Training English Language Student Teachers to Become Reflective Teachers

Ali Al-Issa
Ali Al-Bulushi
Sultan Qaboos University – Sultanate of Oman
dralialissa@yahoo.com

Abstract: Reflective teaching practice has become a central theme in professional growth at the pre-service teacher education level almost everywhere. English language teaching (ELT) teacher trainers, like any other teacher trainers, have a powerful role to play in fostering reflection in their student teachers through the approaches and strategies they incorporate in their training, which can have implications related to the perceived worth of reflective practice.

This quantitative study describes the responses of 90 final-year ELT student teachers and eight of their trainers at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, to a survey about the roles, approaches and strategies used to help the student teachers to reflect on their teaching.

The results show that while the trainers have helped their student teachers to develop as reflective teachers, there are certain practices and aspects adopted by the trainers that need to be reconsidered, as they can have negative implications for teacher preparation.

Introduction

Reflective teaching is complex, as it is implicit and explicit, takes different shapes and forms, and has different levels. Reflective teaching has been considered in the literature on teacher education in general and ELT in particular as a substantial tool for student teachers and teachers to use to understand the complex contexts of the English language and the social conditions that influence its teaching.

The literature on reflection (van Manen, 1977; Hall, 1997; Hatton & Smith, 2005) has identified three different forms/levels of 'reflection-on-action' (Schon, 1983).

The first is concerned with describing and reporting events and providing reasons or justifications for their occurrence and seeking best practice. Hall (1997) describes this level/form of reflection as 'random' and 'descriptive' and considers it as being the lowest level of reflection, which does not always occur. Student teachers return to experience (Boud, Keough & Walker, 1985) and are engaged in 'cognitive retrieval' (Strampel & Oliver, 2007, 975). Experience here is used as a future record stage of reflection to help student teachers reflect upon events as they actually happened (Strampel & Oliver, 2007) and see the situation as others would and in a wider context (Boud et al., 1985). Students who reach this level of reflection '... are

beginning to make meaning of the material presented to them' (Strampel & Oliver, 2007). However, Strampel & Oliver (2007) argue that this level of reflection does not serve deep 'learning'. 'Learning' engages the whole person and involves intellect, emotions, values, experience and daily practices (Boud, Cressey & Docherty, 2006). Strampel & Oliver (2007, 975) argue that 'students at this level should be able to explain the material and how they understand it, but they most likely will not be able to apply their understanding to different contexts' .

The second is 'deliberate' (Hall, 1997) or 'dialogic' (Strampel & Oliver, 2007) and is about re-evaluating experience (Boud et al., 1985) and using prior knowledge to critically analyse a situation. This stage of reflection is '... a process of searching for meaning, coming to an understanding, and applying new knowledge' (Strampel & Oliver, 2007, 975) and is likely to help students to see the world differently through leading and stimulating them to conceptual change (Strampel & Oliver, 2007, 975). 'Dialogic reflection occurs when students take a step back while considering, exploring and judging prior knowledge and the current situation or experience to create possible alternative solutions' (Strampel & Oliver, 2007, 975). In other words, focus in this level of reflection is on replacing '... pre-existing conceptions with new ones' (Strampel & Oliver, 2007, 976) and exploring alternative hypotheses and solutions and finding practical answers to the problems encountered in a particular context through, for instance, writing journals, talking with critical friends or attending network or special interest group meetings.

The third is of a more 'critical' nature (Hall, 1997) and attempts to locate ELT, for example, within wider social, political and cultural contexts, which, according to Boud (1999a), influence teachers, students, learning outcomes and learning activities. Student teachers at this level reach deeper levels of learning and develop an ability to evaluate and/or judge the value of the existing ELT context from those three perspectives, which leads them to make decisions about the necessity of change in action. Decisions about change can lead student teachers, within the context of this study for example, to apply their newfound knowledge to a variety of situations (Boud et al., 1985). Examples of situations can be classrooms rules, course structures and institutional practices (Boud, 1999a).

While these levels are different on the surface, they complement and build on one another. Student teachers who are trained to move gradually from one level to another can end up exploring, analysing systematically and understanding thoroughly the entire context in which they are located.

For reflection on teaching and learning to be effective, it has to be systematic and public (making one's teaching and work accessible for critical peer review and use) (Boyer, 1990) through engaging in professional conversations with one's colleagues. Such conversations can be built on observations of other teachers and reading and writing pedagogical research to facilitate what Boyer describes as 'transmitting', 'extending' and 'transforming' knowledge about teaching and learning in general. All this is triggered by the events that take place inside the classroom and provoke teachers' critical thinking and reflection and trigger exploration and experimentation through different means of data collection.

This is bound to move teachers toward becoming scholars who expand their intellectual world through developing their knowledge, skills and resources and striving to learn more about themselves and their context.

ELT in Oman is a relatively new enterprise and requires continuous inquiry and searching for knowledge.

English is the only official foreign language in Oman and is important for everyday communication purposes in-country and abroad, including the acquisition of science and technology, developing cultural analysis and understanding, pursuing higher education, and finding a white-collar job (Al-Issa, 2002, 2007).

However, students finishing Grade 12 have been found to be below 4.5 on the International English Language Testing System in spite of spending nine years learning English with five contact hours per week (Al-Issa, 2009). This has been attributed mainly to textbook-based teaching, large and mixed-ability classrooms (35-45 students in each classroom), heavy teaching loads, product teaching at the expense of process teaching, teacher-centered as opposed to learner-centered learning, an examination-based system, a short school year, teachers' varied cultural and professional backgrounds, and a rigid and bureaucracy-governed system (Al-Issa, 2007).

But teachers are required to be dynamic agents of change, with the power and potential to make informed decisions and reflect critically on contexts; analyse and understand the causes of perceived shortcomings; and arrive at solutions to such problems to help produce competent English users who can contribute to the welfare of Oman.

Former ELT student teachers at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), which is the only state-owned university in Oman, form a large proportion of the indigenous teachers in government schools in the Sultanate.

On average, SQU has produced 100 English teachers every year since 1990. These teachers have constantly come under scrutiny and on more than one occasion have been found lacking competence in teaching methods and techniques. This incompetence has been attributed to the training program they complete at SQU. Researchers (for example, Al-Toubi, 1998; Al-Shihy, 2003) have investigated different aspects of the training program and reached different conclusions about weaknesses and shortcomings in the structure of the program, which has been in effect since the opening of SQU in 1986.

Al-Toubi found the time allocated to teaching practice compared with the exposure to theory inadequate, while Al-Shihy investigated 120 Omani EFL teachers' perceptions of the EFL teacher education program at SQU. She examined four aspects of the program: the academic training, the pedagogical training, its organisation; and the teaching and evaluation techniques used by the university professors. She found that the teachers perceived the pedagogical courses and the specialisation courses that the trainees took as being useful, while the general education and university elective courses were not considered useful. The teachers rated the teaching practicum as being 'inadequate' to 'moderately adequate'.

