

## EXPLORING LEARNERS' WRITING DIFFICULTIES THROUGH REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

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### ABSTRACT

The globalization process imposes itself at almost different spheres, and more specifically at the educational level, in order to enhance the foreign language teaching and learning. The Algerian context shows that the four language skills are still taught on the basis of competency-based approach (CBA) henceforth. Although, the recent changes that have taken place at the level of Algerian middle schools (second-generation programs). However, most EFL learners are not able to write appropriately and adequately. The reason behind this, is that most EFL teachers do not enhance their teaching process, through promoting reflective teaching. Therefore, this research paper focuses on reflective practice for exploring the difficulties in writing, and the extent to which reflection can be used as an alternative way to overcome those deficiencies. The present work is an exploratory analysis of the situation regarding the teaching/ learning process, among Algerian secondary schools. The main results of this work revealed that EFL learners showed a deficiency in their writing in both form and content in their written productions. Besides that, EFL teachers faced many obstacles such as crowded classes, with mixed abilities students, a lack of an awareness among reflection and how to promote it. This study also affirmed that reflection can be considered as a way to improve the teaching/ learning process.

**KEYWORDS:** EFL, Algerian Schools, Learning, Language Skills

### INTRODUCTION

Significant changes have taken place in the Algerian educational system, because the English language has become necessary at almost all spheres, in that it allows the interaction with foreigners, and simply this foreign language has imposed itself in the Algerian context, because it is rather not an implementation.

The teaching / learning process requires the involvement of learners, and the interaction of teachers. In fact, Algerian EFL teachers do not receive any training in order to teach the four language skills, for promoting their professional practice. This led to EFL learners to be unable to learn the target language skills; listening and speaking, reading and writing. Thus, many educators propose reflective teaching in order to encourage language teachers to improve their practices, develop their own experiences, construct their knowledge, innovate and provide creativity, and show their own beliefs and attitudes, because it is not a matter of what to teach, but in fact, how to teach.

Most of EFL learners in nearly all Algerian secondary schools show a strong difficulty to handle their learning process. They face a strong obstacle mainly in writing into the target language. From the other side, language teachers are blindly followed by their traditional teaching practices, assumptions, beliefs and they still unable to find appropriate ways, and alternative plans to help their learners for a better improvement in writing correctly and appropriately.

Therefore, the main objective of that research paper is considered as an attempt to which reflective teaching may enhance the teaching of the writing skill in the EFL classrooms, and to examine the major problems faced by teachers and learners in the writing skill. Then, there might be some suggestions and solutions, in that way reflective practice would be an applicable way used by language teachers to handle the learning process of their students. Consequently, it is rather important to investigate the following research questions:

- What are the difficulties Algerian secondary school EFL learners face in writing?
- What are the obstacles faced by Algerian EFL teachers when teaching the writing skill?
- How can language teachers stimulate reflection in teaching writing?

The above mentioned research questions will help to explore the teaching/ learning process in the Algerian secondary school context. For that reason, this study tends to explore three major steps; firstly, it deals with the learning difficulties of the writing skill. Secondly, it investigates the teaching obstacles of writing. Finally, it provides some practical suggestions and mainly focuses on the promotion of reflective practice among educators to improve the teaching of the target language in general, and enhancing the teaching of the writing skill in particular.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

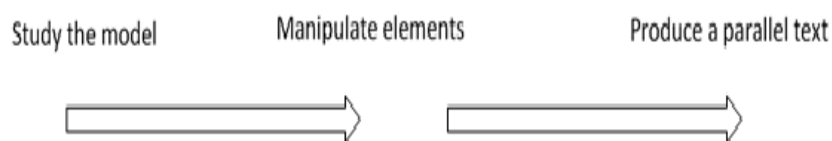
The present literature has been devoted to discuss two fundamental concepts which are; what is meant by writing in the teaching / learning process, and the process of reflection in English language and education. Major scholars do agree that the writing skill is considered to be the most difficult ability in relation to other skills and most educators left it at the end in their teaching. It is also seen as a productive skill in addition to speaking, although they are contrasted and divergent in some points, but they share a great importance in learning the target language.

