

DEVELOPING REFLECTIVE SKILLS AMONG EFL STUDENT TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper reports the results of a qualitative research study designed to examine the effects of guided written and oral reflections for developing reflective thinking skills¹ among Arab-Muslim female student teachers in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education program in Israel. Guidance was provided in the framework of a one-year practicum. Besides employing some qualitative research methods such as observations and conducting interviews, a pre-post questionnaire to examine changes in the participants' perceptions of reflective skills was administered. The results indicate some improvement in the students' reflective abilities. However, a more structured practice teaching program, time and ample opportunities for practice and reflection are needed to help Arab Muslim student teachers further develop their reflective abilities.*

KEYWORDS: Developing reflective skills, Guided reflections, EFL, Student Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Developing reflective thinking means helping student teachers think about their experiences, analyze their beliefs, values or knowledge in relation to these experiences and consider options or alternatives for action (Ferraro, 2000). This research deals with the issue of developing reflective thinking skills among Arab Muslim female student teachers in a pre-service teacher education program in Israel. On the one hand, their previous learning experiences are based on rote learning and memorization; on the other hand, they study in a Jewish college that adopts Western pedagogy that requires students to reflect on their learning. In addition, they are trained to be qualified to teach English, which requires them to develop their reflective skills.

The purpose of the study is to examine the ways, strategies and techniques employed for developing the student teachers' reflective abilities. These strategies included lesson observation and evaluation, post-lesson discussions and portfolios providing guided written and verbal reflections. Written guided reflections were required for evaluating the lessons taught by them, their classmates and the school mentors. They referred to the pros and cons of each lesson, indicating what should be included in future lessons, and mentioning the reasons. Similarly, guided reflections were part of the post-lesson discussions held during the team meetings.

This work is a pioneering research on the issue of developing reflective skills among Arab female student teachers in Israel. The role of a pedagogical advisor is framed by the current thinking on English as a Foreign Language instruction (EFL), which requires student teachers to develop their reflective thinking skills through employing a variety of approaches, strategies, and techniques, evaluating them and offering alternatives (Richards and Farrell, 2011). To

¹ In this article reflective skills, reflective abilities and reflective practice represent the same concept.

qualify EFL teachers in the contemporary world, there is a need to help trainees examine their own work, evaluate their own performance and suggest alternatives for better performance, which continues with the need for developing student teachers' reflective abilities.

Learning and teaching have become a lifelong process rather than an end in itself. It is a lifelong experience of trial, error, and inquiry (Al-Issa, 2005; Strakov'a, 2009) . Therefore, student teachers are expected to be reflective thinkers and teacher educators are their advisors (Farr, 2010). In an EFL context, which is also the context of this research, language teacher educators are seen as facilitators and are expected to provide support and opportunities for practice and reflection (Jarvis, Holford & Griffin, 2004; Jarvis, 2006; Richards & Farrel, 2005; Richards & Farrell, 2011). They are expected to help student teachers develop their reflective skills for self-evaluation, knowledge and pedagogy in general (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), and language pedagogy in specific (Richards & Farrell, 2011). To do so, teacher educators must hold frequent meetings with the students to analyze situations in order to help them develop their reflective skills.

The research emerged from the need to help my students be more independent thinkers and reflectors in order to be well-qualified EFL teachers in the 21st century. The patterns of thinking and modes of behavior of my students are not in line with Western style pedagogy adopted in some educational environments in the Gulf States and in the context of this study. So the focus is on students constructing meaning rather than teachers serving as sources of knowledge and on creativity and reflective practice rather than on rote learning.

Conducting this study was important for me as a teacher educator who comes from the same culture and is considered a role model who realized the advantages of acquiring reflective thinking skills while pursuing graduate studies in the United States of America. Moreover, I consider myself an agent for change who endeavors to work constantly and systematically to provide my students with emotional as well as professional help and support through multiple opportunities for practice teaching to develop their reflective skills.

