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Exploring the impediments on the application of reflective teaching in EFL paragraph writing classes

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Many theoretical and practical impediments prevent the full implementation of reflective teaching in an English as a foreign language academic setting. This study aimed to explore potential impediments to the application of reflective teaching in an English as a foreign language paragraph writing class. The qualitative design was used to describe the in-depth study of teachers' and students' challenges in employing reflective teaching when teaching paragraph writing. The total populations of the study were second-year English major students. Of these, 10 students to carry out interviews and 6 students to have focus group discussions were selected by purposive sampling. From 13 English teachers, one English teacher was selected by convenient sampling to easily access data from his journal writing and interviews. Two other English teachers were selected by the same sampling technique to have classroom observations and provide peer feedback to another English teacher on students' paragraph writing classes. The data gathered were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings disclosed that administrational, egocentric, reflective teaching, and paragraph writing impediments were deemed to be hindrances for teachers and students for the effective application of reflective teaching in EFL paragraph writing classes. On the basis of the findings, researchers concluded that reflective teaching could have potential impediments such that English teachers and students couldn't appropriately implement it in EFL paragraph-writing classes successfully.

Keywords: reflective teaching; paragraph writing, impediments

Public Interest Statement

Even though reflective teaching needs wholeheartedness, responsibility, and open-mindedness and the effects of it bring about quality teaching and learning, there are a number of impediments that block its implementation in EFL paragraph writing classes. However, the findings of this study are paramount not only for colleges and universities, teachers, and students, but also they empower all stakeholders to seek multi-solutions on the application of reflective teaching in EFL writing or paragraph writing classes. Paying attention to administrational, ego-centric, and reflective teaching and paragraph writing impediments of reflective teaching with its suggested coping strategies are also of great help for the quality enhancement of students' paragraph writing in EFL classes. Finally, the study would also be of vital importance for some researchers to explore the issue on a larger scale.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background study

In today's world, English language teaching is more challenging than ever before, so the effects of reflective teaching is more important than ever before to better revitalize students' learning and writing performance in EFL classes. In this regard, there are many aspects of teaching associated with students' positive learning outcomes, including their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. However, according to Sanders (2000) and Ashraf et al. (2016), one of the most important factors contributing to students' success is the reflection and attitude of teachers to improve their students' learning. However, some people in the field of education are unfamiliar with reflective teaching and may reasonably think that it is a different practice where we find the time and place to be alone and to think. Reflection is a skillful process performed by groups. All in all, reflection asks experts to stop and slow down so that they can recognize, analyze, and ask why they are doing what they are doing. It tells them to relate theory to practice, to explore the old and new teaching experiences, and to describe the situations they have encountered (Leitch & Day, 2000).

The writing skills in an EFL context are very important to enhance the academic, professional, and personal success of students. Emphasizing this idea, Assefa (2007, p. 2) writes, "Good writing skills are essential for academic success, and written work serves to provide learners with some tangible evidence that they are making progress in the language." He further briefly remarks that the aim of teaching writing skills at Addis Ababa University has always been to help students function effectively in academics. In the same vein, Geremew (1999) pointed out that one has to write in order to meet persistently changing social demands and pursue personal interests. However, Italo (1999, p. 9) forwarded, "Learning to write in a foreign language (FL) in Ethiopia seems to be the most difficult skill for language learners to acquire in academic contexts."

And this can assert that learning to write in a foreign or second language is one of the most difficult tasks that students encounter, yet few people can be said to fully master it. In order to cope with the paragraph writing skills difficulties that EFL students confront, English teachers, through reflective teaching, i.e., through videotaped lessons evaluation, self-analysis, peer feedback, journal writing, students' feedback, and self-evaluation, can shape and reshape classroom language teaching and learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2002; Arikan, 2006; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Richards & Rnandya, 2010). As noted by Moon (2006), we reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting. Pointing out the reasons, Moon (2006) also puts forth the following convincing reasons when English teachers teach language skills reflectively. These are to learn from our experience, to consider and explore feelings, reactions, and responses in more depth, to explore situations from different perspectives, to gain skills to move forward and make progress both personally and professionally, to explore gaps in our knowledge, to look at how we can adapt to situations, to look at relationships between theory and practice, and to further develop self-awareness. Thus, English teachers in EFL classes can efficiently enhance students' English language skills performance, like paragraph writing, through reflective teaching as thoroughly dealt with before.

Even though there are advantages of reflective teaching in EFL classes, literature reviews show that this new perspective suffers from various impediments as well as the knowledge that is needed to foster reflection in the educational context (Akbari, Citation2007; Harun & Al-Amin, Citation2013). To help expose the impediments to reflective teaching and, as a result, to

improve the practice, a lot of scholars have recently given due attention to this issue. In a very comprehensive analysis of reflective teaching, Akbari (2007) highlights conceptual and practical errors in reflective teaching. Among the cognitive flaws he elaborates on are ambiguity and the contradictory nature of reflection. He elaborates that historically and theoretically, "reflection" has been influenced by many philosophies that make the word open to different interpretations. In addition to theoretical issues, Akbari expresses dissatisfaction with the way reflective teaching is practiced. The excessive attention to the retrospective aspect of reflection instead of the prospective, creative aspects of the concept, and the lack of any evidence regarding the impact of reflection and reflective teaching on improving teacher or student performance are among the real impediments of reflective teaching. In one of his studies, Akbari (2008) reviews more detailed issues such as textbooks and tests limitations, financial and administrative impediments, and the disqualifications of some teachers from teaching reflectively among the real impediments to reflective teaching. In addition to Akbari (Citation 2007, Citation 2008), a growing number of empirical research projects were conducted to investigate impediments to reflective teaching in ELT contexts. Grant and Zeichner (1984), for example, found that the lack of classroom time and the conflict between the dominant institutional norms of teaching and the desired course of action are major challenges reflective teachers face in their practice.