However, no research so far investigated the role of the **trainers** in the preparation and production of these 'incompetent' teachers (Al-Issa, 2005, 2008). Teacher trainers are powerful intellectuals and socialisation agents who can influence their student teachers' thinking and performance positively or otherwise (Al-Issa, 2005).

Al-Issa's qualitative studies considered claims by Ministry of Education officials and student teachers about some of the ways through which the trainers managed the student teachers during teaching practice, which had been described as unsatisfactory, mainly for failing to prepare the student teachers to make decisions and reflect critically on their practices and other issues pertinent to ELT in Oman.

Why this study?

The first aim was to conduct a broad quantitative survey to assist in understanding the perceptions of the ELT student teachers and their trainers and help the former to become reflective practitioners.

The Omani general education and higher education systems share many characteristics with the systems in the neighbouring Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) and other countries, such as Yemen. This study, therefore, has its implications for training ELT student teachers in these contexts.

The second aim was to make an original contribution to knowledge about the role of the ELT teacher trainers. There has been some debate in the literature about this aspect of ELT teacher education, but most has been concerned with discussing theories, approaches and strategies associated with reflection in general or at the in-service level.

Reflective teaching

Teaching is a complicated act. Schulman (1987, 15) considers that it involves comprehension, transformation, instruction, evaluation, reflection and new comprehensions.

Reflection enables teachers and student teachers to diagnose and understand their classroom contexts and students' learning better, put their students' learning at the heart of the teaching-learning process, develop a rationale for their teaching and take informed specific actions and make sound decisions in the classroom (Al-Issa, 2002). This is believed to lead to new comprehensions of purposes, subject matter, students, teaching and self. and consolidate new understandings and learning, through strategies such as documentation, analysis and discussion (Schulman, 1987).

In other words, teachers are required to use their growing 'knowledge base' (Schulman, 1987) to identify problems emerging in their classrooms and schools through 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' (Schon, 1983) and try to solve these problems through continuous reflection and professional and critical inquiry into their own practices (Schon, 1983, 1987); 'good' teaching is hard to define and describe and there will always be room for discovering, inventing and refining one's teaching (Schulman, 1987).

Teachers, according to Schulman, should consider themselves as 'scholars' who should possess 'scholarship' in all these categories in order to be classified as 'effective'. Teaching, therefore, is a scholarly activity and is about learning through systematic critical reflection, which can influence learning, understanding, induction of conceptual change, knowledge transfer and action positively (Strampel & Oliver, 2007).

However, the scholarship of teaching is not merely about teaching our scholarship. Nor is it simply teaching well. It is thinking hard about the frameworks we have constructed and how we move within them.

The scholarship of teaching involves constant reflection on the process and outcomes of teaching and learning and acknowledges the contextual nature of teaching. Boud and Walker (1998, 199) stress that reflection practised by teachers '... before the learning event is as important as reflection during, or after, it', as this has its implications for the teacher's creativity.

Professionals practising the scholarship of teaching focus on change; they develop their practice through a cycle of action, reflection and improvement. They investigate the relationship between teaching and learning. Learning to pose questions about teaching and learning is a starting point in the scholarship of teaching: gathering evidence, interpreting it, sharing results and changing practice continue the process. A key feature in the scholarship of teaching is having an understanding of how people learn, knowing what practices are most effective and having knowledge about what we have learned about teaching.

ELT student teachers can construct various 'incorrect' beliefs and images about ELT derived from their nine years of experience as students of the English language in a system with the 'unpleasant' characteristics mentioned previously (Al-Issa, 2002). Zeichner (1994, 1996) believes that reflection is essential for bringing understanding to the complex nature of classrooms and states that teachers should be trained to reflect on the subject matter and the thoughtful application of particular teaching strategies. He further states that teachers need to reflect on their learners' thinking, understandings, interests and developmental thinking. In other words, teachers need to look at teaching from other perspectives beyond their 'egocentric' view to become more reflective practitioners (Green, 2006).

Furthermore, Boud (1999a) and Boud & Walker (1998) argue that students (or student teachers) should be directed on what to reflect on and how, as contexts are influential, complex (involve learners, processes and outcomes) and variable (social, political and cultural). Reflection, according to these authors, involves thinking and feelings and emotions and depends on different factors, which necessitates training the SQU ELT student teachers to develop reflective skills that can help them bring positive change to the Omani ELT system.

The literature on second language teacher education provides examples of approaches and strategies that can be used to facilitate and enhance reflection, such as journals, narratives, diaries and notes (Bailey, 1990; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Farrell, 2003; Richards, 1991; Thorne & Qiang, 1996), autobiography (Pennington, 1990; Richards, 1991), teaching portfolios (Bullock & Hawk, 2001), action research (Gebhard, 1998), practical experience (Hatton & Smith, 1995), collaborative talk (Farrell, 1999) and self-observation and observation of other teachers (Farrell, 2003; Gebhard, 1998, 2005; Richards, 1998; Richards & Farrell, 2005). While there are a few other examples of reflection strategies and approaches, these remain the most commonly used in contemporary studies about reflective practice and teaching.

Research questions

In the light of the above discussion about the importance of reflective teaching in helping ELT student teachers to become more efficient practitioners and the approaches and strategies that facilitate the achievement of reflective teaching, the following research questions were asked:

·   What are the roles of the SQU ELT teacher trainers in preparing their student teachers to become reflective teachers?

·   What approaches and strategies of reflective teaching do the SQU ELT teacher trainers implement to help their student teachers to reflect on their teaching?

Methodology
Participants

The population of this study comprised 230 final-year English language student-teachers at the College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, in spring semester 2009.

These students had taken several language courses (for example, language skills, linguistics, phonology, morphology, semantics sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics) as well as relevant educational courses (including educational objectives, the education system in Oman and the Gulf, methods of teaching English and school curriculum).

During their final year, these student teachers took two teaching practice placements of 90 and 180 contact hours respectively. Each group of four student-teachers was assigned a supervisor from the college. Since most public schools in Oman are single sex, the grouping and allocation of student teachers was by gender. Each trainer supervised approximately 20 trainees per semester and made two to four supervisory visits to each trainee.

It is important to be aware that the Department of ELT Curriculum and Instruction at the College of Education at SQU consists of nine trainers, of whom seven are PhDs (one American, one Yemeni, three Egyptians and two Omanis) and the remaining two are Omanis, who hold the Masters of Arts degree. In addition to the vast teaching experiences that all the trainers have in higher education, they obtained different teaching qualifications through their education in the bachelor or MA degrees. SQU does not require a specific teacher training qualification apart from a PhD in the area of expertise and a sufficient number of years of experience in training teachers. It is worth noting also that all Omani trainers are a product of the training system.

Instrument

A five-point Likert scale questionnaire consisting of 25 items distributed among three general themes (action research, reflection, and decision making) was created to obtain the student teachers and their trainers' attitudes about the reflection approaches and strategies implemented. Although the items were not borrowed from a similar study, many of them evolved from and were influenced by the works of Al-Issa (2005a, 2008), Al-Shihy (2003) and Al-Toubi (1998), which discuss different aspects of SQU ELT teacher education. The items that eventually made it to the questionnaire were not categorised in the literature under exactly the same themes used in this study.