The present study was aimed at examining the effect of guided reflective techniques employed to develop reflective thinking skills among Arab pre-service female teachers in Israel, who are highly influenced by their previous learning experiences which were based on rote learning and memorization. Thus, the research question was: what effect do these guided reflective techniques have on the development of their reflective thinking skills?

THE STUDY

Developing reflective skills among student teachers

Reflecting means thinking about actions with a view to their importance, evaluating them, and seeking possible solutions or alternatives (Ferraro, 2000). It involves challenging and questioning current beliefs and assumptions, and seeking alternatives (Murray & Kujundzic, 2005). According to Ma & Ren (2011) reflective teaching is the process of self-study or self-learning, where the teacher learns about himself/herself through exploring teaching and learning activities (Ma & Ren, 2011). It even makes him/her more initiative and responsible. Many studies have been conducted to examine the usefulness of reflective practice in teacher education. For example, the findings of a study which was designed to examine the reflective journal entries of 42 trainee teachers during practicum in Malaysian schools indicated that

approximately 77% of the trainees mentioned that the reflective journal “assisted them in evaluating their teaching methods, strengths and weaknesses of their own teaching, problems in teaching, and identifying materials and aids for their teaching” (Nooreiny, 2007, p. 205). Another study was reported by Pedro (2005) which focused on the use of reflective practice by pre-service teachers who were required to reflect on their own performance as well as their peers by completing a reflective learning journal. The findings suggest that the participants of the research “had a general understanding of reflection and learned to reflect through various opportunities, and in different contexts” (p. 49).

Another research study was conducted by Clarke and Otkay (2006) to examine the appropriateness of reflective practice among female student teachers in a new teacher education program at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the UAE. The findings reveal that Emirati women wholeheartedly embrace reflective practice “demonstrating considerable self-awareness of their capacity to growth, development and change” (Clarke & Otkay, 2006, 118).

The need for developing reflective skills for ESL/EFL student teachers

In the literature on second-language teaching, theorists have presented a contemporary perspective by recommending a variety of approaches, strategies, and techniques to teach the language effectively and help learners learn successfully (Richards & Farrell, 2011). Language Teacher Education programs (LTE) must encourage and support students for risk-taking with alternative models and experiencing them (Farr, 2010). Developing teacher expertise is an on-going process that cannot be achieved in year-long LTE programs (Ibid.). Therefore, trainees are encouraged to discover what works best in the context where they will work, reflect on what is happening around them in class, and learn from experiences (Strakov'a, 2009). To do so, student teachers must observe different kinds of second-language classrooms in terms of organization, practices, and norms. Observation would enable them to develop awareness of the kinds and levels of possible classroom interactions because it can expose them to different teaching styles and provide opportunities for reflective thinking (Richards, 1998). To develop trainees' reflective thinking abilities, they should not only observe lessons, but also evaluate and reflect on them as well as on their actual teaching through guided oral and written reflections.

According to Kupara-Spencer (2011), written evaluations of lessons are carried out through writing about what student teachers have done and what they have learned from their teaching experiences with the purpose of examining their teaching experiences and diagnosing their strengths and weaknesses, with a view to improving future lessons. Post-lesson discussions involve thinking retrospectively on what has been done in the lesson (Nyumwe & Mtetwa, 2011). Retrospective reflective thinking allows student teachers to explore the effectiveness of their instructional strategies (Galvez-Martin, 2003).

The need for developing reflective skills among Arab student teachers

Arab Muslim students in Israel are highly influenced by their prior educational experiences which are based on transmission of material, memorization, copying and rote learning (Author, 2011; Al-Haj, 1996 ; Eilam, 2002). Similar observations have been reported by scholars and educators in the Arab world such as Al-Issa (2005) and Sonleitner and Khelifa (2005) besides others who teach Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia like Al-Zubaidi (2012) & Ibrahim & Nambiar (2011). Suliman & Tadors (2011) mentioned that Arab students are expected to make a shift from being passive learners to active ones, “from total reliance on the teacher to reliance

on their own judgment, and from being a repository for rote-memorization of facts to being critical thinkers" (p. 402). In other words, they are expected to adopt critical thinking in order to be able to negotiate meaning, make decisions and rationalize their choices to continue their English studies at the college level successfully.

