

### **3.1. Participants**

In the first phase of the study, 60 ELT teachers teaching general English courses at six different language institutes were selected through convenience sampling. They were 14 males and 46 females from among which 19 teachers had completed their B.A. studies in TEFL, 15 had studied English literature for their B.A. program, five teachers had received their B.A. degree in translation studies, 17 teachers had received their advanced level certificate in English proficiency from language institutes and had B.A. majors not related to English, and four others had completed their M.A. in TEFL. Forty-eight participants were between 22 and 35 years old, whereas others were older than 35. Fifteen teachers had below three years of teaching practice, whereas 45 enjoyed between 3-10 years of teaching experience.

Later, 25 teachers, from among 49, out of 60, who were found to be reflective teachers based on the results of administering a reflectivity questionnaire developed by Akbari et al. (2010) expressed their willingness to participate in the second phase of the study (i.e., a semistructured interview). They were seven male and 18 female teachers, most of whom aged between 22 and 35. Nineteen teachers had more than 3 years of experience teaching general English courses to students at different levels of language proficiency, from starters to upper-intermediate levels. Four teachers held their M.A. in TEFL, 17 participants had B.A. degree in TEFL, English literature and translation studies, and four teachers received their B.A. degree in other majors. All the teachers had undergone a teacher training course (TTC) in their institute as a common certificate policy. A point worth mentioning is that though the teachers recognized to be unreflective, by the reflectivity questionnaire, could have contributed to the present study by elucidating their limits in applying reflectivity principles, due to space limitation of an article, the present study was delimited to inquiring, merely, reflective practitioners' ideas about obstacles to reflective teaching. Unreflective practitioners' ideas can be the subject of further research.

### **3.2. Data Collection Method**

To identify the reflective teachers from among 60 practitioners, a reflectivity questionnaire developed by Akbari et al. (2010) was employed. The questionnaire measures six different domains of teacher reflection including practical, cognitive, metacognitive, and affective critical reflection using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). To confirm the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, Akbari et al. (2010) piloted the instrument on a group of ELT teachers; the Cronbach's alpha reliability was estimated to be 0.91. Their Exploratory and Confirmatory Data Analysis (EDA and CDA) confirmed the construct validity of the questionnaire. Moreover, to check the content validity of the

instrument, they consulted experts' opinions as well as domain knowledge interactively.

In the second phase of the study, semistructured interviews were used as the primary method for collecting data. Semistructured interview is a verbal process consisting of predetermined semiformal questions which allow for additional clarification and/or exploration of the questions or answers when needed (Dörnyei, 2007). The aim of the interview was to document the obstacles ELT teachers face in implementing reflective teaching along with the solutions they think can help overcome challenges.

### ***3.3. Data Collection Procedure***

To collect the data, we first contacted the managers of six language institutes in Bandar Abbas to gain their permission to contact their teachers. Sixty teachers who had comprised the majority of practitioners teaching at the contacted institutes were selected through convenience sampling. We met all the participants in person so as to explain research aims, purposes, and procedures to them. Receiving their consent, we administered the reflectivity questionnaire to them: Some filled out the instrument in the institute, whereas others sent it back through e-mail. Analyzing the questionnaire responses, we found that 49 teachers could be considered to be reflective.

In a later stage, 25 teachers from among the reflective ones volunteered to take part in the interview. At the beginning of the interview, we provided the interviewees with an explanation of reflective teaching principles trying to make them more familiar with characteristics of a reflective educator. Then, the main questions were asked to explore the interviewees' points of view regarding problems they might have faced or the ones they might face in the future in their attempts to be reflective. Later, they were asked to offer solutions which could help overcome the challenges. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and, in a few cases, through making phone calls. Each interview took around 20 to 25 min; meanwhile, all the interviews were audiorecorded to be transcribed for later analysis. The language of the interview was decided by the participants to be Persian; as such, the interviews were later translated into English by the researchers.

### ***3.4. Data Analysis***

To analyze responses to the questionnaires, we followed the same procedure as employed by the questionnaire developers. As the questionnaire consisted of 29 items and the highest score one could get in each item was 5, the total score a teacher could receive was 145 which results in 72/5 when divided into 2. All the teachers with a score of 73—which is slightly higher than the middle



point and above were—were identified as reflective teachers, whereas those with a score of below 73 were identified as unreflective teachers.