This study is unique in the sense that it raises questions about the preparation of ELT student teachers to become reflective teachers by investigating all the aspects in the SQU program that have been found in the literature to influence reflective teaching.

A thorough review of the pertinent literature about contexts other than SQU has shown that no studies of an identical or similar nature have been conducted on teacher education in general or ELT in particular. In fact, the vast majority of the studies found in the literature investigate reflective teaching from a qualitative perspective and through the collection of data from analysis of student teachers' journals, diaries, notes, autobiographies, narratives and live teaching performances.

However, this study investigates the perceptions of the student teachers and their trainers about the processes intended to develop the former as dynamic and critical

reflective practitioners. It further incorporates the views of the trainers, as influential agents in the process, adding a different and unique dimension to the structure and discussion of the topic.

In order to check the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to a 'panel of judges' (de Vaus, 1996, 57), six specialists from the ELT teacher education field outside SQU. The questionnaire, the reasons for the study and the research questions were provided to the judges. They were asked to identify the relevance of each item to the study's purpose. Most of the items achieved a high degree of acceptance by the judges. The researchers decided that any item that achieved consensus among at least four judges would be accepted and any item that achieved consensus among fewer than four would be discarded, unless it was crucial to the study and then the researchers would look into improving it. Only one item that the 'judges' deemed unnecessary was eventually eliminated.

The new version of the questionnaire included 25 statements (see Appendix 1), which were re-categorised under six themes: (1), reflection through self-evaluation [Items 1-2]; (2), reflection through formal instruction [Items 3-5]; (3), reflection through observation [Items 6-9]; (4), reflection through talking [Items 10-13]; (5), reflection through practical experience [Items 14-18]; and (6), reflection through research (Items 19-25].

The review of the pertinent literature, the researchers' professional definitions and their own values and experience with the subject matter contributed to the construction of these themes (Ryan & Russell Bernard, 2003).

Piloting of a questionnaire is crucial to ensuring the validity of its items before the main administration takes place (Oppenheim, 1992). Therefore, the questionnaire was piloted with ten randomly-selected student-teachers from the same population and found to be highly reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.868).

Procedure

The data collection started toward the end of the spring semester in 2009. The questionnaire was designed on line using free Google Docs forms. All final-year ELT student teachers doing teaching practice during the semester were e-mailed the Google Docs link to fill in the on-line questionnaire. However, only 90 participated, a 39 per cent response rate. The on-line questionnaire was significantly more convenient than a paper-and-pencil questionnaire and, since the form-hosting Website was free, it did not have any complicated options and was very user-friendly. It was also very convenient for reminding the respondents via e-mails to take part in the study. More importantly, when each student teacher completed the questionnaire, his/her responses were automatically saved in an on-line Excel spreadsheet linked to the questionnaire form.

It was also important to include the trainers' views about their reflection practices in the practicum. While maintaining the original content of the questionnaire, each item was modified for the trainers (see Appendix 2). Out of the eight trainers who were e-mailed the on-line questionnaire, seven (87.5 per cent) completed it. Google Docs was again used to host the trainers' questionnaire.

Data Analysis

A quantitative descriptive data analysis approach was used. Since the responses of the respondents are automatically logged online, Google Docs does not only save the data in an output Excel file but it is also capable of conducting simple frequency-based descriptive analysis coupled with the percentages of each item. In order to check these frequencies, the original raw data file was analysed independently in Excel and found to be identical to Google's analysis. The findings below highlight the salient results obtained.

Findings
Reflection through self-evaluation

In Item 1, 78.2 per cent of students agreed that they were asked to complete evaluation forms about their teaching. These forms focus on reflecting on certain aspects ('the big picture') of the lesson, such as planning, using teaching aids and resources, timing, classroom participation, introducing and ending a lesson, and the organisation of tasks and activities. The student teachers were required to rate themselves on a 5-point scale. Space was provided to comment on the valuable aspects of the lesson and the areas for improvement.

It is noteworthy that, while some of these forms were designed by the trainers, others had been adapted from other sources. In addition, the forms were not uniform in the sense that each trainer could design his/her own or adopt it from any source. All seven trainers agreed that that they asked their student teachers to complete the evaluation forms.

Boud and Walker (1998, 192) warn against ritualising reflection and turning reflection into a 'recipe following' procedure through completing checklists '... in a mechanical fashion without regard to their own uncertainties, questions or meanings'. In other words, and within the context of this study, SQU ELT teacher trainers should not consider reflection as an easy and purely cognitive activity, lacking an affective dimension and an activity that ignores the learners and the context (Boud & Walker, 1998).

In Item 2, 75.8 per cent of students agreed that they were asked to keep diaries, journals, notes, portfolios, etc. about their teaching practice experience. A typical portfolio, which the student teacher would be asked to provide at the end of the semester, would contain, for example, lesson plans, self-reflection forms, peer evaluations forms, activity samples and tests.

Ur (1999) acknowledges that the first and most important basis for professional progress is simply the teacher's own reflection on daily classroom events, which stimulate reflection, through 'returning to experience' (Boud et al., 1985, 27) and remembering and understanding '... relevant prior knowledge from long-term memory in their descriptive tale' (Strampel & Oliver, 2007, 975).

However, Boud and Walker (1998) are not in favour of using such reflective strategies and reflective writing tasks for assessment purposes by the course instructors. They suggest that a climate conducive to reflection should be developed through encouraging students to complete these reflective tasks for learning purposes, as they are being asked to write about what they know and do not know.

It was evident that the trainers had encouraged the majority of the participants to reflect on their teaching practice by completing evaluation forms or keeping notes about their experience.

However, one of the participants commented that some of the trainers' actions were contrary to reflection through self-evaluation:

Most of the time, trainers are coming to evaluate us rather than guide us. They focus a lot on how much they are going to give us and sometimes use marks to show us our level of teaching which is something we hate and suffer a lot from. Of course not all of them...

Reflection through formal instruction

In Item 3, 72.3 per cent of the trainee teachers agreed that their trainers used different materials and texts to teach them about ELT in Oman.

In Item 4, only 55.6 per cent agreed that their trainers use set textbooks to teach them about ELT, suggesting that different trainers teach in different ways. While the trainers have one course description, their way of interpreting it differs according to their cultural and educational backgrounds. In addition to the nine full-time trainers, temporary supervisors from the Ministry of Education help to monitor trainees in some semesters.
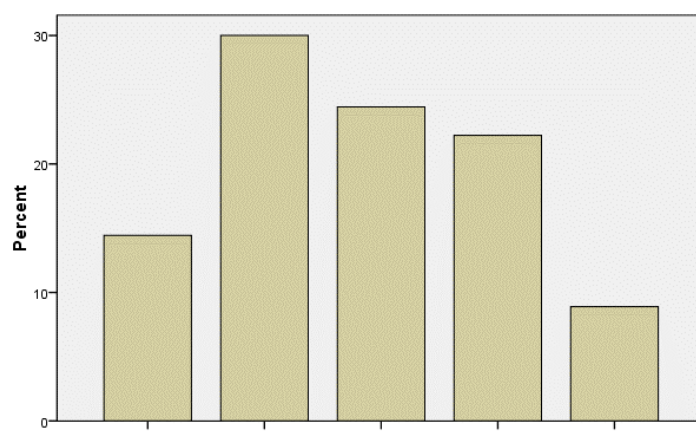

Figure 1: Use set training textbooks only to teach us about ELT

In Item 5, 74.2 per cent of the trainees agreed that their trainers told them how to teach and five trainers agreed that they told their student teachers how to teach, which is contrary to the preparation of a reflective practitioner. One of the student teachers commented on the role played by some of the trainers in making choices on behalf of their trainees about what and how to teach, which is counter to reflective teaching and practice:

Some instructors instruct us to follow DIFFICULT theories that we can hardly utilise in some classes. They consider students at schools as good learners. They are not aware (or neglect) that students in Grades 9 or 10 don't even know or don't want to write a simple sentence of SVO (subject-verb-object). Their comments sometimes annoy us as beginners in education.