The poor writing proficiency level of Ethiopian students would bring about another adverse consequence on the students' general academic performances. Observing unsuccessful academic achievements in the 1970s and 1980s, Dendir (1981) says that the main reason why students are unsuccessful in higher education is their lack of proficiency in writing skills. This generally means that the students' weaknesses in paragraph writing in particular have an adverse effect on their academic career. Therefore, when we say the students' English paragraph writing level is low, we indirectly mean that the students' general academic performance is inadequate and the quality of education in the country is questionable. Even though the possible means of getting rid of the students' paragraph writing problems is implementing a reflective teaching method, it is equally important to explore the impediments of reflective teaching to students' paragraph writing in EFL class. These factors, therefore, triggered researchers to explore the issue.

1.2. Problem statement

In Ethiopian universities and colleges, teachers and students are expected to meet the five performance standards set by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, Citation 2010). One of which is the practice of reflectivity by higher education (HE) teachers and students so that they are able to reconsider their teaching-learning dimensions (reflection in, on, and for action), beliefs, values, and strategies in EFL classes. However, according to recommendations of Hussein (Citation 2006), Mulugeta (Citation 2009), and Dereje (Citation 2009), English teachers couldn't effectively implement reflective teaching in Ethiopian Higher Education (HE) EFL classes. Researchers, based on the literature review and on their extensive teaching of the "Basic Writing Skills" course, believe that there have been impediments like teachers' self-centered impediments (self-conflict, lack of money, unwillingness to reflect, etc.); reflective teaching impediments (difficulty to manage class time, lack of understanding, unwillingness to reflect, power problems, etc.); administrational impediments (financial, material, management, lack of freedom, students' misconduct, lack of interpersonal communications, heavy workload, etc.); and paragraph writing impediments (carelessness, lack of conducive environment, lack of writing performance, fear of writing paragraphs, etc.) that hinder the effective use of reflective teaching at the College of Teacher Education in EFL paragraph writing class contexts (Akbari, Citation2008; Amin et al., Citation2013; Ellis, Citation2003; Harun & Al-Amin, Citation2013; Italo, Citation1999; Negari, Citation2012; Schön, Citation1983). As a result, the performance of students' paragraph writing skills is deteriorating in Ethiopian Colleges of Teacher Education (ECTE) at an alarming rate. Due to these, potential faces many impediments. Here is a summary of the problems that are an obstruction to reflective teaching. (a) Time lag or lack of reflection time allocation. This means that there is no effective communication between teachers that enables them to reflect on teaching and learning practices. (b) The culture of a school is another major obstacle to promoting reflective teaching. In this case, administrators with different views, especially on the cooperation among the teachers to promote reflective teaching, might hurt reflective teaching. The pessimistic attitude of teachers can also hinder the practice of reflection. (c) Assessment problems are also an impediment to reflective teaching. The assessment is still difficult in reflective teaching due to the constraints (shortage of time, lack of commitment, lack of expertise, etc.) that exist.

Scant attention has been paid to the impediments of reflective thinking, and those studies that have been carried out have dealt with reflective practice, which is teachers' reflectivity in ELT classrooms (Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, Citation2017; Sheikhbanooie & Farahian, Citation2021; Soodaman Afshar & Farahani, Citation2018; Tajik & Ranjbar, Citation1989). Tajik and Ranjbar (1989) investigated the constraints and limits in applying reflective teaching principles in ELT settings in Iran from the teachers' perspective. The inductive analysis procedure resulted in the identification of three broad categories of impediments to reflective teaching, including institutional problems, self-directional problems, and problems with reflective teaching principles. Soodaman Afshar and Farahani (2018) studied Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their own reflective teaching, of inhibitors to their reflective teaching, and of inhibitors to their students' reflective thinking. The results revealed that Iranian EFL teachers mainly considered three groups of factors as impediments to their reflective teaching: lack of knowledge impediments (e.g., unfamiliarity with reflection, not perceiving reflection to be advantageous, etc.); affective and emotional impediments (lack of motivation, suffering from burnout, etc.); and language institute impediments (low and insufficient wage rate in language teaching institutes, job insecurity and job dissatisfaction, etc.). Moradkhani and Shirazizadeh (2017) explored the effects of contextual differences on the degree of EFL teachers' involvement in reflection and exploring context-related factors that may help or impede the reflection process. Analysis of the interview data revealed that teachers' involvement in reflection was under the influence of five main context-specific factors, namely, knowledge of reflection, institutional demands, teachers' attitude toward teaching, availability of resources, and collegial support.

Furthermore, Sibahi and Randa (2016) explored the perceptions of EFL teachers on reflective teaching as a tool for teacher development and its impediments in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia. The findings of the study indicate that the participants are aware of the value of reflective practice and use different models of reflection in order to reflect on their daily practice. However, some participants manifested some doubts regarding reflective practice and its multifaceted nature, whereas others highlighted the constraints impeding the practice of reflective teaching, namely, fixed curricula and the absence of ample professional training.