Since pre-college educational environments are teacher-centered in this sector, the absolute authority is the teacher's who usually does not encourage students to express their opinions or ask questions (Al-Haj, 1996; Al-Issa, 2005; Eilam, 2002; Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2005). As a result, Arab Muslim students tend to prefer a control-oriented approach over an experiential approach of trial and error and reflective thinking (Al-Issa, 2005). Collectivism and group orientation are reflected in their daily behavior (Author, 2011; Eilam, 2002; Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2005; Prowse, 2007). For example, Sonleitner & Khelifa (2005) mentioned that "students are rarely alone at any time on campus, and close social relationships are central to them. They expect their teachers to care for them, and are disappointed if they are spoken to brusquely" (p. 4). Similar observations were reported by Eilam (2002) about Arab students in Israeli campuses.

The advantages of acquiring reflective strategies by Arab Muslim students were discussed by different Arab educators. For instance, Allmnakhra (2013), Al-Issa (2005), Al-Thani and Nasser (2012) and Sonleitner and Khelifa (2005) emphasize the need for such practice to elevate their level of education, improve their performance and develop effective learning environments. In contrast, Richardson (2004) claims that reflective practice might not be the best interest of Arab Muslim student teachers if they will be recruited in local schools. However, Littelwood (2011), a teacher educator who worked with student teachers in the UAE, recommends clarifying and simplifying reflective teaching to Arab student teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study were six third-year female Arab students, who majored in EFL, in a four-year program for teaching at a teacher education college in central Israel. They were in early twenties and in the third year of their studies. The EFL teacher education program covers three areas: language competence and performance, teacher education in general, and language pedagogy in particular. The participants practiced teaching at a junior high school in a nearby Arab town. In the first year of the program, students only observed classes for one semester. However, they do practice teaching once a week in the second and third years.

In addition, they practiced teaching intensively for five consecutive days twice throughout the school year. During this year in which the study was conducted, each taught once a week, for five hours, and I accompanied them in my capacity as pedagogical advisor. They also attended a didactic seminar course at the college which was designed to familiarize them with current pedagogy as well as with methods of teaching ESL/EFL in junior high schools. To better develop their reflective skills, the student teachers were also required to reflect on the required reading materials, class discussions and activities in this pedagogy course indicating things they liked or disliked, ideas they found relevant or important and the opposite and providing reasons for their preferences. To preserve anonymity, the participants chose pseudonyms which will be used throughout this paper: Daboul, Nola, Zuzu, Dobi, Salim, and Cool.

Data collection

The six student teachers were required to teach a lesson every week, observe two lessons, fill in observation sheets of lessons delivered by their mentors or by other student teachers, and participate in team meetings with their fellow students, the pedagogical adviser and their school mentors. For practice teaching, the student teachers were required to fill in a lesson plan sheet, which required them to describe their steps, prepare an extra task to help them survive in cases of emergency, evaluate their own performance and reflect on it while mentioning what activities should be used or should not be used in future lessons and why. The aim for filling in the last section of the lesson plan sheets was to support them in developing their reflective thinking skills by evaluating their performance, indicating strengths as well as weaknesses, and looking for alternatives for future lessons.

The student teachers were also expected to make observation notes when they observed each other or the teacher educator. They completed a form in which they were expected to fill in the name of the observed student teachers, time, grade level, the performance of the observed student teacher and his/her interaction with the pupils. They were required to add their reflections pinpointing the successful activities and the less successful ones and providing reasons for their evaluation. Pre-lesson discussions took place in the didactic seminar course at the college which exposed them to current pedagogy as well as to methods of teaching ESL/EFL in junior high schools. In this course, the participants were required to reflect on the reading materials, class discussions and activities mentioning advantages and disadvantages, things they liked or disliked and others that sound important or relevant and providing reasoning for their opinions.

Post-lesson discussions for evaluation were held in the mandatory team meetings which were attended by the student teachers, their school mentors, and the pedagogical adviser and were convened to discuss the students' preparation and practice.

The six student teachers were also required to submit three portfolios throughout the school year: one at the end of the first intensive practical work week, another at the end of the first academic semester, and the third at the end of the second intensive practical work week, which coincided with the end of the school year. Besides the lesson plans and observation notes, each participant was expected to include three reflections in the portfolios to indicate whether they had experienced any changes in their lesson preparation and classroom performance as a result of their successful and less successful teaching experiences and lesson observations.

Individual conferences were held occasionally with those who were not performing well aiming to meet their needs and to help them develop their thinking skills. Data sources were: (1) the three portfolios that included (a) the lesson plan sheets, (b) the three reflections, (c) the observation notes of the student teachers, (2) my observation notes as a pedagogical adviser and notes that documented the discussions during the team meetings and the individual meetings, (3) two questionnaires, (4) interviews and (5) videotaped lessons.

- 1) The lesson plan forms included four sections: lesson description, an alternative task, self-evaluation and reflection. The pre-service teachers were required to evaluate their performance indicating their strengths and weaknesses in the self-evaluation section, and they were expected to reflect on their performance providing the reasons for the choice of activities and considering other possibilities or alternatives.

- 2) The three reflection texts submitted in the portfolio included the students' reflections in terms of evaluating their teaching practices experiences and indicating changes in their lesson preparation and performance.
- 3) The student teachers' observation notes included a reflective part, which required the trainees to reflect on the lessons delivered by their peers and the school mentors.
- 4) My observation notes included a description of the students' performance and progress.
- 5) Transcripts of the weekly team meetings that included descriptions of the students' responses to the feedback given by me and the school mentors were be part of the raw data.
- 6) Transcripts of the individual meetings with the students discussing the contents of their portfolios and progress were part of the data gathering.
- 7) Despite the fact that the number of the participants in this research is very small, pre-post questionnaires were developed to examine changes in perceptions, beliefs, knowledge, and performance as a result of their practice teaching throughout the school year. These questionnaires included closed as well as open-ended questions about their expectations from the pedagogical adviser, lesson plans, observation notes, writing reflections and the idea of videotaping their lessons. The first questionnaire was filled in by the participants in the first week of their practice teaching and the second at the end of the school year. To guarantee objectivity, the questionnaires were collected and kept until the end of the school year, after grades were submitted.
- 8) In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by a research assistant to elicit the student teachers' reactions and thoughts about the way in which they were advised for developing their thinking reflective skills. Each interview lasted about half an hour.
- 9) Videotaping "can provide an insight into the trainees' teaching style that s/he is not aware of" (Richards & Farrell, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, one lesson for each participant was videotaped, towards the end of the school year, followed by a group discussion. Transcripts of these discussions were part of the data for this research.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were derived from the above-mentioned sources which were systematically organized, coded, and indexed. Data sources were grouped by theme. For example, repeated data about developing reflective thinking skills obtained from interviews, field notes, meetings, and reflective texts were grouped together for interpretive analysis. In addition, the field notes that included class observations and team meetings were chronologically and thematically analyzed for developing reflective thinking skills. Sub-categories were also created and included the following: (a) developing self- reflection (b) resisting reflecting on peers' performance.

Since the number of the participants was very small, statistical analysis was not considered. However, the answers of the participants on the pre-post questionnaires were compared to examine any change in the student teachers' reflective abilities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Over all, data analysis revealed difficulties in developing reflective skills among the student teachers mainly because they are young and inexperienced. It could also be concluded that they were influenced by their first learning experiences.

Developing self-reflection among student teachers

Some improvement in the six student teachers' abilities to reflect on their experiences of teaching and observing in general and in an EFL context in particular were revealed with some variations among them as individuals.

All reported that they found writing reflective texts hard, but useful. However, Nola changed her mind regarding that issue from "Writing reflections is boring" in the first questionnaire to "Writing reflections helps students think deeply about the lesson" in the second. This change demonstrates some positive change in her attitudes towards developing self-reflection.

Based on the three reflections and the answers on the open questions in the questionnaire, Daboul and Nola seemed to have improved their reflective abilities more than the rest of the group. For example, Daboul mentioned repeatedly in the reflections as well as in the team meetings that practice teaching is a process rather than an end by itself. In the self-reflection section in the lesson plan, she wrote about the need for being more creative. This statement shows that she started to realize the need of being creative, which means that she started thinking reflectively about her performance and the need to improve it.

Zuzu and Dobi showed improvement in their reflective skills. For instance, they mentioned in the last reflection and in the interview the importance of meeting the needs of the pupils by choosing appropriate activities for delivering good lessons. This shows that they were able to think about what they do in class, evaluate it and think of alternatives to improve it.

Nola, Zuzu, and Dobi also demonstrated some improvement in their reflective skills in that they consistently filled in the alternative task and the evaluation and reflective sections of the lesson plan. For example, Dobi commented on the significance of preparing alternative tasks for cases of emergency and related how she was saved once by employing the activity prepared for the alternative task section in the lesson plan.

Salim and Cool were least able to improve their reflective abilities. They ignored my frequent calls to fill in three sections in the lesson plan forms: alternative task, self-evaluation, and reflection. At times they filled them in briefly, without mentioning reasons, indicating strengths and weaknesses, or providing rationale for their teaching. For example, Salim's reflection on the intensive first practical work week was just: "From my point of view, last week was a very enlightening week for all of us in my point of view." Although she referred to her lack of progress as a result of practicing teaching in a new school and stated that she needed time to adapt, she gave no examples to support this statement. The only point that showed some improvement in her self-reflective abilities was the last paragraph in the second reflection.

I learned a lot about myself, for example, at first even when the practical work week ended I was in denial – I did not accept criticism, and thought myself as a best teacher! But I wasn't. I'm learning gradually that without reflecting on teaching practices, it wouldn't be possible for me to improve. I'm hoping that with your guidance and observations, I'll improve with time.

Her answers in the questionnaire were brief and summarized by words such as "good," "useful," and "important." However, she contradicted herself regarding the expected efforts in practicum. In the first questionnaire she attributed the work to the demanding pedagogical

advisor who would not give her a break. In the second questionnaire she mentioned that she expected to work harder, and wrote:

I expect to work harder or better. I'd taught the second year, so I thought I have experience.

Similar remarks were heard in Cool's interview. Cool sounded more positive claiming that she learned a lot this year in terms of practice teaching. However, she contradicted herself by mentioning repeatedly that she has enough experience because she also had participated in practical teaching the previous year.

Avoiding reporting less pleasant experiences was obvious in the student teachers' behavior. Gradually, they started to evaluate their lessons objectively by indicating strengths and, reluctantly, weaknesses. Although they were defensive, they talked about successful experiences and less successful ones, providing rationales for these experiences by the end of the school year. For example, Daboul reflected positively about her experience of employing a game in one of the lessons. Her reflection on a less successful experience was part of the second reflective text included in the second portfolio. She wrote the following paragraph:

The second day I taught grammar to a 7th class that I taught before. The lesson was ok; I managed teaching all the rules and did a lot of examples with the pupils. I taught the format through a context, and we also discussed the text which was about Lady Diana. However, I didn't enjoy the lesson; something interesting was missing which was to teach the past simple in a more creative way.