Models of language teaching—communicative or structural, teacher-centred or student-centred, textbook-based or otherwise—bear a close resemblance to models of teacher training (Al-Issa, 2002).

Zeichner (1983, 140) argues that '… teacher socialisation occurs largely through the internalisation of teaching models during the time spent as a pupil in close contact with teachers'.

Reflection through observation

In Item 6, 67.2 per cent of the student teachers agreed that their trainers demonstrated to them how to teach and only four trainers agreed that they demonstrated to their trainees how to teach. While demonstrating lessons to the trainees can help them to see how certain parts or aspects of a lesson are taught effectively, it should not give the impression that it is the 'best' or most 'ideal' or 'only' way to teach that particular item or part, as classrooms are not always about 'good' lessons. In other words, teachers have certain days when things do not go according to plan and when, for different reasons, none or only a part of the lessons' objectives are achieved.

In Item 7, 78.9 per cent of the trainees agreed that their trainers encouraged them to visit each other's classes during teaching practice. One of the major characteristics of the Basic Education System ([BES], a national education reform plan that was launched almost a decade ago) requires the heads of the ELT departments at schools to advise teachers about their performance and encourage them to visit each other. There are also regional supervisors, who are sent by the Ministry of Education to visit teachers regularly and prepare performance reports about their work. In addition, school principals pay visits to their teachers to judge their competence and efficiency. Crandall (1998, 4) stresses that 'peer observation can be a powerful source of insight and discovery'. Furthermore, peer observation, according to Richards (1998, 146) '… should be approached as an opportunity to develop a critically reflective stance' to the teachers' own teaching. Moreover, Gebhard (2005) points out that teachers can see their own teaching in the teaching of others. When teachers observe other teachers to gain knowledge of 'self', they have the chance to construct and reconstruct their own knowledge. It is encouraging to note that all the trainers in this study agreed that they encouraged their trainees to visit each other's classes during teaching practice. Observation generates a reciprocal benefit for both the observed and the observing teachers. Cosh (1999, 25) states that observation of others '…stimulates awareness, reflection, and a questioning approach, and it encourages experimentation; it also may make us aware of exciting techniques that we are temperamentally unable to implement'. Richards & Farrell (2005) suggest that the 'how to' dimensions of teaching can be considered as the foci of an observation. These dimensions, which can be documented using a 'checklist', can include managerial and instructional aspects. However, Bartlett (1990) argues that the 'how to' questions are insufficient and lack a 'utilitarian value', and that critical reflection is most effective when the 'what' and 'why' questions are taken into account.

They [trainers] need to provide us with workshops about how to teach the Basic Education curriculum.

None of the participants had been a student in the BES and was unfamiliar with its philosophy and guidelines. SQU ELT graduates have been found to lack methodology training to deal with *English For Me* (EFM)—the national textbook introduced as a part of the national education reform plan and used in public schools— after they graduate and join the teaching force (Moates, 2006). Moates attributed this to the fact

that SQU had not included appropriate and up-to-date (learner-centred) methodology in its training programs.

In Item 8, 60.4 per cent of the participants agreed that their trainers showed them educational films about ELT to help them improve certain aspects of their teaching, while only two trainers agreed that they showed their trainees educational films.

Naidu, Neeraja, Ramani, Shivakumar & Vismanatha (1992) stress that the sharing of classroom experience between teachers can have positive implications for enriching theoretical knowledge and practical procedures about ELT. However, only two of the trainers agreed, while three disagreed and three were neutral, about showing relevant ELT films to their trainees to help them improve certain aspects of their teaching.
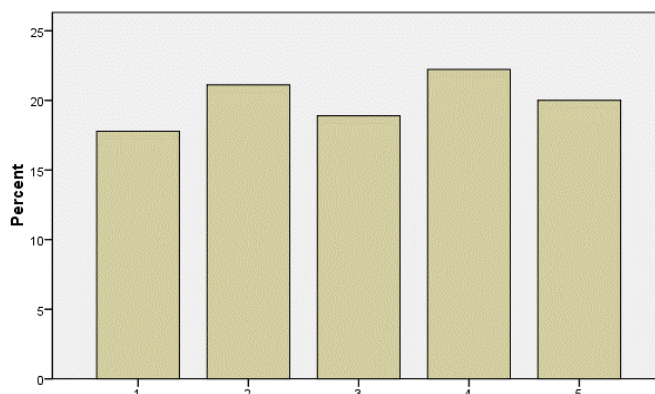

Figure 2: Show us relevant educational films about ELT to help us improve certain aspects of our teaching

In Item 9, 74.7 per cent of the trainees agreed that their trainers encouraged them to complete evaluation forms about their classmates' teaching. Also, six of the trainers agreed that they asked their trainees to complete such forms. While some forms focus more on obtaining general impressions about a lesson and include aspects such as the teacher's personality and linguistic competence, classroom management, evaluation and use of resources, others are more detailed and focus more on the 'nuts and bolts' of the lesson or on detailed observation of a specific teaching skill.

'Focused' observation of teachers can act as a mirror to the observed teachers, as it '… triggers reflection about one's own teaching' and 'provides an opportunity to get feedback on one's own teaching … and developing self-awareness of one's own teaching' (Richards & Farrell, 2005, 86).