Later, using inductive analysis procedure (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the transcribed data of the interviews were subjected to content analysis, that is, following the content transcription of interview data, the transcribed interviews were, first, segmented into condensed meaning units; each condensed meaning unit comprised a number of independent meaning units which were organized on the basis of their content into condensed meaning units. Next, these condensed meaning units were classified under their relevant categories—an umbrella term for condensed meaning units with a similar thematic core. In a later stage, the categories were labeled. The following extracts from different teachers' responses help clarify the way segmentation, categorization, and labeling proceeded in practice:

*Example 1*

*Some teachers have other jobs (1), they do not spend enough time to keep themselves updated with recent approaches to English teaching (2).*

As can be observed, the above piece of transcribed interview represents one condensed meaning unit or simply one case of obstacle of reflective teaching, reported by a teacher. To be more particular, this obstacle consists of two separate chunks, or more technically, independent meaning units, with the same underlying theme, which is concerned with the obstacles in which the source of the problem is with the teachers themselves. This condensed meaning unit and other similar cases were later labeled as *Lack of Time*. It should be noted that, in most cases, the researcher felt no need to do the initial segmentation of the transcribed data into independent meaning units and could simply identify the condensed meaning units, or cases of the obstacles as reported by the teachers, reading through the transcription.

*Example 2*

*Some teachers do not seem to be interested in any improvements in their work (1). They simply teach as routine and resent any type of changes in their practice (2).*

Example 2 marks another case of obstacle, or condensed meaning unit, with a focus different from the one above. This problem which comprises two independent meaning units represents another teachers' recollection about the problem she feels inhibits teachers from acting reflectively. Based on their common focus, these independent units were organized into the condensed meaning unit *Teachers' Lack of Interest*.

When all the transcribed data were segmented into condensed meaning units and labeled, the condensed meaning units were, further, scrutinized to find their similar thematic cores and to group them under categories of obstacles. Hence, the problems with a common focus were classed under the same obstacle categories—this practice was done with the aim of condensing the data into a more meaningful and more manageable form in a research paper and a more comparable one. The above two examples and similar cases were found to share similar content and were included in the same category which was later labeled as *Self-Directional Problems*. Finally, the analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three main obstacle categories. Later, the solutions the teachers proposed for the problems they had mentioned were put under the same three broad categories.

To make sure the participant teachers concurred with the categorization of the data, some instances of segmentation, categorization, and labeling of their responses were checked with them. Because the participants had busy schedules, they could only review parts of the transcripts: 21 teachers could check around a third of the analysis of their own interview. In 99% of the cases, consensus was obtained between the researchers and teachers over the categorizations.

At the same time, to check the interrater reliability of the content analysis phase (i.e., segmentation and labeling) a second party—a colleague familiar with the study's analytic scheme—was asked to reexamine 20% of all the transcribed data, a procedure believed to increase the reliability of the findings (Gass & Mackey, 2000). The results of this second round of content analysis yielded 98% consistency between the researchers' analyses and those of the outside examiner. In addition, this second rater was systematically consulted throughout the project and in cases when the segmented meaning units could fit into more than one category.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

The study's final results are presented in three separate sections: the first section gives an overview of the result of teachers' responses to the reflectivity questionnaire. The second section outlines the types of obstacles teachers reported which could inhibit them or their colleagues from implementing reflective teaching in their classes, and the last section presents strategies and solutions teachers proposed to help overcome the problems.

##### ***4.1. Responses to Questionnaire***

The results of analysis of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire showed that, from among the 60 teachers, 49 teachers were more and high reflective teachers proportionally with the scores of 73 (out of 145 as the total score) and

above, and 11 teachers were less and the least reflective teachers proportionally with the scores below 73. Table 1 represents descriptive statistics of all the respondents' scores on the reflectivity questionnaire:

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Responses to Questionnaire*

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Responses	60	79	49	128	93.8	20.4

#### **4.2. Obstacles in Reflective Teaching**

Reading through the interview transcripts, we classified the obstacles of reflective teaching into three broad categories: institutional problems, self-directional problems, and problems with reflective teaching principles. The following section provides a brief account of the main points mentioned by the participants along with the examples from the teachers' utterances *italicized*:

##### **4.2.1. Institutional problems**

The obstacles which were related to the constraints imposed on the teachers by the institutes were categorized as institutional problems. More specifically, they were the obstacles the sources of which originated from lack of facilities in language institutes, mandated policies, and administrative requirements. Analyzing the interview transcripts, it was found that most of the teacher respondents were dissatisfied with their institute's ignorance or lack of prerequisites to providing opportunities for teacher development in one way or another. A number of them referred to *lack of access to databases to find new materials, books and journals, and to keep themselves more updated like reflective teachers*. Also, they were unhappy they *did not have opportunities to share their experiences with other teachers and to benefit from theirs by participating in related workshops or seminars*. Besides lack of facilities, the teachers were upset with the policies of the institute which restricted their chances of being reflective. For instance, they resented *supervisors' disrespecting their authority in using varying teaching styles, techniques and strategies which is a prerequisite to teaching more reflectively*. Even worse, as the participants mentioned, because they *were not permitted to give the students failing grades due to the subsequent dissatisfaction of the students and their parents and consequently lower rate of student enrollment in that institute, weak students were given passing grades. This resulted in classes with heterogeneous level students*. Needless to say, how much difficult it has been for the teachers to spend time on being reflective while doing their best to teach such a multi-level class. As another policy of the institutes, the teachers were additionally troubled with *reduced class time and the burden on their shoulders to finish dictated amounts of materials throughout a semester which prevented them from having the time to*

*reflect on their classes.* Also about the classes, the teachers were dissatisfied with teaching in overcrowded classrooms; the large number of the students in a class necessitated the teachers' *spending a huge part of the class on checking the students' assignments and their pace of learning*, leaving almost no time for them to reflect on their teaching.

#### **4.2.1.2. Self-directional problems**

Besides institutional problems, the teacher participants, in their recollections, enumerated other obstacles which were related to teachers themselves. Examples are the teachers' lack of interest in keeping themselves up to date, their long working hours, their low-language proficiency, and their majoring in fields other than English. For some of these problems, like the teachers' low motivation and their workload, it seems that the source of the obstacle still originates from the external sources. As they stated, *mainly due to low payment, teachers are not motivated enough to make positive changes in their teaching practices by keeping up with recent innovations in the field.* On this account, they have no impetus for being reflective. According to them, the low payment brings about other negative consequences, as well; *teachers have no choices other than teaching for longer hours to make enough money to afford their expenses.* It seems that even if some teachers are interested in upgrading themselves, long teaching hours prevents them from having the time to read about new conceptualizations in the field. Also relevant to teachers was their low-language proficiency and their majoring in fields other than teaching English; as teachers declared *a substantial number of teachers in language institutes, especially those farther from the capital, suffer from low levels of language proficiencies which results in their not being able to read and understand reflective teaching principles, among other things.* Moreover, *a considerable part of the teacher population in language institutes is composed of practitioners who do not have a degree in English teaching.* As such, they are not familiar enough with diverse teaching approaches, principles, techniques, strategies, reflective teaching included.

#### **4.2.1.3. Problems with reflective teaching principles**

In addition to the obstacles which originated from language institutes or teachers themselves, participants listed other problems more related to the high demands reflective teaching makes of teachers or the nature of the approach itself. For instance, most teachers found it *very challenging to become equipped with reflective teacher characteristics, like open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness.* Overall, they thought they needed to improve their critical thinking before all this process happens. Needless to say, what a high cognitive ability and potential, and how much time and persistence it needs to become a critical thinker. Among the three types of reflection, that is, reflection for action,

reflection in action, and reflection on action, teachers recalled that they *needed a rich knowledge base of alternatives and high potential for on-the-spot decision making to be able to reflect in actions*. Furthermore, they had the idea that the types of tasks required of reflective teachers like *writing reflective journals, observing other classes and being observed by them, and peer discussions are extremely burdensome for teachers*. Besides the complexities involved in doing the tasks allotted to teachers, a number of respondents commented on the strain among teachers to motivate the pupils for doing the tasks assigned for them, like writing reflective journals.

Burdens on the teachers' and students' shoulders imposed by reflective teaching principles were not the only obstacles the teachers mentioned within this category. Another problem which, further, demotivated teachers from becoming reflective was lack of comprehensive studies on the impact of reflecting teaching on teacher and student development. They reasoned that they *had not been informed of real classes in which teachers' reflection resulted in higher student achievements*. Such insufficiency of empirical studies on the benefits of reflective teaching for student and teacher professional development along with the complexities involved in the approach itself made it too tedious for teachers to apply reflectivity in their practice.

The above section categorized obstacles the teacher participants felt in implementing reflective teaching in Iran. Reviewing the literature on challenges of reflective teaching, we extracted examples of three types of obstacles as mentioned by our teachers from the few similar studies. Related to the institutional problems, Grant and Zeichner (1984), Ostorga (2006), Akbari (2008), Minott (2010), and Rashidi and Javidanmehr (2012) had already expressed regret over the mandated policies, administrative requirements and constraints, and contextual factors of the institutes which hinders teachers from being reflective. To them, financial constraints, limitations of textbooks and the tests, teachers' lack of autonomy to actualize their potential to act upon their beliefs even if they conflict with the dominant viewpoints in the institutes, disagreements with colleagues, inadequate interpersonal relational skills, and shortage of the class time are the main inhibiting factors. To Grant and Zeichner (1984), the fast-paced unpredictable nature of the classrooms makes ELT teachers to adopt intuitiveness instead of reflectivity in their classes.

Besides institutional problems, few scholars focused attention on the teachers' self-directional problems. Akbari (2008) and Minott (2010), for instance, seem dissatisfied with the teachers' heavy workload, which leaves them no time or willingness to act as reflective practitioners. For the same reason, Akbari (2008) resembles teachers to factory workers with high-working hours and low payments.

More recently, Rashidi and Javidanmehr (2012) regret over the teachers' lack of incentive for growth and development, in general, and reflective teaching, in particular, due to their having a poorly paid occupation. Besides the teachers' lack of interest and heavy workload, Akbari (2008) and Harun and Al-Amin (2013) refer to the disqualification of teachers to teach reflectively which may stem from their majoring in fields irrelevant to language teaching, their low levels of language proficiency, or what is less related to the teachers' potential and capability, lack of proper teacher education programs.

Regarding the problems with reflective teaching principles, some scholars like Grant and Zeichner (1984) view reflective teaching as something unrealistic and even undesirable due to complexities involved in its realization. More specifically, Ostorga (2006) enumerates high demands reflective teaching makes of teachers like developing critical thinking and difficulties of doing reflective assignments like composing reflective journals and autobiographical narratives.

### **4.3. Solutions to Obstacles in Reflective Teaching**

In addition to the obstacles in reflective teaching, the participants were asked about the solutions they could think of helping remove the problems. In the following, the strategies the teachers proposed for dealing with three types of obstacles will be exemplified:

#### **4.3.1. Solutions to the institutional problems**

To deal with the problems arisen from institutional constraints, the teachers suggested that *facilities be provided for teachers so that they can keep up with recent innovations in the field by having full access to the main databases of their major*. Needless to say, this way they can go through valid journals of the field, read books and proceedings of the conferences. Furthermore, the practitioners seemed eager to be provided with *more opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues in the same institute and others teaching in other settings*. They proposed *holding seminars, workshops and teachers' communication groups by the managers and also supporting teachers financially and logistically to participate in the gatherings*. As to their lack of authority, the teachers greatly felt the need *to be given autonomy in their practice so they can make appropriate decisions on critical incidents of their class resorting to new and old teaching techniques, strategies and approaches as the situation necessitates*. The participants gave suggestions on the testing system of the institutes, as well because they had difficulties teaching students at various levels of language proficiency in the same class; they favored *a much stricter testing system which could distinguish between weak and strong students*. They believed *if a strict system be applied in all language institutes, then, all students will find out that their failure to move on to a higher level at a typical language institute means failure to*

*be given such an opportunity in all other language institutes. As such, the supervisors would not fear that their failed students would enroll in other institutes with the hope that they will be given a passing grade there. All this results in the teachers' having a more homogeneous class in terms of language proficiency and consequently their having some time left to focus their attention on their teaching practices, strategies and techniques. Finally, they offered that the number of students in each class be reduced so that the teacher can manage students' learning better and to keep up with reflective teaching principles.*

#### **4.3.2. Solutions to the self-directional problems**

Additionally, the teachers had recommendations on the obstacles related to them. To help increase their interest, motivation, and willingness to update themselves, the respondents expected that *higher payment provide required impetus for teachers to take their job more seriously, trying to keep up with the best teaching techniques and approaches. A high payment also removes the need for instructors to teach long hours to afford their expenses. This helps free their time to concentrate on making transformations in their teaching based on current established approaches.* As to the problem of the practitioners' low levels of language proficiency and their having majors other than English, the teachers suggested that *more care be given in hiring teachers with a high level of proficiency and degrees relevant to teaching.* The participants seemed certain that this meticulous method of teacher recruitment, besides helping improve reflective teaching within the teacher community, benefits language institutes, too, by removing the need for them to hold many TTCs so as to improve their proficiency and to familiarize them with recent teaching approaches.

#### **4.3.3. Solutions to problems with reflective teaching principles**

The main solution the teachers proposed for the complexity of reflective teaching principles was to hold proper teacher education programs. They believed *a mere focus on conceptual issues related to reflective teaching in preparation courses cannot help teachers actualize reflective teaching principles in their classes.* An alternative they proposed was *to make transformations in teacher education courses so that they will add a practical orientation to their focus.* As such, once teachers are familiarized with a theoretical definition of a concept, idea, or principle related to reflective teaching, they will *be given opportunities to see it in action in the educators' simulated demonstration of a real class and other teachers' presentations.* In case teachers were having their actual classes at a language institute at the same time of participating in the training course, they could *practice the learned reflective principles in their real class and later, in their next meeting, let the colleagues and the educator know about if they were successful.* Then, all can

discuss the pros and cons associated with performing reflectivity principles and will benefit from their colleagues' suggested alternatives.

The above section sketched an outline of the solutions and coping strategies the teacher participants proposed for the obstacles of reflective teaching in Iran. Reviewing related literature, we extracted strategies similar to the ones proposed by the current respondents from few similar studies. Concerning the problems originating from institutional policies, Schön (1987) encouraged authorities to provide facilities for teachers so that they can read new resources and materials about learning and teaching and, in consequence, to improve their reflective teaching. To the same aim, Parson and Stephenson (1995) referred to the need to provide opportunities for teachers to have informal conversations with peers, to try team-teaching experiences, to participate in seminars/workshops, and to ask for peer review; they reckon these factors contribute to improved teacher motivation and increased collegiality for reflective teachers. In addition to the solutions offered to assist teachers become more up to date with recent innovations in the field, scholars attended to teachers' lack of autonomy in their workplace. Grant and Zeichner (1984), Cuban (1989), and Ostorga (2006) are few researchers who favor giving professional voice to teachers so that they can make pedagogical reasoning which is a prerequisite to teaching reflectively. In contrast with those who perceive teachers as channels between theorists and administrators, Cuban (1989) views teachers as problem solvers who have the ability to think critically, do analysis, and make effective decisions in their classroom context.

In addition to the scarce number of solutions offered in the literature to help remove administrative constraints, strategies have been proposed to deal with teachers' self-directional obstacles. On the premise that teaching for many teachers is a job, not a career, and teachers are often not willing to participate in any professional development that would task them with extra responsibilities, Johnston (1997) argues that the payment assigned for ELT teachers should be to the extent that they look at their teaching as a career and devote more time and attention to improving it. Lafayette (1993) and Medgyes (2001) treat linguistic improvement as a fundamental component of a language teachers' professional competence and encourage nonnative English teachers to improve their English language proficiency if they want to be more reflective in their teaching. Like our participants, Moshá (2004) goes for modifications in teachers' recruitment system. He has offered some meticulous guidelines in this process to involve just those teachers that are knowledgeable and at the same time conscious about what their missions are in society. Finally, Schön (1987) highlights attending initial TTCs as one way by which inexperienced teachers can improve their reflective teaching. No references



have been made, however, to how teacher education programs can ameliorate the problems teachers have with the complexity of reflective teaching principles.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study is a further proof of the idea that reflective teaching suffers from a number of theoretical and practical problems, as envisioned by Akbari (2007). The teacher participants reported a multitude of obstacles in reflective teaching which could hinder its full realization in their teaching contexts. Challenges they enumerated could be classified into three broad categories of institutional problems, self-directional problems, and problems with reflective teaching principles. Institutional problems included lack of facilities and opportunities for teachers to upgrade themselves, lack of teacher autonomy, heterogeneous and overcrowded classes. Self-directional problems comprised obstacles related to the teachers' lack of motivation, their heavy workload, their disqualification due to their low-language proficiency or their majoring in fields other than teaching. Problems with reflective teaching principles were concerned with the demanding nature of the approach itself and the complexities involved in its implementation in language classes.

To help remove the obstacles of reflective teaching, the teacher participants, further, proposed guidelines addressing administrators, supervisors, and teacher educators to help foster reflectivity. To the institutional problems, they suggested that administrators and supervisors of the institutes provide facilities for teachers so that they can access online databases, e-journals and e-books of the field; provide opportunities for them to attend workshops and seminars promoting conversations between teachers and giving teachers professional voice; modify the testing system of the institute; and decrease the number of the students in the classes. To ameliorate self-directional obstacles, the teachers offered that the authorities of the institute think about motivational factors like higher payment to help add to the teachers' interest and motivation in their profession and proposed stricter teacher recruitment systems to be able to hire better qualified teachers. As to the obstacles with reflective teaching principles, the respondents unanimously attributed a central role to teacher education programs in the country. To them, not only do teacher education courses require to include discussions on reflective teaching, but they also are in desperate need of providing opportunities for teachers to practice reflectivity.

Even though sporadic references are made in the literature on reflective teaching to the challenges in applying this approach in ELT contexts and coping strategies thereof, the present study provides a comprehensive overview of the obstacles in reflective teaching and solutions to them from the ELT teachers' perspective. Based on the participants' ideas and a review of literature, it is suggested that the authorities give teachers more chances of accessing materials they

require to enhance their knowledge of recent innovations in the field; provide opportunities for teachers to practice a collaborative style of professional development so that they can challenge their existing theories and their own preconceived views of teaching (as proposed by Kettle & Sellars, 1996); respect teachers' creativity so that they can actualize their potential to act upon their beliefs and to make pedagogical choices; pay more attention to the assessment procedures so that they can discriminate between students; decrease the burden on teachers' shoulders by decreasing the volume of the material they have to teach and the number of the students. Whereas these strategies can help improve teachers' enthusiasm in their work, it is suggested that higher payments be provided to teachers to add to their impetus for keeping up with new teaching approaches and to remove the need for them to work long hours for making a living.

The major role of teacher education courses in preparing qualified reflective teachers should not be neglected. The teacher educators of the field agree that teacher reflection must be included as an inseparable part of teacher education programs today and that designing and implementing such programs are of utmost importance to the ELT profession (Akbari, 2007; Halliday, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In order to fulfill the need to actualize reflective teaching into practice, we feel that teacher education must look for sophisticated alternatives to the mainly theoretically-based programs to be capable of responding to the demands made of ELT teachers. As such, teacher educators can try out different activities envisioned by a theoretical understanding of reflective teaching so as to help teachers' initiation into the world of practice. For instance, they can familiarize teachers with different types of reflection through providing opportunities for them to internalize those types through trial and error either throughout the course or in their actual teaching sessions and by giving them voice to express their thoughts in the class. To give them voice, teacher educators can hold small and large group discussions with teachers about their experiences or to encourage them to collaborate with their colleagues in peer reflective groups. To further elucidate reflective teaching for teachers, teacher educators can design explicit awareness raising activities of what, how, and when reflection should be conducted. Hopefully, these practical orientations suggested briefly above can help ELT teachers reconcile with reflective teaching principles and improve their teaching accordingly.

The fact that we only selected teachers from language institutes in a southern city in Iran means that more research is needed in this area. More extensive data collection with teachers selected from other institutes across the country, undoubtedly, will result in more valid interpretations of the obstacles of reflective teacher education courses in Iran. Furthermore, it is suggested that further research

focus attention on the degree to which coping strategies proposed here can help improve teachers' reflectivity.

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