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# Navigating professional growth: Exploring reflective practices in EFL teacher leadership within Arab higher education contexts

Sayyed Rashid Ali Shah<sup>1</sup>, Hamid Ali Khan Eusafzai<sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Galileo Institute of Learning & Development, Islamabad 44020, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup> School of Arts and Sciences, University of Central Asia, Bishkek 720001, Kyrgyzstan

\* **Corresponding author:** Hamid Ali Khan Eusafzai, [eusafzai.h@gmail.com](mailto:eusafzai.h@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Employing an interpretive lens and utilizing a case study methodology, this research investigated insights from a purposively selected cohort of 12 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher leaders on the significance of reflective practice in their professional growth within an EFL environment. Through a qualitative approach, data was collected via semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire. The findings reveal the multifaceted operational and instructional leadership roles undertaken by EFL teacher leaders within the hierarchical structures of the English Language Institute (ELI). These leaders demonstrate a commitment to reflective practices and proactive learning, utilizing collegiality and collaborative reflection to enhance their leadership skills and navigate contextual challenges at the ELI. In the landscape of higher education, EFL teacher leadership emerges from intrinsic motivation to learn and adapt to context-specific roles. This entails reflecting on diverse experiences and applying accumulated knowledge to enhance practical leadership competencies.

**Keywords:** EFL teacher leaders; reflective practice; professional learning; leadership skills; higher education

## 1. Introduction

Reflective practice, rooted in philosophy and tracing its origins back to Plato and later conceptualized by Immanuel Kant, has significantly influenced various fields over the centuries. It gained prominence in academic discourse through the works of John Dewey and Donald Schön. Despite methodological critiques from researchers [1–3], reflective practice has emerged as a viable alternative to the limitations of technical rationality for professionals across diverse fields. In contrast to technical rationality, which involves “instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” [4], practitioners adopting a reflective approach initiate the resolution of context-specific problems by contemplating their personal and professional experiences, steering clear of undue reliance on theoretical knowledge within their respective fields. This entire process takes on a cyclical nature, contributing significantly to the continuous learning and development of professionals. Consequently, reflective practice emerges as a potent tool for professional learning, embraced by a diverse spectrum of professionals, including teachers, teacher trainers, teacher educators, and educational leaders. Its utilization extends beyond personal growth, encompassing the realms of educational change and improvement.

The concept of reflective practice has been integrated into teacher education programs, which prepare pre-service teachers across various disciplines [5]. It holds equal popularity in teacher training programs designed for in-service teachers, where

reflective practice becomes an integral part of academic discourse. Moreover, reflective practice stands as a significant research area in the field of English language teaching [6,7]. Research efforts have extended to explore teachers' and teacher educators' perspectives, aiming to enhance their critical reflective capacity through written reflections [8].

Empirical research goes beyond the realm of teachers and teacher educators, delving into the reflective practices of school educational leaders and principals in various contexts [9]. While the focus of this research centres on teacher leaders in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context and their use of the reflective practice as a professional development tool, the concept is not novel in mainstream education [10]. However, empirical research is scarce on this issue within English language teaching (ELT) contexts. Hence, this study adds to the current knowledge base by investigating the role of reflective practice in the professional learning and development of language teachers serving as leaders in the Saudi EFL context.

## **2. Context of the study**

This study was conducted at a Saudi EFL higher education institute. Saudi culture is predominantly influenced by religious values, tribal traditions, and a societal structure that significantly shapes individuals' attitudes and beliefs at both personal and professional levels. The rigid social framework in Saudi society is rooted in tribal values, leading to a patriarchal family system and pervasive gender segregation across social, political, and educational contexts. This separation extends to schools, universities, and even financial institutions, all conforming to established social codes [11]. The patriarchal culture deeply permeates educational organizations in Saudi Arabia, evident in hierarchical management models. Higher education institutions operate under government regulations, following a hierarchical power structure overseen by the Council of Saudi Higher Education. Consistent with the patriarchal societal structure, key academic positions such as presidents, vice presidents, deans, and department chairs are predominantly held by males. This male leadership oversees the management of both male and female campuses.

This interpretive study was conducted at the English Language Institute (ELI) of a public university in Saudi Arabia, hosting over 10,000 EFL students annually within a foundation year program. The educational requirements for language learning of these students are fulfilled by a dedicated group of over 400 EFL teachers, who collectively deliver 18 hours of language teaching per week.