Reflection through talking

In Item 10, 62.8 per cent of the student teachers agreed that their trainers conducted pre-lesson conferencing to discuss what they were going to teach in class. In Item 11, 63.5 per cent agreed that their trainers held group, rather than individual, feedback sessions.
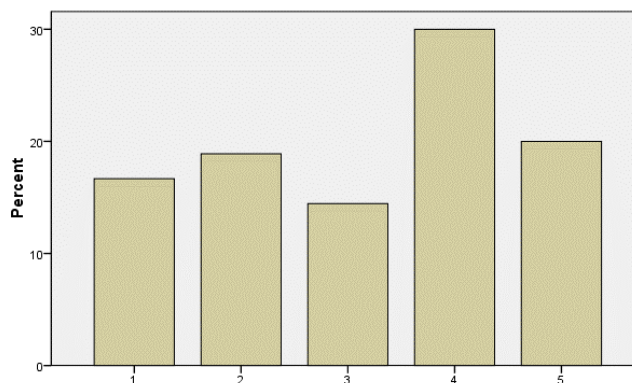
Figure 3: Conduct pre-lesson conferencing to discuss what I am going to teach in class
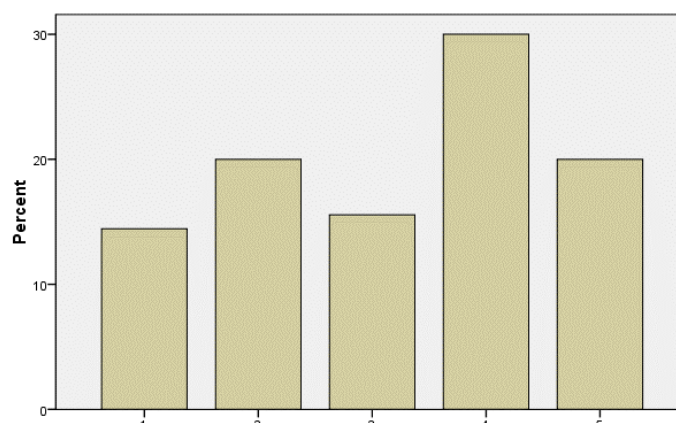

Figure 4 Hold group feedback sessions rather than individual ones

A typical teaching practice routine involved the trainees designing their lesson plans for the grade they were teaching and sending them to their trainers for feedback prior to teaching each week. After supervision took place, the trainers would usually convene post-teaching conferences at which they gave feedback to the student teachers, either individually or in groups. Six trainers agreed that they conducted pre-lesson conferencing and seven that they held feedback sessions on the same day that they observed their trainees.

In Item 12, 57.1 per cent of the participants agreed that their trainers involved them in on-line discussions with other trainees about various issues they had experienced in teaching practice. In Item 13, 81.9 per cent agreed that their trainers held feedback sessions on the same day that they had observed their trainees. All seven trainers agreed that they held group feedback sessions.

What the SQU trainers were implementing can be categorised as 'collaborative talk' (Farrell, 1999), which helps trainees to learn through formulating and expressing their ideas, exchanging their opinions, and passing on advice to each other in a healthy way in order to confront their beliefs and activate and facilitate reflection through being intellectually close to each other. James (1996) points out that teachers who come together in a group can become more confident agents of social change.

However, only three trainers involved their trainees in on-line discussions with other trainees about teaching practice. Edge (1992, 6) stresses that 'we learn by speaking: by trying to put our thoughts together so that someone else can understand them'. Pollard & Triggs (1997, 9) write that reflective teaching and personal and professional fulfilment is enhanced through collaboration and dialogue with colleagues.

Also, Gebhard (2005) points out that solutions to problems can be found through telling and sharing stories and communicating problems about one's own teaching or the observed teaching of others to colleagues and friends in teachers forums and teachers groups. Such talk and communication, Gebhard believes, should concentrate more on generating alternatives and looking for possibilities to try out, rather than making judgements and seeking prescriptions about teaching.

Reflection through practical experience

In Item 14, 65.9 per cent of the trainees agreed that their trainers encouraged them to use technology in teaching in public schools, if available. In Item 15, 76.9 per cent agreed that their trainers encouraged them to design and use additional materials and activities for their teaching practice. In Item 16, 81.7 per cent agreed that their trainers encouraged them to experiment with new teaching techniques. All seven trainers encouraged their trainees to use technology in teaching, to design and use additional materials and activities and to try out new teaching techniques.
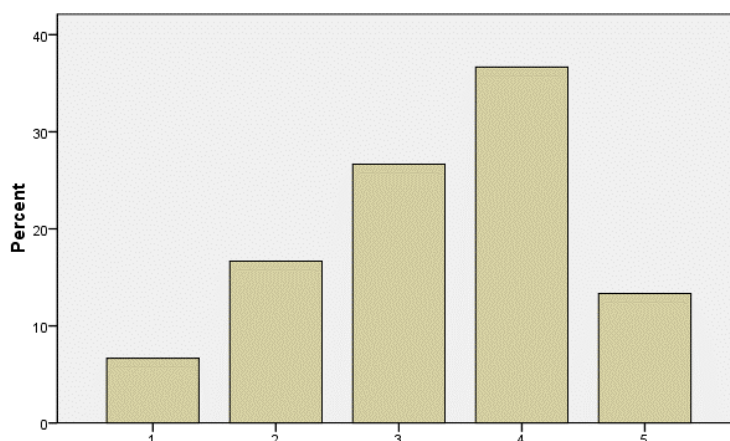

Figure 5: Encourage us to use technology in teaching in public schools if available

However, in Item 17, 53.4 per cent of the trainees agreed that their trainers asked them to use only the teachers guide to plan their lessons and in Item 18, 66.8 per cent agreed that their trainers trained them to teach the national textbook. Al-Alawi (1994) and Al-Hammami (1999) criticised the education system in Oman, describing it as authoritarian and highly centralised, with teaching methods being governed and controlled by the Ministry of Education and teachers being instructed to use the teachers guide (Al-Alawi, 1994).
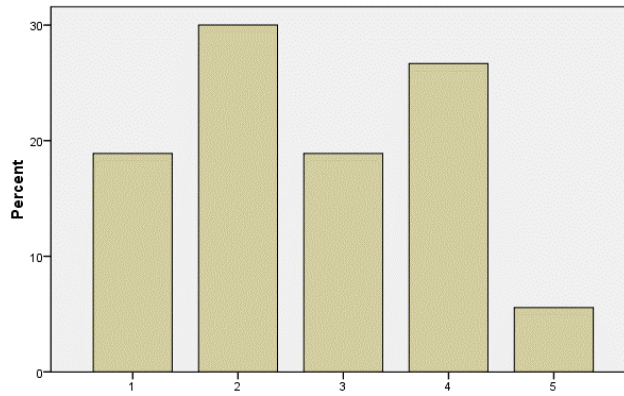
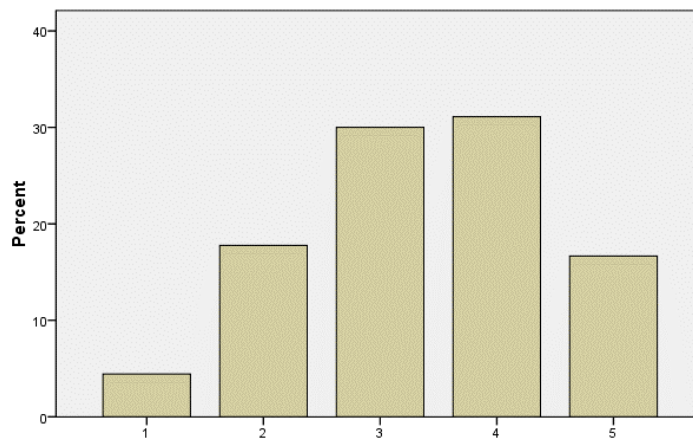**Figure 6: Ask us to use the teachers guide only to plan our lessons**

Figure 7: Train us to teach the national syllabus

Al-Balushi (1999, 4) describes the teaching methodology used in the Omani ELT classrooms as 'very formal', and emphasising rote learning and a passive role for students. Moreover, the curriculum is implemented in a top-down mode, which makes it very difficult for teachers to engage in any kind of change or innovation (Al-Toubi, 1998). Six trainers disagreed that they asked their trainees to use only the teachers guide to plan their lessons and six agreed that they trained their trainees to teach the national syllabus.