**Harmer (2004:03)** claims that: “spoken language, for a child, is acquired naturally as a result of being exposed to it, whereas the ability to write has to be consciously learned.” From this quotation, the writing skill is considered as a learned process, however, the speaking skill may be acquired from infancy as a natural matter.

Therefore, **Crystal (2006:257)** adds that the writing process requires some visual graphic symbols as a means of communication, in that way, it would be observable to the readers.

Moreover, three important approaches have been taken into consideration among many educators, in order to teach the writing skill stated as the following; the product, process, and genre approach.

The product – oriented approach focuses on the final production of the writer, and does not take the process of writing into consideration. This final production has a relation with imitated texts previously provided by the instructor. White (1988:05) considers this approach as a classical model of writing summarized on the following figure 1:



**Figure 1: Classical Model for Writing**

The first phase of the model is about analysing and studying the rules, content, and sentence structure of the

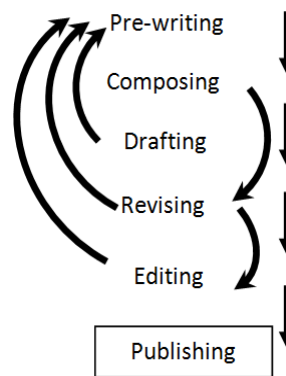
language. The next phase, requires an analysis of the components of the imitated text. The last phase, the learners are instructed to provide an imitated text, with no creativity.

The genre- based approach, on the other hand, is applied in order to achieve a certain contexts, and genres, or simply writing with purpose. In this context, **Richards (2003:18)** says that: “we write something to achieve some purposes: it is a way of getting something done.”

By mean of purpose is the link to the target situation. For example, the writer may face different genres such as writing letters of complaints, apologizing, invitation, application, writing recipes, and selecting different types of reports.

However, **Byram (2004: 236)** argues that this approach ignores the self-confidence of writers, and it leads to minimizing the abilities needed in order to form the content.

The process- oriented approach comes as a reaction against the shortcomings of the product-oriented approach. In this approach, writing follows certain steps; it is not only an imitated version of a previously studied text. Therefore, **Tribble (1966: 39)** provides the following model, in order to mention the stages of the writing skill.



**Figure 2: The Process of Writing**

According to the abovementioned, adapted model from **Tribble (1966)**, the process of writing, requires from the writer to brainstorm first, and choose a theme of interest, collecting data and improve an outline or a plan. Secondly, the learner should produce a draft under the supervision of an instructor. Then, revising the drafted version, this phase may provide some modifications of data, omitting the unnecessary ideas. At the end, the edited phase may help the writer to check the content in terms of vocabulary, and mechanics as well. The last version, which is the publishing phase is considered as a fully designed production ready to the readers, with a treatment of all mistakes.

It is the role of the teacher who has to develop his teaching practice in order to stimulate the responses of his learners towards learning. In this way, teacher education may induce some pedagogical ways and strategies that enhance the teaching / learning process, and this can be only through reflective teaching.

In this context,

*Reflection means thinking about what one is doing. It entails a process of contemplation with an openness to being changed, a willingness to learn, and a sense of responsibility for doing one's best. Perhaps this process seems natural, and indeed, it may be; but it also poses a challenge.* Jay (2003:01)

The above quotation stresses the most important features of reflection. Firstly, it is considered as a process that carries a quality that influences the reflection practioner. Therefore, when the instructor provides activities, or some writing tasks, he does not have to focus at the surface level, but he may mark the progress of his learners, in order to increase the learning process.

In language teaching, the two terms of “teacher training” and “teacher education” are of central part. These two terms describe the educator who is either under the process of reflection or not. The following table draws a clear-cut distinction between teacher education development (TED) and teacher training.