The English Language Institute (ELI) operates under a traditional top-down leadership structure, overseen by a dean and six vice deans responsible for managing both academic and administrative operations within the institute. The leadership roles outlined in **Table 1** are predominantly executed by EFL teachers situated within the middle-level institutional hierarchy. This intermediate leadership tier establishes a crucial link between teachers and the top management at ELI. These middle-level leadership positions align closely with the classifications of teacher leadership delineated by York-Barr and Duke [12], encompassing curriculum development, quality assurance, professional development, teacher evaluation, tests and examination preparation, and academic coordination.

**Table 1.** Academic and administrative units led by EFL teacher leaders at the ELI.

Academic units	Administrative units
Graduate studies unit	Academic & educational development system unit
Student support unit	Student affairs unit
Research unit	Academic coordination unit
Curriculum unit	Cooperative and practical training unit
Professional development unit	Faculty affairs unit
Testing unit	Quality application unit

The concept of teacher leadership may seem unconventional within the traditional top-down social and academic structures of Saudi Arabia, where democratic practices like teacher leadership have limited scope. While the teacher leadership model is predominantly applied in Western schools, Shah [13] has identified its emergence in the Saudi EFL context, highlighting several characteristics that parallel those found in the Western world. Therefore, this study aligns with the definition of teacher leadership proposed by Katzenmeyer and Moller, who define it as “the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” [14].

### 3. Conceptual framework

Reflection is described as a cognitive process employed to achieve a specific purpose or anticipated outcome. According to Chelliah and Arumugam [15], reflection is utilized to enhance understanding of complex or unstructured ideas, relying on the reprocessing of existing knowledge, understanding, and emotions. Given its context-specific nature, reflective practice provides insights into personal observations and experiences, often aligning with Kolb’s [16] experiential learning theory. The intertwining processes of experiential learning and reflection suggest that meaningful learning may not occur without reflecting on experiences. Dewey [17] emphasized the educative value of reflection, asserting that individuals must frequently reflect to fully grasp the significance of events. Sullivan and Wiessner reinforce this perspective, stating, “To learn from experience, individuals must reflect on it; without reflection, learning may not take place, or the learning may be dysfunctional” [18]. In a leadership context, reflection on experience can maximize leaders’ potential. Guthrie and Jones believe that “experiential learning and reflection are critical to maximizing leadership learning” [19].

Dewey’s work on thinking introduced the concept of reflective practice in education. According to Dewey, reflective action is integral to learning and development, involving “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads” [17]. Norsworthy [20], guided by Dewey’s concepts, delineates three fundamental attributes nurtured by effective reflection: openness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility. The context should be conducive to curiosity, and attention should be directed towards the individual within that context. Schön’s

[4] seminal work is seen as an affirmation of Dewey's contributions rather than a departure from them. Schön delineates three dimensions of reflection: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. Reflection-in-action entails spontaneous thinking, contributing to the enhancement of a professional practice repertoire by acknowledging tacit knowledge gained in a role. Reflection-on-action involves retrospective contemplation of experiences in a methodical and preplanned manner. Reflection-for-action represents the intended result of the initial two forms of reflection. Sullivan and Wiessner [18] view these forms of reflection as experiential learning contributing to leadership development. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), Wallace [21] proposed a reflective model that posits teachers can enhance their professional development through reflection on their practices. Wallace's work is seen as an extension or continuation of Schön's concepts. He posits that relying solely on received knowledge (comprising theories, concepts, and skills acquired through courses) does not enhance teachers' competence. Wallace supports a reciprocal relationship between received knowledge and experiential learning. This approach enables trainees to reflect on received knowledge in the context of classroom experience and, conversely, allows insights from classroom experience to inform sessions on received knowledge.

Among the three models, Dewey's [17] perspective positions reflection as a cognitive process intertwined with a social context, encouraging individuals to contemplate their actions. In contrast, Schön places relatively less emphasis on the social context, concentrating more on the procedural aspects of reflection, delineating three facets based on individuals' professional requirements. Wallace [21] envisions reflection as a cyclical process where both received knowledge and experiential knowledge contribute to practice, followed by reflective contemplation. This iterative cycle of reflection towards practice facilitates the development of professional competence, effectively closing the gap between theory and practice. The three models mentioned above can manifest in various tools to support individuals in teacher leadership roles. In line with these models, the literature proposes several effective reflective tools for leadership learning. Reflective tools utilized by EFL teacher leaders include a range of methods such as reading, group discussions, critical incident analysis, autobiographies, metaphor analyses, critical friends, teacher interviews, classroom ethnographies, peer observations, self-assessment, journal writing, portfolios, and action research [19]. However, being aware of different activities and their appropriateness is crucial to maximize learning outcomes. Additionally, individuals must take responsibility for actively participating in reflective activities to deliberately enhance their learning outcomes:

*"Intentional reflection for the purpose of making sense of and learning from experience for the purpose of improvement... Reflection requires linking existing knowledge to an analysis of the relationship between current experience and future action... They go on to say that reflection aids in the reflective processes themselves, thereby building or expanding knowledge" [22].*

Reflection is acknowledged as a fundamental process that allows individuals to derive knowledge from their experiences. Moon [23] argues that reflective practices play a crucial role in promoting reflection, especially in complex professional activities, as a strategy for navigating through ill-structured or unpredictable situations.