One can argue that this contradiction in training styles, especially in relation to Item 18, can be attributed to the variation in the trainers' cultural backgrounds, qualifications and nationalities. This contradiction is exacerbated when trainees receive opposing views about a teaching experience from their trainers and the cooperating teachers in the school in which they are undertaking the practicum. One of the participants commented on this situation:

There is a huge gap between what we are taught and teaching practice at school. Supervisors' feedback is different from cooperating teachers'. They say 'do it like this' and the teachers say 'don't do it like this'. Therefore, we are confused.

This view was supported by another participant's comment:

... Every supervisor has his own theory about teaching. Also, every school has its own rules. We feel lost and as a result we lose our marks because of this thing so please make everything clear.

One student criticised the Ministry of Education supervisors and their style of supervision, which contradicted with the style of the SQU ELT trainers:

The trainers that are from the Ministry are old-fashioned. They focus on minorities [sic] such as writing the date, title..... Also, they have their own style of evaluation which differs from what we know and study at SQU.

Reflection through research

In Item 19, 69.7 per cent of the trainees agreed that their trainers encouraged them to consult different sources to expand their knowledge about ELT techniques. In Item 20, 74 per cent agreed that their trainers encouraged them to consult different references to find solutions for encountered teaching practice problems. In Item 21, 65.4 per cent agreed that their trainers encouraged them to use technology in preparing for their teaching practice and in Item 22, 79.5 per agreed that their trainers encouraged them to find solutions and alternatives to their teaching practice weaknesses and mistakes.
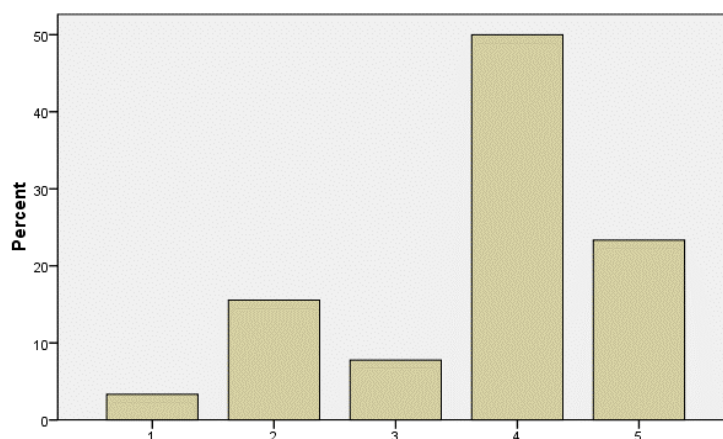
Figure 8: Encourage us to consult different references to find solutions for encountered teaching practice problems

Seven trainers agreed that they encouraged their trainees to consult different references to expand their knowledge about ELT techniques, seven that they encouraged their trainees to consult different references to find solutions for teaching practice problems, six that they encouraged their trainees to use technology in preparing for their teaching practice, and seven that they encouraged their trainees to find solutions and alternatives to their teaching practice weaknesses and mistakes.

All these activities represent the 'scholarship of application' and 'scholarship of teaching' (Boyer, 1990). While the former engages the scholar in asking questions about the application of knowledge, the latter is about being well informed in one's field of knowledge. Such activities require 'focused' reading and writing on the part of the trainees to establish a link between theory and practice, and thus to develop their own theories (Freeman & Richards, 1998).

In Item 23, 58 per cent of the student teachers agreed that their trainers asked them to produce different written assignments about ELT in Oman, and in Item 24, 70.3 per cent agreed that their trainers asked them to present on different topics about ELT in Oman. Five trainers agreed that they asked their trainees to produce different written assignments about ELT in Oman and five agreed that they asked their trainees to present on different topics about ELT in Oman.
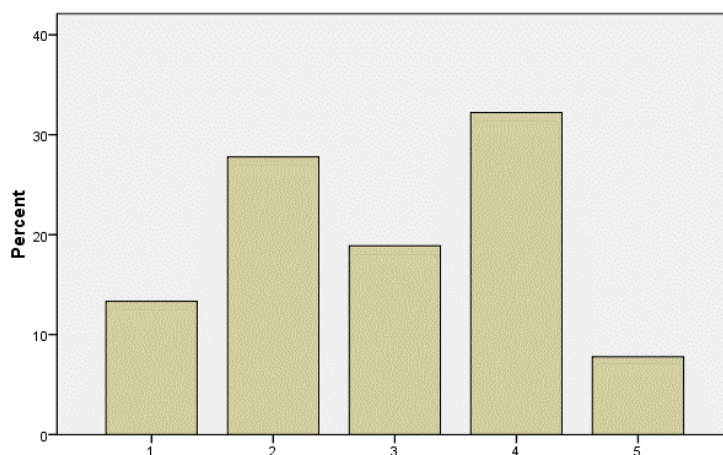
Figure 9: Ask us to produce different written assignments about ELT in Oman

SQU ELT student teachers are assessed out of 100 marks in the two ELT Methods courses at the end of the semester. While 50 marks are allotted to the final (end-of-semester) exam, at least 20 marks are allocated to assignments. Some trainers seem to prefer to use these 20 marks for short tests, rather than asking the student teachers to produce written assignments.

In Item 25, 69.4 per cent of the trainees agreed that their trainers urged them to establish a link between teaching practice and the methods courses. All seven trainers agreed that they urged their trainees to do so. The two methods core courses are partly theoretical in nature and the ideas presented in them are, in many cases, basic rather than thorough.
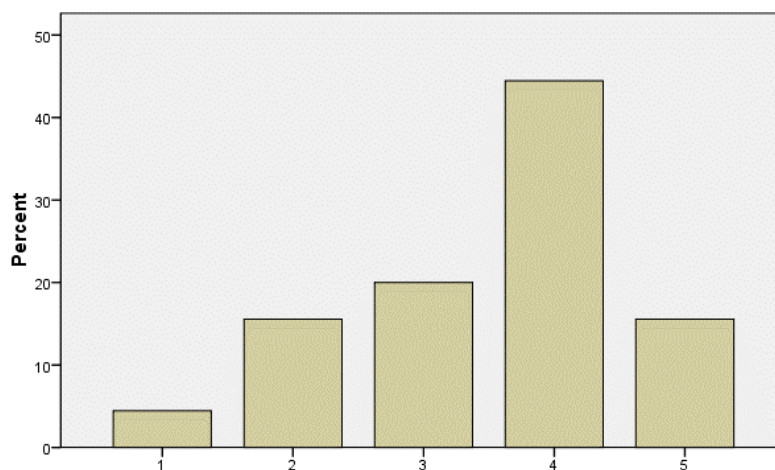
Figure 10: Urge us to establish a link between teaching practice and the two ELT methods courses

Recommendations
Technology-mediated learning

The use of computer-facilitated learning or activities has been emphasised in the literature on fostering reflection in higher education (Barak, 2006; Strample & Oliver, 2007). According to Strampel & Oliver (2007, 978), use of the computer is significant in terms of changing the role of the course instructor from a knowledge provider and controller to a facilitator and helper, helping learners become autonomous, giving

student teachers '… access to multiple worldviews' about ELT, for instance, and creating an environment conducive to learning and reflection leading to 'conceptual change, knowledge transfer, and action' (Ibid., 980). All these can have their positive implications to the student teachers' beliefs, socialisation and teaching practices.