From the observed lessons and the subsequent feedback session, it became clear that the six student teachers were very defensive, especially at the beginning of the school year. For example, Daboul and Nola responded to the pedagogical advisor's questioning of specific activities by saying "maybe" and Daboul said once: "Maybe the activity should be changed". Nola responded to the advisor's call for clarification about the text by saying: "Maybe the text is boring".

Similarly, Cool's reflections were very brief and included almost nothing about the process that she was undergoing. In the first reflection, she focused on the fact of being attentive and the importance of being open to accept criticism:

It was the criticism that taught me that my lessons lack methods or ways that activate the students more and attract their attention. I think that it's important to vary our methods of teaching like integrating games.

At the beginning of the school year, they sounded more positive regarding their performance and tended to focus on the activities they employed for teaching English, not on the pupils' interaction and reaction. They became more objective by the end of the school year, reflecting not only on the activities themselves, but also on the student's reactions and involvement. This improvement shows that they have become able to challenge their assumptions regarding their teaching and seek alternatives.

While Daboul provided a rationale for both experiences, Nola, Zuzu, and Dobi did not provide enough reasoning for their choices of different activities. For instance, Nola mentioned

repeatedly in the three reflections that the practical work experience was challenging, but did not explain or elaborate. She did, however, give detailed answers during the interview, expressing her satisfaction with her progress by adopting different techniques for teaching vocabulary, reading, and listening. She also mentioned that she is looking forward to improving her performance. She said: "Nobody is perfect and there is a need to learn all the time."

In their three reflection texts, Zuzu and Dobi made positive and negative comments about their performance. However, Dobi elaborated more on her actual teaching and adopting new ideas from the EFL didactic seminar course that included group work, using games, and integrating listening texts and video segments.

The rationale that Salim and Cool provided for their choice of activities did not reflect deep thinking. For example, in the discussions Salim mentioned repeatedly that she is a student teacher, and it is the teacher's responsibility, not hers, to help the less advanced pupils. Cool was very defensive claiming that the pupils were not cooperative.

In addition, Cool reflected only on the positive experience of including a segment of a movie in one of her lessons and how it helped her to stimulate the pupils' curiosity. In the second reflection she elaborated on the same issue of accepting criticism and reflected on another good experience of employing group work in her lesson. She also mentioned the need to have more information about the pupils before she taught them. Although the third reflection included some sentences that reflect her positive attitude toward the practical work, her words sounded more like slogans.

Developing reflective skills among Arab student teachers

To develop trainees' reflective thinking abilities, they should not only observe lessons, but also evaluate and reflect on them as well as on their actual teaching through guided oral and written reflections. Therefore, the participants in this study were expected to evaluate the lessons of their peers indicating which activities they liked and which activities didn't work well providing possible reasons. However, they resisted the idea of evaluating each other's performance, especially at the beginning. They tended to avoid peer evaluation. For example, Zuzu was frank when she expressed her dissatisfaction with the fact that I tried to involve them in the evaluation of each other's lessons because she considers her classmates as friends and prefers to comment on their lessons privately. The following paragraph is quoted from her first reflection:

I like the idea of sitting with you and telling you what we are going to teach or tell what we have already taught or observed. Even though it disturbs me a little bit because I can't tell my classmate in front of you what was bad in her lesson. I prefer just to tell her face to face not in front of all the students and you.

Zuzu's answer to the open question in the questionnaire, regarding working with other classmates, was in line with her reflection. On the first questionnaire she wrote: "they are my friends and I like to work with them." However, her answer on the second questionnaire demonstrated a degree of professional growth by stating that they can learn from each other.

Notes taken at team meetings indicated that the students showed solidarity with each other and tried not only to support each other, but also to constantly defend each other. All of them held similar opinions to those of Zuzu. Over time they began to comprehend the reasons the pedagogical advisor wanted them to evaluate each others' lessons. Such an evaluation was aimed at appreciating differences and learning from each other, as each has her own personality, style of teaching, ideas, and abilities.