In the context of higher education, Guo's [24] recent meta-analysis emphasizes the importance of fostering reflective thinking and enhancing principles for reflective scaffolding. Earlier, Inman [25] suggested that self-learning through reflection on individual and collective work enhances contextual knowledge, self-awareness of challenges, and the ability to mitigate their impact. While these practices may prove effective in supporting teacher leaders in various educational settings, including EFL, reflective practice faces theoretical challenges, as highlighted in the literature [25]. There is a lack of clarity and consensus on the definition of reflective practice due to the rapidly expanding body of literature on this subject. Grimm et al. [26] point out that there is a diversity of meanings attached to the term "reflective teaching" in the literature. Fendler [27] notes the tension between Schön's practitioner-based intuition and Dewey's rational and scientific thinking, leading to ambiguity and confusion. Beauchamp underscores "the problem of the variety of ways in which reflection is perceived" [28], which can distort the notion and meaning of 'reflective practice' in teacher education.

Despite inherent shortcomings, experiential learning theory and reflective models can provide valuable support for the professional learning and development of teacher leaders. The ongoing, evidence-based introspective practices proposed by Dewey [17], Schön [4], and Wallace [21] serve as a framework for teacher leaders to inform their actions and make decisions regarding their leadership practices. Informal and unstructured learning takes place as teacher leaders reflect on their practices, attributing meaning to their actions and making sense of challenging experiences within specific leadership roles:

*"When new experiences are encountered and mediated by reflection, inquiry and social interaction, meaning and knowledge are constructed. Learning takes place, as does adult development. When actively engaged in reflective dialogue, adults become more complex in their thinking about the world, more respectful of diverse perspectives, more flexible and open toward new experiences"* [10].

#### **4. Prior research on teacher leaders' reflection**

Numerous studies highlight the importance of reflective practice in enhancing teaching and learning outcomes. While empirical research on teacher leaders' reflective practice in higher education is limited, insights can be drawn from the literature on school leaders. For instance, Cappelletti and Sajon [9] view systematic reflection as integral to the process of school change and innovation. Their study delves into the reflective practice of secondary school principals leading innovative initiatives. The narratives of these principals suggest they functioned as change agents, revealing an association between school change and reflective practice. The study concludes that reflective practice empowered school principals to assess and address the needs of the school community, establishing a link between the school and the processes of change.

Beyond being a catalyst for change among school leaders, reflective practices prove instrumental in the professional development of teacher educators. An illustration comes from a South African study conducted by Lubbe and Botha [29], highlighting the continuous development of context-specific knowledge through

critical reflection on teachers' beliefs, experiences, assumptions, and pedagogical practices. This process allows educators to recognize successful classroom strategies, reflect on obstacles, and adapt their instructional practices, fostering ongoing learning and development. The study emphasizes that adopting self-study techniques in teaching and research supports teacher educators in their continuous journey of critical reflective practice. The theme of critical reflection is further emphasized in the work of Fox et al. [8], highlighting the value of writing reflective notes during master's level coursework. The findings suggest that, while there may be no linear progress for most teachers, engaging in critical reflection prompts them to question the aims and outcomes of the program. They consider critical reflection a significant milestone for teachers and teacher educators in the US context.

The strong correlation between school change and reflective practices of school leaders and teacher educators has long been established in the literature, as identified by Furtado and Anderson [30] in the realm of teacher leadership. Their research encompasses a series of four action research projects, focusing on teacher leaders' reflections aimed at school improvement. The practice of reflection, particularly through journal writing, proved instrumental for teacher leaders in developing innovative teaching strategies. Collaborative reflection involving collaboration, peer dialogue, and mentorship played a crucial role in implementing change and ensuring positive student learning outcomes. Excerpts from the teacher leaders' journals affirm significant professional growth in pedagogical knowledge, autonomy, confidence, and leadership.