Besides, Strampel and Oliver (2007) suggest that computers-mediated technologies support learning and promote reflection through the multiple tools and activities they provide to students and student teachers. This is particularly the case when student teachers are given 'scaffolds' and 'social' tasks (Strampel & Oliver, 2007), that help encourage reflective practice, develop and nurture it and stimulate and inspire further reflection.

Observation tasks and activities

Wajnryb (1992, 1) writes that '... observation is a skill that can be learned and can improve with practice'. Actively engaging student teachers in activities and tasks that require them to focus on '... one or a small number of aspects of teaching or learning and requires the observer to collect data or information from the actual lesson' (Ibid., 7) helps them to develop a '... skilled and trained eye to perceive, understand and benefit from observing the proceedings of learning/teaching'(Ibid., 5).

Observation, which can include peers, trainers and cooperating school teachers, is a significant learning tool that reduces dependence on the trainer, while at the same time training trainees to become autonomous learners who can take control of their own learning. This is particularly important as classrooms are complex sites where many overt and covert processes occur and co-occur and it is the trainer's responsibility to help his/her trainees to grow and develop independently.

We have found many of the tasks proposed by Wajnryb (1992) particularly interesting and relevant for the SQU ELT context, as they deal with the learner, language, learning, the lesson, teaching skills and strategies, classroom management and materials and resources, and are designed with an aim to promote reflection. However, these tasks are not by any means exhaustive. Competent trainers can always think beyond the existing resources and materials and accordingly enrich the training process.

Learning tasks and activities

Reflective practitioners should possess the ability to make informed decisions and solve problems. Teaching in general and ELT in particular are first and foremost governed by context and classrooms are controlled by realities (Al-Issa, 2002). Boud (1999a) argues that reflection is not universal and contexts and cultures vary. He also argues that contexts are determined by cultures. It is only the teacher who is in a position to make the most suitable decisions about his/her students' learning (Al-Issa, 2002).

Boud et al. (1985, 38) suggest that it is the role of '... those who assist the learner', or the teacher trainers within this context, to create a place and context for learning, support and encourage the learner, and provide useful learning resources.

Hence, SQU ELT student teachers can be engaged in collaborative learning activities and tasks such as role plays and simulations, problem solving, reflective discussion, group work and writing and rewriting (cited in Strampel & Oliver, 2007), which,

according to Strampel & Oliver (2007), can be most effective, if they are designed to centre on a specific task, with reflection as a goal, provide challenge, encourage integration, require ordering of thoughts and involve evaluation. These tasks are believed to help students achieve high levels of reflection and cognitive processing.

Oliver and Herrington (2001) and Strampel and Oliver (2007) suggest that technology can support the use of these activities by establishing an on-line environment, or developing and nurturing it in the case of the SQU ELT student teachers.

Furthermore, Parrott (1993) proposes a task-based approach for English language teacher training and development, which aims at helping trainee teachers to examine and develop and increase their awareness and knowledge about their experiential and received knowledge. The tasks further encourage ELT trainees '... to question and evaluate their assumptions, their awareness and their knowledge, and ultimately to modify these' (Ibid., 2). The proposed tasks have been designed to encourage the trainees' active involvement and collaborative work and encourage trainees '... to value their own experience, beliefs, opinions and knowledge, and to reflect on these and evaluate them in the light of the new input' (Ibid., 2).

We found these tasks relevant for the SQU ELT trainees, as they encourage the development of '... an attitude of ongoing exploration and enquiry'(Ibid., 17) through collecting data and conducting a small-scale classroom-based research leading to professional development.

Peer collaboration

Boud (1999b, 9) argues that academic work has changed and is characterised at present as cooperative and collaborative, whereby peers and colleagues shift roles and bring formally and informally different '... knowledge, ideas and experience' to their culture and share it. SQU ELT student teachers can and should be encouraged to create a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), whereby they participate in dynamic and collaborative inquiries, which lead to serious questioning and critical reflective thinking. Participants of communities of practice take collective responsibility for identifying their needs and planning how to address them (Boud, 1999b) and are engaged in reflection through acquiring and applying knowledge within ELT.

This kind of learning is 'productive' (Boud et al., 2006) and is collective, organisational and contextualised and connects work and learning, integrates field experience and academic study, links knowing and producing and leads to action. Learning is most productive when learners know why they are learning, how they are learning and what they want to do with their learning (Boud et al., 2006). Such learning, according to Boud et al., should be nurtured, as it has an impact on work products and wider learning and enables personnel to be active players in work and learn beyond their immediate situation.

Reciprocal peer learning, according to Boud (1999b), can involve peers in reviewing existing materials and practices and developing writing materials that can be used by other ELT teachers and students to enhance their teaching and learning respectively.

Reciprocal peer learning can also facilitate writing for publication. Written assignments can take different shapes, involving raw data obtained from observing peer teaching, classroom teaching, transcripts of lessons, microteaching, video or audio recordings of actual lessons and helping student teachers to gain experience about teaching. Alternatively, written assignments can help student teachers to raise

their awareness about the principles underlying ELT and/or the practical techniques they can use in different lessons. Examples can be textbook materials, case studies, lesson plans and outlines, and samples of students' written work (Ellis, 1990).

Written assignments can also take the form of action research to help train student teachers to become dynamic, creative, analytical and critical thinkers and research and action initiators and writers. Action research, 'trains student teachers to try out ideas in practice to improve and increase their knowledge about learning and teaching, link theory and practice, develop research skills and embrace self-inquiry. Richards & Lockhart (1994, 3) point out that 'much can be learned about teaching through self-inquiry' and 'much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher'.

It is important that the more 'private' practice of reflective teaching carried out by the different individual student teachers behind the closed doors of their classrooms be taken one step further and converted into academic work about Omani ELT. It is also important that this work be made available for public scrutiny (Nunan, 1993), either through being published or being presented at conferences, forums or seminars about ELT at the local, regional or international levels.

Such a move would be a genuine representation of the 'scholarship of discovery' and 'scholarship of integration' (Boyer, 1990). While the former kind of scholarship is scholarly investigation and is '… at the very heart of academic life' (Boyer, 1990, 18), as it is about the search for knowledge for its own sake due to its absolute importance, the latter kind puts isolated facts in perspective and helps to make connections across the disciplines.

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the role of the nine multicultural SQU ELT trainers in training their trainees to become reflective teachers and the approaches and strategies these trainers had used to help them reflect on their teaching. A 25-item questionnaire was designed and administered on line to collect the student teachers and trainers' responses for this purpose.