**Table 3: TED versus Teacher Training (Benmoussat, 2003)**

Teacher Training	TED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ministry directs the teacher training</li> <li>• Course structure is already defined</li> <li>• Total lack of professional practice</li> <li>• Blindly guided by an imposed syllabus.</li> <li>• Absence of critical thinking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TED is sponsored by himself</li> <li>• Course structure has developed through operations and procedures</li> <li>• Developing solutions through professional experience.</li> <li>• Fixing the syllabus in cooperation with contributors.</li> <li>• Awareness and critical thinking</li> </ul>

Teacher education development has to promote three basic dimensions. Firstly, reflection-in-action where language teachers provide an immediate and quick reactions sometimes are subconscious to the obstacles that he may face inside the classroom. For example, the teacher may face situations that are ambiguous, when he instructs a written task and suddenly he recognizes that EFL learners are losing their concentration.

Secondly, reflection–on-action could be conducted at the end of the lesson, or at the end of the day. It is a process where language teacher takes it in order to check which level is best performed. It is also considered as a sequence of action followed by thought.

Schön (1983;1987) posits the view that when the teacher finishes the written task provided to his learners, he needs to take into consideration an insightful step, that asses his professional practice. Afterthat, another dimension that is rarely carried out by language teachers called reflection-for-action involves the thought that precedes the action. This dimension is considered as a more practical tool, because it guides the instructor to well-managed future practice.

**THE STUDY**

The objective of this work is to investigate EFL teachers and learners perceptions. These informants have been randomly selected, in order to make accurate data and for the generalization of the research findings.

**Research Method**

The researcher in this phase opted for a case study approach. It investigates the obstacles that face the teaching / learning process, by taking the case of both EFL teachers and learners in the Algerian secondary schools. Though this method does not provide a total representativeness, since it ensures only the interpretation and the analysis of the uniqueness as far as the informants and the contexts are concerned.

In this paper, the researcher tries to describe the teaching and the learning situation in Algerian secondary schools, and then trying to explain and explore the teaching obstacles in learning difficulties in relation to the writing skill, and finally proposing some solutions and looking for the way in which language teachers opt for reflective teaching in their pedagogical practice.

## Sources

In this practical phase, the researcher has used a variety of sources that can help him in identifying the difficulties of writing. The informants that are the represented in this research work are; EFL language teachers, and EFL learners.

## EFL Teachers

Three Algerian EFL teachers have randomly chosen from both genders (males and females) in one Algerian secondary school, that are in charge of the three levels (first, second, and third year) literary streams. These teachers vary in terms of experience between four months to ten years.

The main objectives behind choosing EFL language teachers because:

- They are considered as the most aware and conscious of the obstacles that face them in their teaching / learning process.
- They are conscious of the challenges in order to get EFL learners for their Baccalaureate exam.
- EFL teachers try to help their learners overcome their writing difficulties.

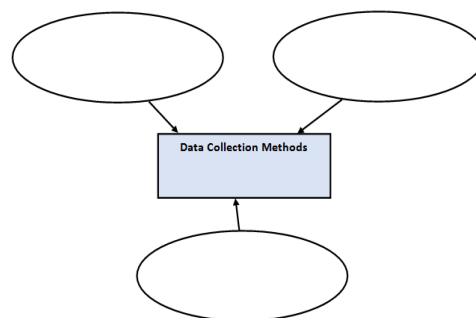
## EFL Learners

Twenty Algerian EFL learners have been picked from both genders. They have studied within the same secondary school, and they nearly share the same educational, social, and cultural backgrounds. The main reason behind opting for the aforementioned EFL learners is that they are more aware and they know what they lack. They are also looking for developing their ability in writing. They possess some insights into their weaknesses and strengths.

## Data Collection Methods

The researcher in fact, has followed an exploratory case study for investigating reflective teaching and to see if it is applied in the classroom practice, and the extent to which it is used in order to teach the writing skill for overcoming the learning deficiencies.

A triangulation of research methods have been used of both quantitative and qualitative data, in order to provide generalizability and reliability of the research findings. In this way, the research instruments that are used in this work are: a questionnaire for EFL teachers and another one for learners, in addition to that a classroom observation as another research tool, as being clarified on the below figure:



**Figure 3: Data Collection Methods**

### **The Questionnaire**

It is considered as a set of questions that have been used in the written form. The researcher opts for such a kind of tools because it is considered an effortless method, and it is much more easier for collecting data in a faster way **Dorneyei (2007:101)**.