The literature review encompasses studies primarily centred on reflective practices among teachers, teacher educators, and school leaders. While there is a wealth of research on reflection within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), notably among language teachers, a notable gap exists in the literature regarding the application of reflective practices among teacher leaders. Specifically, there is a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating the impact of reflective practices on the professional learning and development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher leaders. This study, part of a larger qualitative investigation conducted in the Saudi EFL context, introduces the concept of reflective practice within the domain of teacher leadership, with a focus on EFL teachers whose roles extend beyond the classroom to encompass leadership responsibilities. The study's findings hold significance for English Language Teaching practitioners in the Arab world and beyond, emphasizing the value of continuous reflective practices for unstructured, unplanned, and informal professional development.

## **5. Research methodology**

This research adopts an interpretivist approach to investigate the perspectives of EFL teacher leaders regarding reflective practice and its impact on their professional development. In line with Crotty, this approach "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social lifeworld" [31]. Interpretive research primarily focuses on subjective meanings and individuals' interpretations of a social phenomenon [32]. As interpretivist studies delve into individuals' perceptions, share subjective meanings, and develop insights about an observed case [33], this approach

aligns with the scope and objectives of the current study, which examines reflective practices among EFL teacher leaders from their subjective perspectives within their context.

Consistent with the interpretivist approach, this study employs a qualitative case-study methodology to explore the perspectives of EFL teacher leaders on reflective practice and its impact on their leadership learning and development. Following Yin's [34] definition, a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, utilizing various sources of evidence. Cohen et al. [35] highlight that a case study offers insights into real people in actual situations, capturing the complexities, dynamics, and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships, and other factors in a unique instance.

Given the unique nature of leadership roles and the study context, the case study methodology aligns with the research objectives and aims to address the research question. As interpretivist researchers typically employ a holistic, investigative, and inductive approach for data analysis [36], this study utilizes semi-structured qualitative interviews (Appendix) as the primary tool to comprehend EFL teacher leaders' interpretations of their reflective practice in the Saudi EFL context. Following the interviews, an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix) further explores unsaturated categories identified during the interviews. Data was collected from August to December 2022.

The transcripts of 12 interviews and 8 open-ended questionnaires were analysed using NVivo 10. For data analysis, an eclectic approach was adopted by combining the frameworks provided by Creswell and Poth [36] and Saldaña [37]. Initially, 119 codes emerged, which were then collapsed into 18 broad categories. The study ultimately focused on two overarching categories: a) Collaborative Practices and Reflection's Impact on EFL Teacher Leadership Development, and b) Linking Past and Present through Reflection. These two categories, based on participants' perceptions, succinctly address the research questions.

Employing a purposive sampling technique, this study enlisted 12 EFL teachers in leadership roles at the ELI. This technique, aligned with the interpretive nature of the case study, facilitated the collection of in-depth information from experienced EFL teacher leaders [35]. The participants were primarily EFL teachers who had been elevated to middle-level leadership positions based on their pedagogical knowledge and professional experience. Ethical approval from the ELI administration was obtained before commencing data collection, and participants provided their consent for scheduling interviews at their preferred time and place. To safeguard participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were employed to attribute their views in interviews and questionnaire responses.

## **6. Findings**

The qualitative analyses of 12 semi-structured interviews and eight open-ended questionnaires provide insights into EFL teacher leaders' perceptions of their reflective practice and its potential contribution to their professional development in the Saudi EFL context. This section incorporates quotes from the interviews and open-ended questionnaires, serving as representative excerpts that aim to address the

research question.

### **6.1. Collaborative practices and reflection's impact on EFL teacher leadership development**

The findings reveal that EFL teacher leaders actively collaborate on various professional issues at the EFLI, with Khan's perspective representing the shared sentiment among other participants:

*"We rely on each other. There is no other method to deal with so many challenges. Our strength lies in our collegiality and teamwork."* (Khan)

Besides collegiality, the participants acknowledge reflection on their professional practices as a shared learning tool. Reflectivity, a characteristic of experiential learning, plays a crucial role for motivated teacher leaders at the ELI, making their on-the-job learning meaningful. It enables them to rectify mistakes and enhance their practices continuously, as Ibrahim explains:

*"I believe that reflecting on what you do during the day plays a pivotal role in learning about your job, revising your strategy, rethinking your tools of work, and designing your future actions. Certainly, reflecting on past actions, policies, and themes contributes significantly to revising and improving your strategies."* (Ibrahim)

Drawing on his own experience as an experiential learner, Harrison elaborated on how reflection played a role in his professional development as the head of the research unit at the ELI. He supported his point by referencing relevant literature:

*"The strategy I prefer aligns with Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning, with 'reflection' as its central element. I enjoy observing the outcomes of different leadership and management strategies and assessing their success. This approach allows me to reflect on the most effective ones and integrate them into my role."* (Harrison)

For Hamza, the reflective process has been instrumental in facilitating learning throughout his academic and professional journey:

*"When it comes to reflection, I grew up with this thing. I've been doing it since I was very young. Every time I do something, I reflect on it. It's not like I sit down and write on it; I'd be walking home, driving home, reflecting on why I did it that way."* (Hamza)

Peter emphasized the significance of collective reflection as a team, a strategy that was not addressed by other participants, in influencing their professional development efforts:

*"We've engaged in a lot of reflection, aiming to establish a minimum standard of quality in the week of workshops and make professional development activities more consistently useful for the faculty. I believe we've made significant progress in all the areas we reflected on and endeavoured to improve."* (Peter)

The results indicate that the intrinsic motivation of teacher leaders played a vital role in cultivating their interest in leadership roles, encouraging collaboration among colleagues, and fostering reflective practices. Natlus elaborated on how his internal drive and motivation created a conducive learning environment for both himself and others, particularly in the absence of a specific policy at the ELI:



*“The collaboration among the coordinators is a form of intrinsic motivation, and it has nothing to do with top management. In fact, they don’t even know about it.”*  
(Natlus)

The participants unanimously agreed that individuals can develop leadership skills within their workplace settings, echoing Khan’s assertion:

*“Leadership has to be learned whether it is in a political or educational context. The concept of ‘people are born leaders’ is nonsense.”* (Khan)

The interviewees, acknowledging the importance of professional development, showcased a remarkable desire for professional excellence. They revealed a fondness for reading, exploration, and experimentation in their respective professional domains, as indicated in excerpts from Khan and Peter’s interviews:

*“I read research and academic resources. I employ this approach while providing feedback. I read various books and explore websites when crafting evaluation reports and defending my arguments. These are valuable learning tools.”* (Peter)

Intrinsic motivation, fueling active reflective practice, empowered them to capitalize on learning opportunities and stay abreast of new developments and research in the field. These comments also suggest the teachers’ commitment to lifelong learning and its pivotal role in their career growth.

## **6.2. Linking past and present through reflection**

In addition to the structured and informal learning experiences at the ELI that contributed to the professional growth of teacher leaders, their past academic and professional backgrounds played a crucial role. Reflective practices, both individually and collaboratively, activated their prior experiences. The results underscore that the qualifications, training, and professional development courses pursued by EFL teacher leaders in other contexts before taking on leadership roles at the ELI greatly facilitated their current positions. For eleven participants, the insights gained from prior educational and non-educational experiences proved to be a valuable asset in their current roles, shaping their development as teacher leaders at the ELI. This knowledge from the past served as a practical tool for navigating the bureaucratic system at the ELI, as illustrated in the excerpt from Gray’s interview:

*“My engineering-focused technocratic learning has proven valuable in assessing environmental dynamics. Many individuals enter the environment and unquestionably embrace a technocratic approach as the sole legitimate means of influence. Drawing from my engineering background, I’ve gained the ability to recognize and objectively critique a technocratic system. This contrasts with the prevailing tendency here, where people often accept it without considering alternative approaches to managing the education system. This perspective has been instrumental in navigating the bureaucratic complexities, ensuring effective management and preventing potential chaos. Continuous reflection and discussion with colleagues are crucial in overcoming challenges.”* (Gray)

Ibrahim, Ismael, and Khan possessing extensive experience in education, gained valuable insights into management learning and practices through exposure to diverse educational settings. Khan’s description of a specific past role illustrates this

perspective:

*In my previous role, I managed a unit called the Self-Direct Learning Unit, where an American teacher-initiated self-development projects known as SDL projects. When he was absent for three months, I took charge of the project. Over the next five years, I supervised that unit, providing me with valuable learning experiences that have supported me in my current role. (Khan)*

Omar's challenging experiences in his previous job in Pakistan prepared him for the role he had to undertake at the ELI:

*It was a very hostile environment where my collegial relationships were not very good. But I still kept on working really hard. My responsibility was huge because in the morning I was teaching master's classes, and in the evening, I would manage the evening session until 9 pm. It was tough but rigorous training for me. Reflecting critically on those experiences prepared me for future assignments. (Omar)*

His role as a supervisor in a Saudi college further contributed to his present position. He said, "In 2002 when I was in Taif, I became a supervisor of a small English unit, which enhanced my capacity as a manager. That experience assisted me here at the ELI" (Omar). Similarly, Gray came from "a very competitive environment," and Sachin too had "a lot of service experience" in non-educational settings, which assisted them in their current positions.