The analysis and discussion of the data have revealed that there is a contradiction between the trainees' responses on one hand and those of the trainers on the other in relation to Items 4, 10, 11, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23 and 25. One possible reason for this contradiction is that more than half of the trainees did not complete the questionnaire. Another could be that the trainees who did so were taught and trained by certain trainers and not by others.

The ELT SQU trainers have been training their student teachers to implement different approaches and strategies to reflect on their teaching. However, there appears to be a lack of coordination among the trainers in terms of the selection and implementation of these approaches and strategies.

This has apparently led to some student teachers having been exposed to certain approaches and strategies and not to others.

Moreover, some of the trainers have been implementing training practices that can have negative implications for the student teachers' ELT beliefs and thinking.

A good example is asking the trainees to teach only the national syllabus. We argued above that trainers are powerful socialisation agents and such practices can defeat the purpose of producing dynamic and informed agents of change. The same applies (more or less) to engaging the trainees in on-line collaborative talks, telling the

trainees how to teach, demonstrating to the trainees how to teach and failing to require assignments about ELT in Oman.

While the literature on reflective teaching emphasises engaging trainees in collaborative talk about their teaching practice experience and conducting action research as important approaches and strategies in helping develop reflective teachers, it was found that 42.9 per cent of the trainees had not experienced any on-line collaborative talk and 42 per cent of them had not been asked to produce any written assignments (research) about ELT in Oman. Moreover, while the literature discourages trainers from telling the trainees how to teach and demonstrating to them how to teach—as these can have negative implications for their reflective stances—it was found that five trainers had been telling their trainees how to teach and four had been demonstrating to their trainees how to teach.

In addition, reflection is about learning and reflective teaching is about professional practice (Boud, 1999a). They both involves '... exploration, focusing on a lack of understanding, questioning, probing discrepancies and so on' (Boud, 1999, 123). While the concept of reflection is intrinsic to and central for effective learning (Boud et al., 1985), to being a teacher and an integral component of work and a necessary element in evaluation, sense-making, learning and decision making in the workplace (Boud et al., 2006) and should be promoted throughout the course and the curriculum (Boud, 1999a), reflective teaching is complex and not all teachers or trainers are familiar with its approaches and strategies and levels.

We therefore believe that the SQU ELT trainers have the important task of educating themselves in depth about reflection and reflective teaching, which should have positive implications for their trainees' performance.

This is particularly important in an ELT education system such as that of Oman; and, with the introduction of BES and the rapid transformation occurring in the students' knowledge, attitudes and perceptions about learning English, a different kind of challenge is being made to the teachers' skills and knowledge.

The analysis and discussion of the data have shown that while the trainees are being trained to reflect, it is still unclear whether they continue implementing some of the reflection approaches and strategies they have used at SQU after being appointed as full-time English teachers.

There is a need for a longitudinal study that follows the student teachers into their first years of teaching and demonstrates whether the reflective approaches and strategies they have used are being retained, developed or lost.

This study has focused on eliciting responses from the student teachers and their trainers about how the former are being trained to reflect on their teaching. Perhaps future studies can turn their attention to the observation of some teacher training sessions, which can tell us more about the approaches and strategies adopted for training SQU ELT student teachers to reflect on their practices.

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Appendixes

1: Our trainers tend to:

No.	Item	SA	A	NS	D	SD
1	Ask us to complete evaluation forms about our teaching.					
2	Ask us to keep notes, a diary, journal, or portfolio about our teaching practice experience.					
3	Use different materials & texts to teach us about ELT in Oman.					
4	Use set training textbooks only to teach us about ELT.					
5	Tell us how to teach.					
6	Demonstrate to us how to teach.					
7	Encourage us to visit each other's classes during teaching practice.					
8	Show us relevant educational films about ELT to help us improve certain aspects of our teaching					
9	Ask us to complete evaluation forms about our classmates' teaching.					
10	Conduct pre-lesson conferencing to discuss what I am going to teach in class					
11	Hold feedback session during the same day s/he observed us in.					
12	Involve us in online discussions with other trainees about the various issues we experience in teaching practice					
13	Hold group feedback session rather than individual ones.					
14	Encourage us to use technology in teaching in public schools if available					
15	Encourage us to use & design additional materials & activities for teaching practice.					
16	Encourage us to try out new teaching techniques.					
17	Ask us to use the teacher's guide only to plan our lessons.					
18	Train us to teach the national syllabus.					
19	Encourage us to consult different references to expand our knowledge about ELT techniques.					
20	Encourage us to consult different references to find solutions for encountered teaching practice problems.					
21	Motivate us to use technology in preparing for our teaching practice (e.g. online lesson plans, activities, etc.)					
22	Encourage us to find solutions and alternatives for our teaching practice weaknesses and mistakes.					
23	Ask us to produce different written assignments about ELT in Oman.					
24	Ask us to present different topics about ELT in Oman (e.g. motivating low achievers, organizing groups work in large classes, supplementing the textbook, etc.)					
25	Urge us to establish a link between teaching practice and the two Methods of ELT courses					

SA = Strongly Agree
A = Agree
N = Not Sure
D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree

2: As a trainer of English language student teachers, I:

No.	Item	SA	A	NS	D	SD
1	Ask them to complete evaluation forms about their teaching.					
2	Ask them to keep notes, a diary, journal, or portfolio about their teaching practice experience.					
3	Use different materials & texts to teach them about ELT in Oman.					
4	Use set training textbooks only to teach them about ELT.					
5	Tell them how to teach.					
6	Demonstrate to them how to teach.					
7	Encourage them to visit each other's classes during teaching practice.					
8	Show them relevant educational films about ELT to help them improve certain aspects of their teaching					
9	Ask them to complete evaluation forms about their classmates' teaching.					
10	Conduct pre-lesson conferencing to discuss what they are going to teach in class					
11	Hold feedback session during the same day I observed them in.					
12	Involve them in online discussions with other trainees about the various issues they experience in teaching practice.					
13	Hold group feedback session rather than individual ones.					
14	Encourage them to use technology in teaching in public schools if available					
15	Encourage them to use & design additional materials & activities for teaching practice.					
16	Encourage them to try out new teaching techniques.					
17	Ask them to use the teacher's guide only to plan their lessons.					
18	Train them to teach the national syllabus.					
19	Encourage them to consult different references to expand their knowledge about ELT techniques.					
20	Encourage them to consult different references to find solutions for encountered teaching practice problems.					
21	Motivate them to use technology in preparing for their teaching practice (e.g. online lesson plans, activities, etc.)					
22	Encourage them to find solutions and alternatives for their teaching practice weaknesses and mistakes.					
23	Ask them to produce different written assignments about ELT in Oman.					
24	Ask them to present different topics about ELT in Oman (e.g. motivating low achievers, organizing groups work in large classes, supplementing the textbook, etc.).					
25	Urge them to establish a link between teaching practice and the two Methods of ELT courses.					

SA = Strongly Agree
A = Agree
N = Not Sure
D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree