REFLECTING ON TEACHING PRINCIPLES AS A META-COGNITIVE STRATEGY IN ENHANCING EFL TEACHERS' PRACTICES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY

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ABSTRACT

Teaching principles that EFL teachers adopt, in fact, determine their ways of thinking and teaching practices. Hence, it is noteworthy to investigate the principles of EFL teachers in the light of what they consider as fundamental in teaching the foreign language. In addition to articulating one's teaching principles, the reasons for considering them as important components of pedagogy need to be equally investigated. Moreover, it is crucial to explore, in depth, how EFL teachers put their principles into action. In this perspective, this qualitative study explored the principles of twenty-eight EFL teachers teaching grades 5-12 in governmental schools in the Sultanate of Oman. To answer the research questions of this study, a case study approach with four research instruments was applied. The instruments were initial self-reports, teachers' written journals, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The obtained data were coded manually and analysed thematically. The initially generated data, which were based on the self-reports' answers showed that the participants, at the beginning of the study, were not fully aware of their principles and how to reflect on them duly. However, after showing them one example of a teaching principle and its reflection, they were able to identify 125 principles which were analysed and classified into twelve themes. Furthermore, the eight classroom observations revealed two embedded principles that teachers practised while teaching English. The interviewed fourteen participants revealed four effects their teaching principles had on students' language learning. After analysing other interview responses, eleven sources of forming language principles and two types of challenges in reflective exploration and implementation of all these principles were found. In addition to that, the fourteen participants propounded eight recommendations to maximize the use of principles in language teaching and they also revealed many benefits for exploring principles of language teaching and reflect on them to encourage other EFL teachers to discuss their principles. The findings of the current study may assist in the following four aspects: 1. raising awareness towards the importance of the teachers' principles in language teaching, 2. motivating the Ministry of Education, EFL supervisors and teachers to augment the use of principles in light of the proposed recommendations, 3. offering a model for EFL teachers to follow when they intend to explore their principles and reflect on them systematically and finally, 4. providing other researchers with further research suggestions.

ملخص البحث

إن مبادئ التدريس التي يتبناها المعلمون في حقيقة الأمر هي ما تُحدّد طرق تفكيرهم وممارساتهم في التدريس. وعليه كان من المهم بمكان البحث في مبادئ معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ضوء ما يَعُدُّونه أساسا في تدريس لغة أجنبية. فضلا عن جوهر صياغة مبادئ الفرد، فإنه وجب البحث في الأسباب بِعَدِّهَا مكونات مهمة في علم أصول التدريس، فمن الأهمية بمكان، علاوة على ذلك، استجلاء كيفية وضع هؤلاء المعلمين مبادئهم موضع التنفيذ. وقد سعت هذه الدراسة النوعية إلى استكشاف مبادئ ثمانية وعشرين معلما لمادة اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الحكومية (الصفوف 5-12) بسلطنة عمان. للإجابة عن أسئلة البحث في هذه الدراسة، طُبِّقَ نهج دراسة الحالة وأربع أدوات بحث (التقارير الذاتية الأولية، والنقد التأملي الذاتي للمعلمين، والمشاهدات الصفية والمقابلات شبه المنظمة). ورُمِّزَت البيانات التي حُصِلَ عليها يدويًا ومن ثم تم تحليلها موضوعياً. أظهرت البيانات في بداية الدراسة المرتكزة على التقارير الذاتية أن المشاركين لم يكونوا مسبقا على دراية كاملة بمبادئهم وكيفية التأمل الفكري فيها كما ينبغي، إلا أنه بعد عرض مثال واحد عليهم، استطاعوا حصر 125 مبدأً حُلّلت وصُنّفت إلى اثني عشر موضوعًا. كما كشفت المشاهدات الثمان عن مبدأين راسخين مارسهما المعلمون أثناء تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية. كشف المشاركون الأربعة عشر الذين تمت مقابلتهم عن أربعة تأثيرات للمبادئ على تعلم الطلاب للغة الإنجليزية. بعد تحليل البيانات الأخرى المستنبطة من المقابلات، تم استخلاص أحد عشر مصدرًا لتشكيل مبادئ اللغة والوقوف على اثنين من التحديات المتعلقة بالتعرف على جميع هذه المبادئ على نحو تأملي ناقد والتطبيق العملي لها. فضلا عن ذلك، قدم المشاركون ثماني توصيات لزيادة استخدام المبادئ في تدريس اللغة، وكشفوا عن فوائد عدة لاستكشاف مبادئ تدريس اللغة لتشجيع معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على مناقشة مبادئهم. وعليه ستساهم نتائج الدراسة الحالية في زيادة الوعي بأهمية مبادئ تدريس اللغة، تحفيز وزارة التربية والتعليم ومشرفي اللغة الإنجليزية والمعلمين لزيادة استخدام المبادئ في ضوء مقترحات الدراسة، وتقديم نموذجًا لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لاتباعه عندما يعتزمون استكشاف مبادئهم والتفكير فيها على نحو منهجي، وأخيرا عرض مجموعة من الجوانب المستنبطة من نتائج الدراسة الجديرة بالبحث مستقبلا.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Yaquob Obaid Juma Al-Qutaiti

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To

My family and friends

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

For effective language teaching and learning, a determining factor is the language teaching principles that underlie EFL teachers' teaching practices and ways of thinking (Farrell, 2018). As Larsen-Freeman (2012) asserted these ideas of teaching influence EFL teachers' actions and techniques inside the classrooms. In addition, Borg (2018) proposed that teachers' cognition plays a vital role in what teachers consider necessary to be accomplished when they teach the language. Nowadays, EFL teachers are not encouraged to follow one particular method of teaching. However, they should practice their own teaching principles that would meet their students' needs and abilities, educational contexts and materials (Brown, 2007), among others.

Teaching by principles is essential; and reflecting on these principles is paramount. Writing their own reflections, EFL teachers will be able to be updated and share their thoughts with the experienced and expertise in the educational field. Also, they will have a chance to revise and question their own teaching (Dervent, 2015; Farrell & Kennedy, 2019). This leads to profound, critical analysis of regulating, self-directing meta-cognitive type of teaching and lifelong learning (Farrell, 2015). El-Okda (2009) argued that reflection can be the chief means of teacher professional development strategy as it can be practiced on many tasks. He called these tasks "reflection enhancing task types"; and according to him, these tasks are peer-observation, teachers' journals, teaching autobiography, action research, task analysis and critical incidents.

One essential type of reflection relates to teaching philosophy which can be performed by writing language teaching principles first (El-Okda, 2009). Then, the EFL teachers examine the effectiveness of these held principles by justifying and implementing them in their classes. These language teaching principles are significant as they encourage teachers to maximize the potential of the teaching principles used with the learners (Farrell, 2016; Xu, 2012). This type of reflection opens doors for creativity, discovery and novelty in language teaching (Farrell, 2008, 2015; Freeman, 2016). In addition, it aids EFL teachers to understand their students' needs and preferences better. Consequently, students can be more interested in the subject matter and achieve satisfactory language proficiency (Farrell & Ives, 2014). Besides, exploring language teaching principles can fortify and consolidate the teachers' choices and make them be more confident in their own teaching methodology (Brown & Lee, 2015; Kaushanskaya, Yoo & Marian, 2011; Krashen, 1982).

Farrell (2016) asserted that teachers' entrenched beliefs are those convictions and assumptions about students and classrooms that teachers have inevitably nurtured after many years of learning and teaching activities. These beliefs, which are also associated to teachers' past experiences as language students, tend to impact on teaching methods and everyday choices (Schön, 1987). Reflecting on principles can help EFL teachers to enhance motivation and consistency in their teaching, while decreasing discrepancies between their beliefs and actual classroom practice. Moreover, Farrell and Kennedy (2019) believed that teachers' own beliefs or principles are very significant for language teachers' learning and profession and need to be revisited and carefully monitored. Articulation of their implicit principles, according to Abednia, Hovassapian, Teimourezhad and Ghanbari (2013), enhanced teachers to attain heightened level of awareness of their assumptions and beliefs and

this awareness made them evaluate, and in some cases re-evaluate those principles in terms of their appropriateness and effectiveness.

1.2 TEACHING ENGLISH IN OMAN

Sultanate of Oman has always valued teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) since the beginning of the formal education in 1970. It is the only core foreign subject taught from the first grade to the last grade, which is grade 12, in all Omani public and private schools. Al-Issa (2007) explained that Oman needs English because it is a fundamental means for 'modernization', 'nationalization' and the acquisition of science and technology. Competence in using English has indisputably proven to be a worthwhile benefit for employment in Oman (Al-Issa, 2007; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2010). Regarding the fact that Arabic is the official language in Oman, English is widely used mostly in medical clinics, chemist shops, restaurants, factories, hotels, general trade stores, banks, business, insurance agencies, and companies (Al-Issa, 2006). For all these factors, Oman has seriously invested in teaching English as a foreign language at all levels starting from the early years of schooling up to higher education institutions such as colleges and universities (Al-Khamisi, 2019).

In this context, the English language teaching aims to offer students with the basic four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. In Oman, learners have 5-7 English language lessons per week depending on the grade level; each lesson lasts for 40 minutes with a total of 4-5 hours of English language learning exposure per week. The Ministry of Education (MoE) provides schools with the English language teaching (ELT) textbooks and materials. Therefore, EFL teachers are instructed to strictly use the provided textbooks and teaching resources with a regular

number of 30-38 students of diverse abilities, per class. Therefore, EFL teachers should use various teaching principles and strategies to meet their students' individual differences and learning needs. The textbook series used in EFL classrooms are called 'English for Me' for grades 1-10 and 'Engage with English' (EWE) for grades 11-12 (MoE, 2017). The fundamental goals governing the Ministry of Education design and use of these textbooks are, to assure communicative education that promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, and an appreciation of English language's global value. In addition, it emphasizes that the English curriculum has been designed to support a student-centered approach to English language learning. The English language textbooks for grades 5-12 are initially designed to support learners' academic progress, and to maintain motivation and interest. The general aims of the English curriculum are to raise students' language level to be ready to enter the job-market and develop their specific language skills independently. Generally, the ELT curriculum design has a number of linguistic aims for example,

1. developing and consolidating functional skills in English;
2. giving leaners the skills and confidence to use English outside the classroom;
3. developing learners' awareness of learning strategies, so they can apply to further their learning of English both inside and outside of schools;
4. enabling learners to acquire active mastery of the core grammar of English;
5. providing learners with a functional command of English as preparation for work or future studies;
6. establishing a basis for both fluency and accuracy within specific domains; and

7. using English as a medium for learning about other cultures and contrasting it with their own (MoE, 2017).

In addition to the linguistic aims, there is also a number of embedded non-linguistic aims. For instance, the textbooks offer chances for students to become familiar with self-help strategies and encourage proper use of a range of resources for independent learning and reflection, and monitoring strategies. Basic skills such as dictionary skills and library; and research skills such as paraphrasing, referencing, and accurate citation of sources are integrated into the class materials. Moreover, the themes and topics of the ELT curriculum cover a range of international issues that have a global impact, through which students can reflect on and relate the subject topics and their implications to the students' own Omani experiences. For example, a number of topics pertain either directly or indirectly, to different fields such as tourism, hospitality industry, computer technology, and office management, among others.

Many teaching principles can be inferred from general aims of teaching English in Oman. To start with, language is taught to develop and consolidate students' functional skills in English, and to give them the skills and confidence to use English in/outside the classroom. Thus, EFL teachers should enable their students to use English confidently. Another teaching principle is that teachers should develop students' awareness of learning strategies. This means that teachers not only should teach the language explicitly, but also motivate the learners to depend on themselves and use their own ways to learn English in the classroom and outside. Moreover, it is necessary to establish a solid foundation for both fluency and accuracy within specific situations; and to use English as a medium for learning about other cultures and contrasting it with their own. Therefore, EFL teachers should emphasize both fluency

and accuracy depending on the students' needs and teaching situation and context. Furthermore, language is viewed as a tool for learning about other cultures and comparing what is studied with the Omani culture. Hence, EFL teachers should encourage research skills, values, independent learning and reflection on global issues since these non-linguistic objectives are essential to Omani language learners, too.

1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The researcher was appointed as an EFL school teacher in the Sultanate of Oman in September 2000 and this position lasted for four years. Then, he was promoted to a senior teacher's position in which he continued for two more years. In the academic year 2006 and 2007, the researcher was appointed as a supervisor of English. Since the commencement of his career as a teacher, he has undergone and given in-service training programs. Most of which have been top-down approach-based types. The Ministry of Education activated the EFL teachers' interests as it has designed small boxes in the preparation books that have allowed teachers to write their reflection. However, this reflection has been based on the lessons taught only. It has not revealed what these teachers think and how they think. Teachers' reflection is indispensable for better teaching practices and professional development (Dewey, 1933; Farrell, 2015, 2018; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

In 2008 (during the researcher's master's study at Sultan Qaboos University), a tutor asked him and his colleagues to write their own teaching philosophy and teaching autobiography; all of them were perplexed about what to write and how to commence. Since then, a strong conviction of the essence of identifying learning and language teaching principles was formed deeply in him and started practicing them. In addition, the belief evolved to trigger how to cogitate on these principles and activate

the intuitive heuristics in order to discover what a person has already known and how to construct his or her own teaching philosophy and schemata. This is a main feature of Kumaradevilu's (2003, 2005) post-method pedagogy and the constructivists' perspectives. The principles can be thoughts on learning, teaching in general, supervision, training and so on. Having read Brown's book, "Teaching by Principles", the researcher was also encouraged to explore how Omani EFL teachers' reflection on their teaching principles would enhance their teaching and professional development, as a contribution to this relatively new and growing area of knowledge.

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teaching English is a complex, multifaceted process that needs EFL teachers to diversify their teaching techniques and methods frequently (Richards, 2013). Thus, it requires them to be creative and innovative. In addition, language is dynamic and changing, EFL teachers also have to frequently update themselves and add to their existing knowledge. Therefore, teaching English urges these EFL teachers to not only follow the latest trends in teaching and learning English (Farrell, 2018; Richards, 2013), but also to keep pace with changes that occur within the language.

More importantly, EFL teachers ought to examine their language teaching principles that are learnt and formed accumulatively throughout their lives, being language learners at schools and trainee teachers at education colleges. Language learning experiences are developed to be beliefs and cognition which underlie the principles of their teaching (Borg, 2013, 2018). Without regular reflection on these tacit, formed principles, the teaching practice becomes a routine which will be believed to be the only way of teaching English (El-Okda, 2009; Farrell, 2016). This leads these teachers to teach as they had been taught, to the point that they fail to think

of alternatives to what they are doing (Borg, 2013; Stigler & Hiebert, 1998). Similarly, the threat of not reflecting upon what they believe to be perfect and effective in language teaching is that these tacit principles can be easily conventionalized into a set of everyday procedures in their classes and they may never change if they are not questioned or investigated further (Olaya Mesa, 2018).

The revised research revealed that many old teaching beliefs and unadvisable approaches are still practiced in EFL teaching; and they were among the reasons of students' low English proficiency in Oman. For example, Al-Issa (2007, 2015) found that EFL teachers did not allocate sufficient time for students to participate; that explained why the teacher's talking time was dominant throughout the whole lesson. He found that it happened due to the participants' beliefs which were based on the thought that the more teachers talk, the better the students' English would be. Moreover, Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2018) stated that many EFL teachers still ask ordinary questions that require low-level of thinking skills and they do not give ample time for students to discuss and negotiate meanings. In other words, they do not stretch the level of critical thinking and English practice for daily uses. Additionally, Al-Khamisi (2019) revealed that many EFL teachers believe in teacher-centered approach which does not support students to take the learning lead. He attributed that to the teachers' beliefs that stemmed from their own experiences as students and the teaching principles of Grammar Translation Method. He further disclosed that too many EFL teachers use too much Arabic in EFL classes. Therefore, EFL teachers should regularly examine their held principles to discover their effectiveness. He recommended that ineffective language teaching principles that still exist need to be uncovered and discussed with senior educators.

Being a supervisor of English in the Ministry of Education in Oman, the researcher has noticed that a big number of EFL teachers could not state what their language teaching principles were. Moreover, they did not know why they consider certain language teaching principles to be significant or how to reflect on them duly. To begin with, identifying these language teaching principles can facilitate language teaching since EFL teachers are confident of their choices of teaching techniques and procedures (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In addition, exploring and reflecting on these learnt and formed language teaching principles is essential because they determine the EFL teachers' teaching practices (Borg, 2013). The more the EFL teachers are aware of these principles, the more teaching alternatives they can implement in the EFL classes (Farrell, 2018; Ghaye, 2010).

Implementing various teaching techniques and understanding the students' needs, attitudes and preferences inevitably affect students' learning positively and make them attain better results in English (Borg, 2018; Skott, 2014; Tamimy, 2015). Hence, studying and scrutinizing these language teaching principles critically lead to better understanding of the learning and teaching processes. When EFL teachers examine their language teaching principles regularly, they will be able to distinguish between effective and ineffective methods and approaches with the particular groups of learners in their classes (Brown, 2007; Brown & Lee, 2015). In other words, they will de-routinize their teaching, try every conceivable, workable methods; and develop alternatives effortlessly (El-Okda, 2009, Farrell & Kennedy, 2019).

Brown (2007) emphasized that every teacher is unique, every student is distinctive, and every teaching context is different from another. He added that the task of an EFL teacher is to digest the relationship among all existing variables, such as students, available materials, culture, motivation for learning English language; and