Hussein (2006) conducted research in Ethiopia on the impact of critical practitioner inquiry, which is more self-reflection, and he also carried out research related to student teachers' reflection on the practicum at Haramaya University. In both of the works by him, the poor writing skills and lack of adequate and relevant experience of reflection, together with low English language proficiency, are the main causes for the student teachers' low level of reflectivity. Dereje et al.'s (Citation2017) study also disclosed some of the impediments that teachers' understanding of the concept and use of reflection as a teaching strategy is below the expected standard. Thus, it would help them little to ensure that the importance of reflection in preparing their students to become reflective learners, and the reflective teaching impediments also block the learners from practicing in their own way of reflection. This could emanate from different barriers of reflective teaching, such as inadequacy of free expression, less perception of the usefulness of reflective teaching, lack of prior experience, and having less time for reflection, which are the major causes of the challenges towards reflective teaching. To better implement reflective teaching in EFL classrooms, teachers do not have the opportunity to reflect fully with their peers. In addition to these very limited interactions, the time to reflect on the various decisions made during teaching is limited in the classroom. As a result, it was observed that teachers during reflective teaching were unable to succeed in achieving: Cognitive strategies, which enable learners to understand and produce new language; metacognitive strategies, which allow learners to control their own learning through organizing, planning, and evaluating; and affective strategies, which help learners gain control over their emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values (ibid.).

1.3. The remedial strategies for the impediments of reflective teaching in ELT classes

In spite of the abovementioned theoretical, professional, and methodological impediments researchers find ways to further foster reflection in an educational setting; scholars do not criticize the reflective practice and do not suggest that it should not be pursued in teacher education programs or other professional practices. The scholars try to indicate that reflective practice should be used selectively, with care, and be taught with clear understanding. The effectiveness of reflective teaching depends on how well it is cultivated with effective and sensitive teaching during the training session. Simon et al. (2013, p. 109) suggest that educators

should base the teacher training programs on theoretical concepts united with sound and relevant methodology. Scholars have agreed that despite the concerns and critiques in different fields, educators and researchers tend to accept that reflective practice is worth bringing the effort about deeper insights and changes in practice, leadership, supervision, and education (Capar, Citation 2014; Hailu, Citation 2014; Merryfield & Merryfield, Citation 1993). Thus, reflective practice in educating teachers should be realized with determination because, in the end, it makes teaching much more successful and rewarding.

Reflective teaching has been one of the noteworthy trends in education since it helps teachers and learners in problem-solving and decision-making processes, and it promotes critical-thinking capabilities in the Ethiopian situation too. Curriculum specialists precisely point out that the most sensible and effective strategy to make lifetime learners of teachers is to promote ongoing programs in reflective teaching. Apart from the inevitability for teachers to be lifelong learners, reflective teaching is a crucial component because the norms and standards for proficient teachers incorporate a detailed description of the trainee teacher's reflective actual work performances (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 9).

Therefore, a reflective teacher must be aware of his/her limitations and impediments in an EFL classroom. In order to maximize the EFL teachers' approaches and strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, and affective) of reflective teaching so as to help their students to reflect on their teaching, teachers should increase their awareness of reflective teaching; they should design specific tasks for the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations; provide feedback on both the content and process of the learners' own reflective practice; and be able to provide an environment that encourages reflective practice, minimizing if not avoiding the impediments of reflective teaching by having a clear understanding of reflective teaching and its implementation, by avoiding personal negative factors, and by using the positive opportunities of the culture, environment, and other pressures (Raimes, 1983; Taylor, 1989).

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Study area and period

The study was conducted at Hossana College of Teacher Education (HCTE) from February 5 to April 6, 2021. HCTE is one of the colleges located in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR), almost in the middle of Hossana Town. It is located 232 kilometers from Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. The college has been training pre-service student teachers from first year to third year for over 20 years. It was selected by a convenient sampling method due to four reasons (Dörnyei, 2007). The first reason is that researchers can easily reach the study participants at a given time. Next, the proximity of the college would save the researchers time to get some logistic support and other accesses at their convenience. Third, as all teachers at the college are their colleagues, they would be willing to participate for the purpose of the study. The last reason for choosing the college is that "the paragraph writing skills," which is the last mastery unit of the "Basic Writing Skills" course, has been offered to students who are in their second year of the diploma program.

2.2. Research design

Qualitative design was implemented for this research work. The design aimed to identify impediments to reflective teaching in ELT paragraph writing classes.

2.3. Population and sampling techniques

The number of people targeted in the current study included second-year English major students in the Department of English, as they were expected to provide the required data for the research being investigated, and they have been empowered about the reflective teaching in their first-year classroom practices. By 2021, there were two sections, section A and section B, comprising 84 second-year English major students. Of which 10 students were selected by purposive sampling technique, as participants were selected intentionally based on their abilities to have an interview with them (Pollard et al., 2002). The other six students were selected by the same sampling to have a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). From 13 basic writing course teachers, one English teacher was also selected by purposive sampling due to two reasons: 1) to have been a

model teacher to teach paragraph writing skills via reflective teaching compared to those teachers assigned for classroom observation. 2) to have in-depth data from his journal writing and 3) to have an interview with him. And two other English teachers were also selected by a convenient sampling technique in order to have peer observation and provide feedback on the impediments of reflective teaching in EFL paragraph writing classes. All teachers were men, as there were no female English teachers employed at the department to include in the sampling, and they had finished their MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). They were all older than 35 years with more than 20 years of teaching experience. They have been certified with a higher diploma course in the college as a license of teaching.

2.4. Data collection tools

The study used four qualitative data collection tools. The first one was teacher's journal writing. As noted, writing a journal is ultimately a way to get feedback from ourselves and enables us to feel more fully and openly. The second was interviews with teachers and students. The purpose of the interview was to document the impediments that ELT teachers face in using reflective teaching and the solutions they think are able to overcome challenges. Hinds (Citation 2000) stated that during an interview, interviewees may take different roles in responding to their perceptions of a particular set of questions. Thirdly, peer observation and feedback (PO) were used, since observing another teacher may also trigger reflections about one's own teaching. The observer could provide an "objective" view of the lesson to the teacher who is being observed (Ira). In addition, the PO allows participating teachers to initiate dialogue, encourages open debates in their teaching, and supports taking risks in teaching that will affect the teaching and learning of teachers and students (Dörnyei, 2007). Fourth, the researcher used the focus group discussion (FGD) to develop a useful understanding of the topic (Collins & O'Brien, 2003). More importantly, the FGD will be used as a "carefully planned series of discussions designed to find ideas in a defined area of interest in a positive and non-threatening environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Finally, in order to check the content validity of the tools, the researcher consulted two experienced "basic writing teachers" for their constructive comments.

2.5. Data collection procedures

With regard to data collection procedures, the researchers followed a series of steps in the study. To collect data, we first contacted the deans of HCTE to gain their permission to contact English teachers and second-year English major students. We met all the participants in person so as to explain about the research purposes and procedures to them. Having received their consent, we tried to collect one English teacher's journal writing compiled per semester on the application of reflective teaching, which comprised lesson objectives, activities and materials, students' grade level, and classroom management. At the beginning of the interview, we provided the interviewees with an explanation of reflective teaching principles, trying to make them more familiar with the characteristics of a reflective practitioner. Then, we asked the interviewees the main questions consisting of seven items to explore their points of view regarding the impediments they faced in their attempts to be reflective. The interviews were conducted face-to-face. Each interview took around 20–25 minutes; meanwhile, all the interviews were audio-recorded to be transcribed for later analysis. The language of the interview was decided by the participants to be Amharic; as such, the interviews were later translated into English by the researchers. Two English teachers who were selected by convenient sampling were given a classroom observation checklist consisting of five items to watch over what was actually taking place in the classroom. Lastly, six students were chosen by purposive sampling technique to carry out FGD in order to obtain in-depth data required for the current study.

To determine validity, journal writing forms, interview and FGD questions, classroom observation checklists, the outlines of the paragraph writing, and the summary of reflective teaching guidelines were provided to two English instructors, who have expertise in teaching the same course at Hossana College of Teacher Education, for their comments and feedback. In line with their comments and recommendations, changes were made. After verifying the credibility and trustworthiness of tools by the experts, the researchers collected data from the teachers and students. The reliability was determined by data triangulation in such a way that data collected from one tool would be compared across other tools (Hinds, Citation 2000).

Finally, the sequence of data collection has helped researchers to obtain valid and reliable information about the title that was being investigated.

2.6. Data analysis procedure

The researchers used the inductive analysis procedure of Dörnyei (Citation 2007), where the transcribed data of the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, which is following the content transcription of interview data. The transcribed data were first segmented and then got into condensed meaning units. Each condensed meaning unit comprised a number of independent meaning units, which were organized on the basis of their content of the condensed meaning units. Similarly, the same procedures have been used for the data collected by journal writing, classroom observation, and FGD. Next, these condensed meaning units were classified under their relevant categories, an umbrella term for condensed meaning units with a similar thematic core. In a later stage, the categories were labeled for the results of the research.

3. Findings and discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the impediments to the application of reflective teaching in an EFL paragraph writing class. The study findings are presented in four separate reflective teaching impediments: administrational, egocentric, reflective teaching, and paragraph writing. The types of impediments reported became obstacles for teachers and students from the successful implementation of reflective teaching in EFL class. After finalizing data analysis gathered from the four tools (teachers' and students' interviews, teacher journal writing, peer classroom observation feedback, and students' FGD), the researchers tried to synthesize data that triangulated from each tool and put them into one theme. Actually, the four themes emanated from the analyzed data. It is the basic research questions, review of literature, and collected data that guided researchers to arrive at different themes. Most of the data, which are identical from each tool, have been categorized under the same theme. The following section provides a brief account of the findings obtained from the collected data with the discussions made thoroughly. These are:

3.1. Administrational impediments

The challenges that were imposed on the teachers by school leadership were categorized as administrational impediments to reflective teaching. Let's see the extract taken from the FGD:

R: *What about the support given from college deans, from Language stream, and from the Department of English?*

S03*: I did not see any help from college and the department. The trainer didn't find enough material to train us about reflective teaching. Because of that we did not get internet access and handouts. I think there are material shortages to effective practices of reflective teaching.*

S01*: The class lacks material facilities like papers, books, internet … etc.*

S07*: I have not seen college management bodies motivating us to reflect in the classroom. … .There is no materials availability.*

From the above excerpts, one can judge that the college administration was negligent to reflective teaching. In relation to this, Akbari (2008) mentioned some of the administrational impediments of reflective teaching, like lack of facilities in language institutes, hard-and-fast management policies, and unattainable administrative requirements (Grant & Zeichner, 1984; Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, 2017; Sparks-Langer et al., 1990). After analyzing the interview transcripts, teachers' respondents got dissatisfied with the institution's ignorance in providing opportunities for their development in one way or another. They then referred to lack of access to new books and journals in order to keep them more updated on their reflective teaching. Let's see the extract taken from one of the teacher's interview transcripts:

R: *Let me bring you to the fifth question. What challenges are there in employing reflective teaching (RT) in paragraph writing performance?*

T: *As far as we are Ethiopians, English language is foreign to all of us. Keeping these points in our mind, there is lack of understanding or lacks of poor command of language use are some of the challenges. And shortage of time itself lead the students to be limited effectively carry out paragraph writing reflectively. During reflective teaching, in order to carry out collaborative work, the trainees, the trainer, and colleagues lacked quality time. Lack of experience is part of the challenge. Another challenge is lack of materials, for example, video recordings and different materials related to reflective teaching. Lack of stationary materials expected to be posted to effectively implement RT process. Large*

class size itself is the challenges in order not to go forward are some of the challenges not to go with RT foreword.

Also, teachers' respondents were unhappy that they did not have an opportunity to share their experience with other teachers to be able to benefit from them by participating in related workshops or seminars (Sibahi & Randa, 2016). Besides, teachers were upset with the policies of the college, which restricted their chance of being reflective. To raise a few points, they resented academic deans and stream heads (supervisors) disrespecting their authority in using varying teaching styles, techniques, and strategies, which are requirements to teach more reflectively (Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, 2017; Soodaman Afshar & Farahani, 2018). Needless to say, it has been difficult for teachers to spend time on being reflective while doing their best to teach such multi-level classes. As another policy of the institute, teachers were additionally troubled with the shortage of time allotted and the burden on their shoulders to finish the dictated amount of material throughout a semester, which prevented them from having the time to reflect on their classes (Soodaman Afshar & Farahani, Citation 2018; Sparks-Langer et al., Citation 1990). The following is taken from the teacher's interview transcript:

R… *What challenges ... in employing reflective teaching in paragraph writing performance?*

T … *And shortage of times itself lead the students to be limited to carry out paragraph writing reflectively. During reflective teaching, in order to carry out collaborative work, the trainees, the trainer, and colleagues lacked quality time.*

Similarly, the EFL paragraph writing class teachers were dissatisfied with teaching in overcrowded classrooms, and the large number of students in a class necessitated the teachers' spending a huge part of the class on checking the students' assignments and their pace of learning, leaving almost no time for them to reflect on their teaching (Soodaman Afshar & Farahani, 2018; Sparks-Langer et al., 1990). Let's take a look at one of the students' interview transcription excerpts:

I: What are the challenges you confronted in terms of students and trainer?

S1: actually, there were. For example, lack of materials, students level of understanding and knowledge, and lack of students motivation. Besides, less participation of weak and medium level students.

I: List out now challenges and then you will be moving onto the solutions.

S1: The first is lack of materials related with RT; there are topical issues challenging to apply RT. Lastly, shortage of time.
I: What are the challenges you faced while practicing paragraphs reflectively?

S3: The challenges as to us would have been that students gave less attention towards RT while practicing paragraph writing.
I: While you were being trained paragraph writing by reflective teaching, what specific challenges you confronted on the side of the trainer as well as on the side of students?

S5: Even though RT is crucial for quality students' paragraph writing, most of the students I think were unfamiliar for the method from the primary to the college level. I mean it is entirely new method for us. Let alone implementing in the classroom, we were scarcely heard about RT and its strategies. However, ever since we were trained we capacitated the power of writing. And this would be a great help for us.

In the same way, many of the impediments teachers have mentioned to implementing reflective teaching in paragraph writing classes so far have been related to that of students' interview responses, like scarcity of materials, insufficiency of time, lack of commitment, absence of awareness, shortage of motivation, and deficiency of exposure are challenges to implementing reflective learning in ELT paragraph writing classes (Soodaman Afshar & Farahani, Citation2018; Sparks-Langer et al., Citation1990). Let's once again see what one of the English teachers responded to one of the interview questions:

R: *Any additional challenges English teachers face in this regards (during reflective teaching implementations)?*

T: *At the college no attention was given for what we're going on in the classroom. The administrators focus was busy focusing on buildings and practicum related issues. They did not have budget allocated for strong methodological application in the classroom and professional development activities. For teachers were not motivated at the college so that they look for part time works. English teachers were not used to observing their colleague classes. They don't let others to comment the way they teach, for they don't like to be reflective practitioners.*

With regard to administrational and other related impediments, Akbari (Citation2008), Minott (Citation2010), Ostorga (Citation2006), Rashidi and Javidanmehr (Citation2012), Sibahi and Randa (Citation2016), and Yisak et al. (Citation2009) researches' findings disclosed that teachers and students had already expressed regret over the administrative requirements, constraints, and contextual factors that hinder teachers from being reflective. For them, financial problems, textbooks, fixed curricular, absence of ample professional training, teachers' lack of independence to fulfill their abilities to act on their beliefs, even when it comes to institutionalism, disagreements with peers, lack of interpersonal skills, and lack of classroom time are also the barriers hindering reflective teaching to the appropriate implementation in EFL classes.

3.2. Ego-centric impediments

3.2.1. Teachers' ego-centric impediments

In addition to the administrational impediments, the participating teachers listed some of the impediments, during the interview and after classroom discussion, which were connected to their teaching and to that of the students. For example, during the paragraph writing classes, as a teacher confronted the insufficiency of time, he was giving a lot of activities per class. Thus, there is a shortage of time that hinders the effectiveness of reflective practices (Soodaman Afshar & Farahani, Citation2018; Sparks-Langer et al., Citation1990). Let's see the excerpt taken from the trainer's interview:

R: *What challenges are there in employing RT in EFL paragraph writing performance?*

> ***T*** *… to carry out collaborative work, the trainees, the trainer, colleagues lack ample or appropriate time. These are challenges there in every aspect we take.*

In the same vein, after having observed the paragraph writing class taught through reflective teaching, the peer recommended one of the English teachers as follows:

… But maybe students were somewhat overloaded because they had been provided with three tasks at the same time. That will be a challenge. And to me it is by far better to provide them either one or two activities. When we made them burdened with similar tasks simultaneously, they may have fed up with it.

And teachers did not put their maximum endeavor; yet they lost their interest in updating themselves with the up-to-date information (Ryan & Cooper, 2006). The more desperate teachers and students are, the less they understand each other's expectations and goals for academic and social performance. From what has been said, let's see the extract taken from the peer discussion with English teachers and researchers after classroom observation:

… The background of the trainees might have some influential effect, because to my understanding, many of them have not been trained in such a way. The way, the method, and the procedure our colleague Tefera applied might be new to them.

The teachers' longer working hours and their less concern for the students' poor writing proficiency are other problems too (Harun, Harun & Al-Amin, 2013). For some of the aforesaid impediments, like the teachers' low motivation and their workload, it seemed that the source of the impediment would be from themselves too. In addition, teachers pointed out, there have been many impediments to the real implementation of reflective teaching, such as poor communication with peers, shortage of time to actualize reflective teaching effectively, insufficiency of mentoring programs, and lack of attention to preparing different activities that arouse students' interest (Dereje et al., 2017; Jeylan, 2006). The peer recommendation asserted what had been said before:

And students were not given free writing activities. The activities they were given were controlled. The topic was selected and given by the trainer, our colleague Tefera. Better to free them.

As teachers additionally stated, mainly due to low payment, they are not motivated enough to make positive changes in their teaching practices by keeping up with recent innovations in the field. On these accounts, they have no impetus for being reflective. According to them, teachers' interviews and peers' discussions disclosed that the low payment brings about other negative consequences as well. It seems that even if teachers are interested in upgrading themselves, longer teaching hours prevent them from having the time to read about new conceptualizations (reflective teaching approach) in the field. As such, they are not familiar enough with diverse teaching approaches, principles, techniques, and strategies that reflective teaching embodies (Akbari, 2007, 2008; Negari, 2012).

3.2.2. Students' ego-centric impediments

There were some impediments that the students confronted when the teacher was implementing reflective teaching in ELT paragraph writing classes. Among which were what some students had been suffering due to their low level of understanding and knowledge (Ouma, 2005). Below is an extract taken from the classroom observation carried out by a peer observant English teacher in an EFL paragraph writing class:

The attempt made by the teacher Tefara is very interesting to me. I observed that he made his maximum effort to enable learners to reach the goal set. I have top appreciation for the effort and initiative you made. But the background of the trainees might have some influential effect, because to my understanding, many of them have not been trained in such a way at the high school level, and their ability to write in English would not be as I expected.

In addition, lack of motivation, less participation in small group works, and little attention given to reflective learning by some student participants are part and parcel of impediments for effective application of reflective teaching (Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, 2017). The teacher's journal writing (*Teacher's journal, entry 02)* asserted what has been elaborated:

However, a few male students and some female students were not quite motivated to easily engage in in-class group work; they would rather wait for my guidance. Even though I tried my best, I'm afraid that at least some female students still didn't know what they were doing in individual and small group tasks.

There were topical issues that had been blocking students from effectively implementing reflective teaching (Ellis, 2003; Italo, 1999). In relation to this, an interview excerpt was taken from the peer-observant English teacher:

The topic was selected and given by the trainer, our colleague Tefera. Better to free them. You see, they have to choose their own topics and let them choose their topics; let them do, on top of that, what they have been learning, which means free writing. I am saying it. They should be able to select topics of their interest.

Thus, English teachers in EFL classes didn't help students to select topics of their interest to write their own paragraphs. Similarly, a shortage of time was one of the issues entertained as an impediment. Some students were also reluctant to reflect on certain tasks in paragraph writing (Awol, Citation 1999). Consequently, they preferred writing paragraphs individually to group focused reflection. And lastly, students' unfamiliarity with reflective teaching from the primary to the college level and lack of experience to be able to reflect on what had been done in the classroom are some to mention ('O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Taylor, 1989).

3.3. Reflective teaching impediments

In addition to the challenges which originated from administrators, teachers, and students, there were other problems more related to the high demands of reflective teaching and the nature of the approach itself. For instance, they found reflective teaching is very challenging to get equipped with reflective teachers characteristics, like open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Let's see a small portion of teacher's response during peer discussion:

But the background of the trainees might have some influential effect, because to my understanding, many of them have not been trained in such a way at high school level and their ability of writing in English would not be as I expected.

Overall, teachers thought that they needed to improve their critical thinking before all this process happens. Among the three types of reflection, i.e., reflection-in-action, reflection-on-

action, and reflection-for-action, teachers recalled that they needed a rich knowledge base of alternatives and high potential for on-the-spot decision-making to be able to reflect in actions. One of the English teacher's Journal Entry 03 acknowledged what have been elaborated above:

However, the teacher did not use the primary trait scoring (Weigle, Citation2002, p.110.) that can provide rich information (e.g., rubrics) about students' success and failure of certain writing.

What has been recommended to use in writing class by Weigle should have been implemented during reflection-on-action in EFL paragraph writing class. Otherwise, the teacher did not know the strong and weak sides of him and his students. Furthermore, teachers had the ideas that the types of tasks required of reflective teachers like writing reflective journals, observing other classes and being observed by other teachers, and peer discussions are extremely burdensome for them (Akbari, Citation2007; Zeichner & Liston, Citation1996).

The responsibilities on the shoulders of teachers and students burdened with reflective teaching principles were not the only impediments the teacher identified in this section. Another problem that diminished teachers' ability to become reflective is lack of comprehensive teaching and understanding. Teachers thought that they were not informed of the actual classes when their reflection resulted in higher student achievement (Dereje et al., Citation2017; Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, Citation2017). Such a shortage of lessons based on the beneficial outcomes of student demonstrations and the professional development of teachers and the difficulties involved in the reflective teaching process itself make it difficult for teachers or students to use reflection in their work. Let's see the extract taken from the students' interview:

> *R: By the time you were trained, what were some of challenges you faced so far?*
>
> *S3: Actually, we did not have that big challenge on the side of the trainer. As to students, there would be challenges such as lack of motivation and preparedness by a few students; some of them were found disturbing knowledgeable and motivated students during reflective teaching practices … they did not know the objectives of reflective teaching.*

What had been discussed were the impediments that the teachers and student participants confronted when they were applying reflective practices in the Hossana College of Teacher Education context, i.e., in Ethiopia. According to Akbari (2008), his research findings disclosed that Asian students do not take part in reflective conversations, seldom question the authority, and have less inclination to engage in problem-solving activities. For the same reason, Akbari (2008) expressed that teachers got engaged with longer hours yet with low payment. More recently, Rashidi and Javidanmehr (Citation 2012) regret the lack of teachers' motivation for

growth and development in general and reflective teaching in particular, as one of the English teachers' journals discloses, "… *I felt that they were less motivated. Thus, it would be better off making them more motivated and interactive…" (Entry … 12)* … for their lowly paid work. With regard to the problems of reflective teaching principles, some scholars such as Zeichner and Liston (1996) view reflective teaching as unrealistic and unnecessary because of the complexity involved in its implementation. Specifically, Ostorga (2006) lists the high demands of reflective teaching by teachers, such as developing critical thinking and the difficulty of performing reflective assignments like composing reflective journals and autobiographical narratives.

3.4. Paragraph writing impediments

One of the impediments pertaining to paragraph writing practices through reflective teaching was that students were unintentionally given three or more activities per class. The other impediments that students confronted were the misuse of capitalization, punctuation marks, conjunctions, and agreement in the paragraph writing (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). The following extract was taken from one of the English teachers' journals:

The other impediments that students would confront were the misuse of capitalization, punctuation marks, conjunctions, and agreement in paragraph writing. Some of the problems I saw in students' paragraphs were like lack of sentence organization and poor flow between sentences (lack of coherence). There had been mechanics and punctuation problems for which students still would have strong struggles to cope with (Teacher 1, Entry … 66).

What is equally challenging are students' poor writing skills. With regard to this, the trainer's journal writing entries disclosed the following:

Students still had poor writing skills due to their background, which became a hindrance to them to write their paragraph confidently and reflectively (entry … 22). The very problems for the majority of students still would have been poor command of writing skills, i.e., it is below their grade level as college students. Sadly, some students did not do sentence construction well, nor did they write paragraph writing, nor did they confidently employ reflective discussion in the classroom (Teacher1 Entry … 24).

The students' still existing poor writing ability is related to their background, which is highly likely to have become a hindrance to them in writing their paragraph confidently and reflectively. Despite the fact that participants have been trained through reflective teaching, it could be judged that students' command of writing would not drastically change. In relation to this, Daller and Phelan (2013) reported that students' poor writing skills might be one of the determinants directly or indirectly influencing their academic success. Therefore, their writing proficiency might be a key factor in their academic success. The following extract was taken from peer discussion after observing one of the English teacher's paragraphs. writing class:

The attempt made by the trainer Tefara is very interesting to me. I observed that he made his maximum effort in order to enable learners to reach the goal set. I have top appreciation for the effort he made and for the initiation he made too. But the background of the trainees might have some influential effect because, to my understanding, many of them have not been trained in such a way. The way, the method, and the procedure our colleague Tefera applied might be new to them. That might have its own effect. I think most of the trainees made their maximum effort and showed their maximum level of interest … . Therefore, I appreciate the trainees. The strong sides I have observed were they were highly initiated, they were very cooperative, and they did the homework they had been given, you see. But they were somewhat too overloaded because they had been provided with three tasks at the same time. That will be a challenge. And to me it is by far better to provide them either one or two activities. When we made them burdened with similar tasks simultaneously, they may have fed up with it.

Hence, due to students' poor background in writing skills, though they struggled to perform to their best, their paragraph writing performance still could not be changed as expected due to the impediments on their reflective practices in EFL paragraph writing classes (Abduljelil, Citation, 2010).

4. Conclusion

Teachers' and students' interviews, peer observation feedback, teachers' journal writing, and students' FGD reported lots of impediments that hinder effective realization of reflective teaching in EFL paragraph writing classes. Challenges teachers and students enumerated on the

application of reflective teaching in EFL class had been classified into four broad categories, such as administrational, ego-centric, reflective teaching, and paragraph writing. Administrational reflective teaching impediments included lack of resources and opportunities for teachers to develop themselves, lack of teacher independence, financial constraints, and overcrowded classes. Teachers' egocentric impediments included barriers related to teachers' lack of motivation and their heavy workload. Problems with reflective teaching impediments were related to the complex nature of the process and the difficulties involved in its use in EFL paragraph writing classes. Impediments related to students' paragraph writing are the suffering of some students due to their low level of understanding and knowledge, lack of motivation, low level of female students' writing ability, and very limited number of students' participation in small group activities. Similarly, a lesser amount of time allowed, poor students' attention, and challenging topics are considered among the impediments that prevent students from the effective use of reflective teaching in students' paragraph writing classrooms. Other obstacles were also students' unfamiliarity with reflective teaching from elementary to college level, unintentionally assigning three or more tasks per class, and the misuse of capital letters, punctuation marks, conjunctions, and subject-verb agreement during paragraph writing classes were among some to mention. Even though male and female students were equally exposed to reflective teaching in EFL classrooms, their scores were counterproductive, i.e., below the standard of the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (Citation 2010) due to challenging factors like psychological, cultural, and work burdens at home. Finally, exploring impediments to the practices of reflective teaching can also create exposure for English teachers, students, and other stakeholders to seek solutions from the Ministry of Education to the classroom level. The study is delimited to HCTE second-year English major students of the diploma program and English teachers who have taught the "Basic Writing Skills" course for many years at the college. The design of the study is exploratory. However, the researchers were also cognizant that it would have been better if the study had involved a greater number of teachers, students, and additional government colleges in the region. But this had not been possible due to time constraints, limited financial resources, and the nature of research design. In Ethiopian higher institutions, there had been a handful of studies done on the impediments of reflective teaching, which would restrict the potential researchers from investigating similar issues in EFL contexts. As many students in

Ethiopia didn't get exposure to reflective teaching and learning, consequently, they could highly likely be unwilling to make reflective practices.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, researchers have recommended as follows:

- To help remove impediments from reflective teaching, teachers in an ongoing basis should propose guidelines addressing Ethiopian Ministry of Education, Regional Education Bureau, college deans, supervisors, and teacher educators to help promote reflectivity;
- There should be continuous training sessions for all English teachers on the application of reflective teaching in EFL classes;
- As to administrational problems, college leaders should facilitate ICT centers to be effective in providing internet access, e-journals, and e-books for teachers and students to use at their disposal;
- There should be teachers' motivation and budget allocation to effectuate reflective teaching in EFL classes.
- Concerned bodies like deans of colleges should provide opportunities for teachers to attend workshops and conferences so that they could promote dialogue among them about reflective teaching;
- The number of students in the classrooms should be reduced in EFL classes to effectively implement reflective teaching;
- To improve ego-centric reflective impediments, English teachers have to offer the authorities of Ministry of Education (MOE) and the colleges to consider incentives such as higher payment to help increase interest and motivation in their work to make reflective teaching more effective in EFL paragraph writing classes;

- For the potential impediments to reflective teaching, colleges of teacher education in the country should play a significant role (by setting feasible programs) in implementing and promoting reflective teaching in EFL writing/paragraph writing classes.

- With regard to the students' paragraph writing impediments, teachers and students recommend that:

  - Teachers in their paragraph writing classes should provide students with flexible or simplified activities (i + 1); it means that teachers, during reflective teaching, should play a huge role in preparing their students to become effective learners through designing specific tasks for the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations.

  - Teachers are expected to provide feedback on both the content and process of the learners own reflective practice to be able to provide an environment that encourages reflective practice.

  - EFL teachers at colleges and universities are expected to minimize if not avoided the impediments of reflective teaching by having a clear understanding of reflective teaching and its implementation, by avoiding personal negative factors, and by using the positive opportunities of the culture and environment;

    - Students should consult different books/e-books, e-journals, and review of literature to tailor reflective teaching to their current needs;

    - Teachers need to allow peer-to-peer observations to look after their classes, to help students work in small groups, and to have teachers' own journal article to effectively use reflective teaching in order to bring about quality in paragraph writing;

    - Students should write paragraphs individually and have self and group evaluation continuously;

- There should be large scale research done by a team of English teachers nationwide on the impediments of reflective teaching in EFL paragraph writing classes and in other English language skills;
- In Ethiopia where English is taught as EFL (L2), stake holders from classroom to macro level should give ample support for female students in paragraph writing classroom due to many factors that affect their academic performance.

Abbreviations

HCTE: Hossana College of Teacher Education; ELT: English Language Teaching; TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language; TESO: Teacher Education System Overhaul; RT: Reflective Teaching.

Consent for publication

Participants have provided consent for presentation and publication of data.

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