DISCUSSION

Difficulty in Reflecting on Teaching Experiences

The data from the participants' reflection texts, reflective sections in the lesson plan sheets, transcripts of the team meetings and individual conferences, and interviews showed that they faced difficulty in reflecting on their teaching and observation experiences. This difficulty could be attributed to their previous learning experiences in which are based on transmission of material, memorization, copying and rote learning. As it has been mentioned by (Author, 2011; Al-Haj, 1996; Al-Issa, 2005, Collins et al. 2004; Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2005), it seems that these previous learning experiences affected their patterns of thinking. So they found it difficult to negotiate meaning, make decisions and rationalize their choices.

Despite the difficulty in developing their reflective skills, some of them started to develop a journey of self-learning and self-discovery as a result of the constant attempt to reflect on their performance. In this sense, the argument of Ma and Ren (2011) about the importance of reflecting for self-study or learning is relevant. The findings show that the participants started to learn more about themselves as learners and what they need to improve their learning process. In addition, they started to realize the need of making the desired shift from having teacher-centered classes to learner-centered ones by involving the pupils more in their classes and to consider them in their preparation. These results are consistent with the calls of Suliman & Tadors (2011) to Arab students to make the needed shift from being passive learners to active ones. The data also showed that the participants made some improvement in their reflective abilities by adding rationale to their comments on their lessons. By the end of the school year, they became more objective in evaluating their instructional activities and pupils' interactions. Four out of six student teachers started to report both positive and negative experiences, mentioning both strengths and weaknesses and seeking possible solutions or alternatives. These results match the claims of Ferraro (2000) and Strakov`a of the need of developing reflective skills among pre-service teachers in general and Strakov`a's (2009) regarding EFL student teachers in specific for evaluating their teaching experiences and thinking of other ways for improving them.

It could be concluded that they were at an embryonic stage in their reflective learning process as they were always defensive in the post lesson discussions. As Galvez-Martin (2003) and Nyumwe and Mtetwa (2011) argued about the importance of post lesson discussions for promoting retrospective reflective thinking to explore the effectiveness of instructional strategies, these sessions were helpful to some extent. It seems that the student teachers needed to practice teaching more and to participate in more post lesson discussion sessions.

The student teachers kept a rigid attitude toward reflecting on the performance of their classmates. Showing solidarity with each other, trying to be mutually supportive and even defend each other indicate the slow process of developing reflective skills. This example of

behavior lends further the claims to support (Author, 2011), Eilam (2002), Sonleitner and Khelifa (2005) and Prowse (2007) regarding students' behavior that stem from the collectivism orientation of their culture. It seems that these pre-service teachers tend to have close social relationships and spend a lot of their time together. As a result, they may prefer friendship over professionalism.

Preferences to Written Reflections

It was obvious that they preferred written reflections rather than oral ones. They were more frank in written reflections. In addition, they elaborated more about their practice. However, when they reflected orally, they were always defensive and tried to avoid reflecting upon their own less successful teaching experiences and their peers'. As Kupara-Spencer (2011) and Nooreiny (2007) put it, there is great importance to requiring student teachers to write evaluations and guided reflections. However, it seems that more guided written reflections should have been required to provoke the students' thinking for lesson evaluation and reflection.

Possible Factors for the Little Improvement of Reflective Skills

Their age could also be a factor here. Since they are young and do not have enough experience in life, it seems that they have not developed their critical thinking and reflective skills yet. It also seems that individual differences could be a factor here. It depends on a person's ability to comprehend, retain, and use information (Eilam, 2002). Despite the fact that the participants did not much improve their reflective abilities, it could be concluded that reflective practice among Arab student teachers would be possible; however, it might be a long slow process. These findings are not in line with those of Clarke and Otkay (2006) who showed that female Emirati pre-service teachers did recognize the value of reflective practice and practiced it enthusiastically. It is likely to say that developing reflective skills among Muslim Arab student teachers would be possible and appropriate although it might take time and efforts.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This is a small-scale study, but the results suggest that further examination of form of a follow-up research to be conducted a year or two after the completion of the teacher education program would be useful to investigate the effect of this attempt of developing their reflective skills on the process of their professional development and autonomy. Integrating thinking reflective practice in teacher education programs in the Arab world and in Israel and conducting a comparative study to compare between Arab Muslim female student teachers in these different settings would be another interesting idea for a future research.