In response to the open-ended questionnaire, Ismael condensed his insights gained from his previous employment, which was in a Saudi context:

*Reflecting on my earlier roles, I can say that my previous management experiences have taught me to tread cautiously and softly, be sensitive to cultural and geographical differences, and listen attentively to everyone and everything. Without any disrespect to ambition and idealism, it's the realities on the ground that matter, and one must make every possible effort to make a difference within the space and span, however tiny it may have been. (Ismael)*

The participants' critical reflection played a crucial role in making sense of their challenging experiences, ultimately contributing to their effectiveness in their current roles at the ELI. Peter, in his capacity as the head of the PDU responsible for teacher supervision, underscored the value of his experience as an IELTS examiner at the British Council. This experience significantly influenced his ability to observe and provide feedback on teachers' lessons:

*Another major thing that I brought into this position was my four years of experience with IELTS. I've been through a very rigorous IELTS training and learned how to use the rubric in a very standardized fashion. So, that background with rubrics and standardization helped me on the observation side of things here. (Peter)*

Similarly, the data unveiled how Harrison's prior employment significantly contributed to his current position as the head of the research unit. His proficiency in transferring skills acquired from his previous job to his current role bolstered his confidence:

*Being a team leader in my previous employment has helped me immensely in my current job since both are identical EFL contexts in one country (Saudi Arabia) and at a tertiary institution. Thus, I was able to transfer my skills from my last*

*job to the new one, and build further on them and improve the quality of implementation of these skills. Knowing different elements and responsibilities as a leader in my previous job has helped me recognize challenges and possible tricky issues in the current one. (Harrison)*

Ibrahim shared a similar perspective in his critical comments:

*Human nature is the same everywhere. Although differences exist at societal, economic, political, or religious levels, the general ways in which people react to particular situations are largely the same. Therefore, my previous experience in dealing with people was directly transferrable in the current context. (Ibrahim)*

The above excerpts indicate that having prior management experience, whether within or beyond the realm of education, can be advantageous for assuming teacher leadership roles in the Saudi EFL context. Peter underscored this point, stating, “Before delving into the technicalities of EFL management, you must have that experience of management and teaching.” Seven additional participants also considered prior management experience essential for assuming teacher leadership roles at the ELI:

*It would be beneficial if you already have some administrative experience. If you're entering a job without any administrative experience, I would strongly advise against taking that role, as it will pose a very steep learning curve. (Moh)*

Among the participants, four individuals held post-graduate level leadership qualifications and formal management training yet lacked specific experience in EFL leadership. In contrast, the remaining eight teacher leaders predominantly depended on their on-the-job learning and experience from their current and previous roles. Omar, for instance, emphasized, “I never had any formal training,” relying on his more than five years of prior EFL management experience.

In addition to their previous leadership roles, the teacher leaders gained leadership knowledge through professional development (PD) courses undertaken in their prior employments. These courses deepened their comprehension of leadership theories and practices, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness in their current roles at the ELI. Reflective activities during and after these courses facilitated their professional growth. Khan's statement serves as a notable example:

*In my previous job, I had the opportunity to enroll in online courses of our choice. Over seven years, I completed 134 short courses, varying from small, 2-hour courses to week-long ones, all conducted online. These courses provided valuable background information about educational leadership, which I can apply at the ELI. In my current role, I frequently draw upon that knowledge, reflecting on various aspects. Given that the courses involved many reflective activities, I sometimes use the same technique to comprehend my leadership role and enhance my professional practice. (Khan)*

When questioned about the influence of prior experience and leadership qualifications on teacher leader roles and performances, diverse opinions surfaced. While eight participants underscored the importance of leadership experience, considering qualifications less critical, four participants believed that a combination of both could be more advantageous in EFL contexts. Despite this difference, there was a unanimous agreement among the participants on the value of reflective practice in leveraging both prior experience and leadership qualifications. Individuals like

Hamza, Rahat, Moh, and Omar, lacking formal qualifications in leadership, emphasized that ‘experience’ held unmatched importance:

*I think experience is the key and more important than qualifications. I know a lot of people who don't have proper qualifications, but they have 10 years of experience and thus they are capable managers or leaders. They reflect on their experiences and make sense of the issues at hand. (Hamza)*

Ismael, Harrison, Khan, and Ibrahim, all holding post-graduate level leadership qualifications, stressed the significance of both experience and qualifications. They expressed the view that experience alone might not provide sufficient guidance for teacher leaders, emphasizing the role of theoretical knowledge in rationalizing their actions and decisions in leadership. Khan’s comments underscore the importance of combining both experience and qualifications:

*I believe experience alone, without specific knowledge, sometimes can prove a barrier. So, both knowledge and experience are very useful, in my opinion. For example, if somebody has 20 years of teaching experience and doesn't know anything about TESOL, that experience can be an obstacle at times in teaching and learning. Similarly, in management, if I have ten years of experience in coordination, but I don't know the standard practices, perhaps, I'll be making the same mistakes again and again. Instead, I'd say that a course followed by just 2 years of experience would be more useful. Nevertheless, it takes conscious efforts of group and individual reflection to connect both and benefit from them. (Khan)*

The participants’ reflections indicate that, by contemplating their management experiences and leadership qualifications, teacher leaders enhance their comprehension of professional issues and excel in their leadership roles at the ELI.

## **7. Discussion**

The collaborative nature, informal interactions, and reflective practices fostering professional development characterize experiential learning for teacher leaders. This approach enables them to acquire context-specific knowledge, enhance their skill set, and transform their practices. This aligns with Guthrie and Jones’s [19] perspective on the critical role of experiential learning and reflection in leadership development, a viewpoint supported by the current research findings. EFL teacher leaders, as unveiled by the study, exhibit traits of experiential learners and reflective practitioners. Their primary source of learning involves reflecting on past and current experiences at the ELI and elsewhere, leading to self-improvement and professional growth. Dewey [17] suggests that experience alone may not always be educative, and reflection helps individuals understand the workplace context, contributing to the development of leadership capacity. While experiences can be both positive and negative, making sense of them through reflection is crucial for learning. The study highlights that EFL teacher leaders, such as Omar and Gray, engage in reflective practices to make sense of difficult experiences in other contexts, playing a vital role in their leadership development. This challenges Norton and Campbell’s assertion that “reflection in itself does not necessarily lead to action” [38]. However, the specific actions mentioned by Omar and Gray and their contribution to professional learning at the ELI

require further exploration. Future research could delve into the impact of reflection, its connection to action, and its outcomes in the development of teacher leaders.

Per Kolb's [16] experiential learning model, the EFL teacher leaders in this study exhibit a learning process characterized by four phases: a) concrete experience, b) abstract conceptualization, c) reflective observation, and d) active experimentation. The findings indicate that teacher leaders learn from concrete experiences in their past roles, engage in reflective observation of their current practices, and cyclically apply newly acquired skills, mirroring Kolb's model. Significantly, the participants excel in applying previously acquired knowledge or skills to the EFL context, enhancing their leadership capabilities. However, the explicit mention of abstract conceptualization is absent in the data, possibly due to the nature of the participants' experiences or potential limitations in their ability and training to conceptualize and attribute meaning to abstract actions. Further research could explore these factors for a more comprehensive understanding.

The data underscores the significant role of experiential learning in the professional development of EFL teacher leaders, aligning with the findings of Alexandrou et al. [39]. The diverse experiences gained in both educational and non-educational settings provide valuable exposure to management practices, and the process of reflection on these experiences serves as a crucial element in preparing them for their current leadership roles. This mirrors the essence of experiential learning evident in the data. Consistent with the observations of Burgoyne and Stuart [40], the findings imply that the professional learning of EFL teacher leaders is predominantly characterized by being unstructured, unplanned, and informal. Their intrinsic motivation to collaborate, encounter new challenges, share expertise, and enhance skills propels this form of learning. Moreover, the ability to transfer past learning experiences to the specific context of the ELI demonstrates their adeptness at assessing cultural sensitivities and making informed decisions. For instance, Gray's anticipation of the ELI's bureaucratic functioning, drawn from prior experience, facilitated his current leadership role. In essence, experiential learning emerges as a pivotal factor contributing to the acquisition of role-specific skills and the development of leadership knowledge among teacher leaders at the ELI.

The findings highlight the essential role of reflection in learning and improving professional practices for EFL teacher leaders. Experiencing a situation and subsequently making sense of it through reflection significantly contribute to overcoming weaknesses, rectifying mistakes, and enhancing leadership skills. This aligns closely with the perspectives of Stephenson [41] and Inman [25], who emphasize reflection as a gradual process integral to developing leadership skills, gaining contextual knowledge, fostering self-awareness of context-specific challenges, and building the capacity to address them effectively. The identified life-long learning process enables teacher leaders to continually upgrade their leadership skills, equipping them for their assigned roles. Additionally, the findings recognize the crucial influence of social, cultural, and organizational factors that teacher leaders reflect upon while executing their leadership responsibilities. This inclination of EFL teacher leaders towards considering these factors counters the arguments by Hager and Hodkinson [42] suggesting that reflection-in-action may sometimes neglect the impact of social, cultural, and organizational elements.

In addition to individual reflective practices, collective reflection and discussion sessions play a significant role in the professional development of PDU and ACU members. The findings highlight the value of “interpersonal theories of action” and dialogue in workplace reflective practices [4]. Group reflection fosters collaborative thinking to address professional issues, enabling teacher leaders to listen to colleagues, understand various perspectives, and learn from shared experiences. The collective reflection aims to resolve professional matters and generate solutions, countering the challenges identified by Collin et al. [1], who find it difficult to measure and determine the outcomes of reflective practices. Consequently, group reflection emerges as a valuable activity for teacher leaders, providing insights into leadership skills and knowledge that may not be fully gained through individual reflection.

The participants’ narratives indicate that they embody open-minded, wholehearted, and responsible practitioners, attributed to their reflective practices as per Dewey [17]. They align with Schön’s [4] concept of reflective practitioners, engaging in spontaneous and structured individual or group reflections to develop tacit knowledge and enhance their skill sets. Furthermore, their reflective practices resonate with Wallace’s [21] model, allowing them to connect previously acquired knowledge and experiences to their current roles and assess their relevance in practice. Given that EFL teacher leaders perceive reflection as a significant learning source, it contributes substantially to their professional competence. In conclusion, the application of Dewey’s [17] reflective practices, Schön’s [4] reflective practitioner, and Wallace’s [21] reflective model is evident in EFL contexts, offering valuable benefits to EFL teacher leaders in their professional development.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study has explored the perceptions of EFL teacher leaders regarding their reflective practice and its impact on professional learning and development at a university in Saudi Arabia. Utilizing an interpretive approach and a case study methodology, the research aimed to address the central question of how reflective practice influences the professional growth of EFL teacher leaders. The findings suggest that these leaders engage in diverse operational and instructional roles within hierarchical structures. They are characterized as reflective practitioners and enthusiastic learners who collaborate with peers to enhance their leadership practices and navigate contextual challenges at the ELI. Moreover, EFL teacher leadership is nurtured through individuals’ intrinsic motivation to learn from their context-specific roles, reflecting on their experiences, making sense of them, and applying previously acquired knowledge to practice. Future research could further explore EFL teacher leaders’ reflective practices using a mixed-methods approach, offering insights that may benefit educators in ELT and mainstream education in the Arabian Gulf and beyond.

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project administration, SRAS. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## **Appendix**

### **Semi-structured interview protocol**

1. Could you tell me about your teaching career and how it has led you to this point in your professional life?
2. Have you held a professional career outside of education?
3. What do you mean by the term 'teacher leader'?
4. What is your role as a teacher leader at the ELI?
5. What professional skills are important to your leadership role? How have those skills evolved over the years?
6. Have you had any planned or formal training or development for leadership? Could you outline what you have had and how helpful it has been? Is there any type of training or development that you would have liked or would still like?
7. Do you think leadership can be learned while doing a leadership role?
8. What do you do to learn more about your role as a teacher leader?
9. What did you do to establish yourself as a teacher leader?
10. How do your administrator(s) support you in your leadership growth/development?
11. Do you think that the development of teacher leadership would benefit the Institute?
12. How do you see the role of your colleague coordinators in helping you learn about leadership?

### **Open-ended questionnaire**

1. Can you elaborate on any specific challenges or obstacles you have encountered in your role as a teacher leader that were not covered in the initial interview questions?
2. Reflecting on your experiences, are there any unexplored aspects of your leadership journey that you believe are important to share?
3. Have there been any unexpected or surprising discoveries during your tenure as a teacher leader that you feel warrant further discussion?
4. Are there any particular strategies or approaches you have found effective in overcoming barriers or fostering positive change within the ELI that were not previously mentioned?
5. Considering your insights into the dynamics of leadership within the ELI, do you have any suggestions or recommendations for improving leadership development programs or support structures?
6. Can you provide examples of successful collaborative initiatives or projects you have been involved in as a teacher leader that highlight the importance of teamwork and cooperation in achieving organizational goals?
7. In your opinion, what role do continuous learning and professional development play in sustaining effective leadership within the ELI, and are there any areas where you believe further investment in learning opportunities is needed?
8. How do you navigate and address conflicts or disagreements within the leadership team at the ELI, and do you have any strategies for fostering constructive dialogue and resolution?
9. Reflecting on your leadership journey thus far, are there any personal or professional growth areas that you are currently focusing on, and how do you plan to further develop in these areas?
10. Can you share any examples of innovative approaches or initiatives you have implemented as a teacher leader to adapt to changing circumstances or address emerging needs within the ELI community?