In light of the findings of this research, I recommend the following to better help Arab EFL student teachers develop their reflective skills:

- 1) Teacher educators are expected to be aware of the previous learning experiences and cultural modes that affect student teachers' behavior and performance. Since similar findings were revealed in other Arab Muslim countries, there is a need for teacher education programs' designers to take into their consideration the specific needs of Arab Muslim student teachers. As Littlewood (2011) suggests there is a need to clarify and simplify the reflective teaching practice for Arab student teachers. Therefore, adopting

reflective practice successfully would require teacher educators to follow a structured three-year plan for developing the reflective thinking abilities of pre-service teachers. Written reflections should be the core of such a program. In addition, it should be prepared and implemented step by step. In the first stage, they will be required to report only on positive experiences. The negative experiences will be reported including possible reasoning in the second stage. At the third one, the student teachers will provide alternatives to the activities that didn't work well.

- 2) To deal gently with the student teachers who avoid reflecting on the performance of their peers, teacher educators are expected to think of indirect ways rather than challenging them directly. For example, providing a list of written questions would be a good strategy especially at the beginning of the teaching practice. The aim of providing such a list is to encourage them to report about the performance of their peers and to reflect on their positive as well as negative experiences. The list would include the following: 1) Indicate one good activity in the observed lessons today. 2) How was the interaction between the pupils and the teacher? 3) Are you fully satisfied from the pupils' participation? At later stages, the student teachers will be required to provide reasoning for their answers. At the third stage, they will be expected to suggest alternatives to the less successful activities.
- 3) Since the student teachers tended to avoid expressing their evaluations and reflections in the post-lesson discussions, one-to-one feedback should be considered at the early stages until they feel confident enough to hear comments from the pedagogical advisor in front of others. Individual student teachers and their school mentors should meet after lesson to discuss the student's performance using a special form that includes closed and open-ended questions. Some closed questions should be related to preparation and others to actual teaching, and the open-ended questions should be used to comment and reflect on the performance. For example, the list of closed questions would include the following: 1) Which of the activities you used is the most satisfying? 2) Are you fully satisfied from the participation of the pupils? 3) How many new words have you taught in your lesson today? At later stages, they will be required to add the reasoning for their answers.
- 4) Because the student teachers did not always accept criticism easily, program organizers should consider foregoing post-lesson evaluations in the weekly team meetings, especially at the early stages, and replace them with individual meetings between the student teacher and his/her teacher educator. In addition, more frequent individual meetings with the pedagogical advisor should be enacted. Gradually, the pedagogical advisor will include more students in these meetings to discuss common issues derived from the reflective forms.
- 5) To better help Arab student teachers develop their reflective skills, their teacher educators should encourage them to submit short written reflections gradually. For example, they should be encouraged to reflect only on positive experiences at the beginning. Later on, they will be required to provide their reflections on negative experiences providing reasons and suggesting alternatives for future lesson teaching.
- 6) To provide a comfortable atmosphere, Al-Issa's recommendation (2005) of conducting workshops to reflect on teaching experiences could be relevant here. The workshop should be designed in a way to help Arab student teachers to not only understand the need for developing reflective skills, but also to practice reflective strategies.
- 7) Working with other colleagues on campus for integrating thinking reflective strategies among Arab female student teachers in all subject matters and examining the

effectiveness of such an attempt for preparing better student teachers would be a topic for a future research.

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