The first questionnaire has been designed to language teachers and the second one has been selected to EFL learners. In fact, a variety of questions have been used; closed-ended questions, multiple choice items, and open-ended questions.

### **Classroom Observation**

This research tool is beneficial in a way that it provides the investigator of realizing what is happened inside the classroom in order to determine the interaction between EFL learners and language teachers, as well as the behaviour of both of them.

In this way,

Observation is fundamentally different from questioning because it provides direct information rather than self-report accounts, and thus it is one of three basic data sources for empirical research. - **Dorneyei (2007:178)**

In this case, the investigator opted for a rating scale classroom observation, for the sake of exploring the extent to which Algerian language teachers instructs and are considered as reflective practitioners, in addition to that, to see if these EFL teachers interact with the writing difficulties in their practice.

### **Triangulation**

The researcher has used a combination of data sources (research instruments) in order to verify the research findings. Triangulation is often used in order to show that there are two or more research methods are used in this work. This is for the sake of checking the research findings, and to get concrete and reliable data. The reason behind opting for a triangulation of methods is that the researcher wants to be more confident to use a variety of methods through a cross verification.

## **RESULTS**

Through the use of different research instruments, in order to look for a detailed analysis of the research questions and hypotheses. Therefore, these instruments gave a clear image for reflective practice, and materials for teaching / learning the writing skill. The results obtained are below presented in this section, according to the aforementioned purpose of the research work.

### **Awareness about the Writing Difficulties of the Students**

Almost 100% of language teachers show that they are aware of the problems and difficulties faced by Algerian EFL learners mainly in their writing practice. The purpose behind asking such a question is in order to test the awareness of these teachers among their learners.

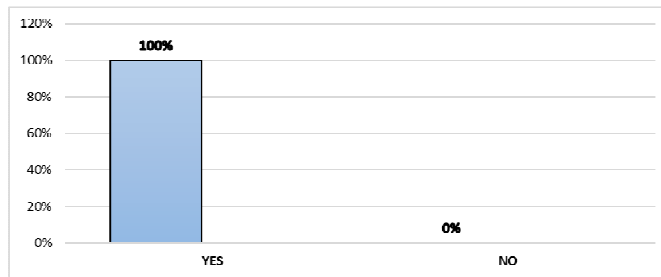


Figure 4: Teachers' Awareness of the Learning Difficulties in Writing

**Teaching Obstacles Related to the Writing Skill**

The aim behind this question is used for the sake of exploring the various types of teaching obstacles that face Algerian EFL teachers when they teach the writing skill. In fact, figure 5 represents that the majority of EFL teachers with almost 75 % opt for mixed ability classes, and within the same rank, the attitudes of EFL learners which are totally negative towards writing.

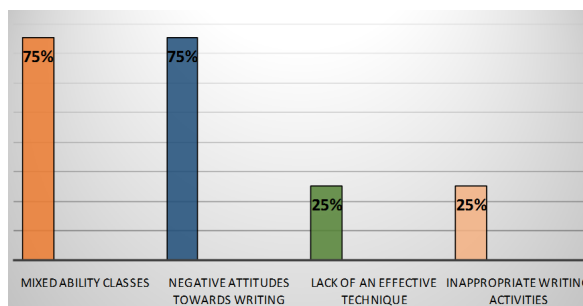


Figure 5: Teaching Obstacles Related to Writing

**Teachers' Perceptions about the Learning Deficiencies in Writing**

The purpose of that question is to test the extent to which these EFL practioner perceives the writing difficulties of their learners. Thus, figure 6 below shows that 50 % was given to both items of language transfer from the mother tongue, and even to lack of cohesion, in addition to that, the same percentage of 50% was devoted to an inappropriate sentence structure. Therefore, 33.33% was selected for both problems in the outline of writing, and coherence. Teachers even mentioned that almost 16.66 % of their learners make use of unsuitable vocabulary.

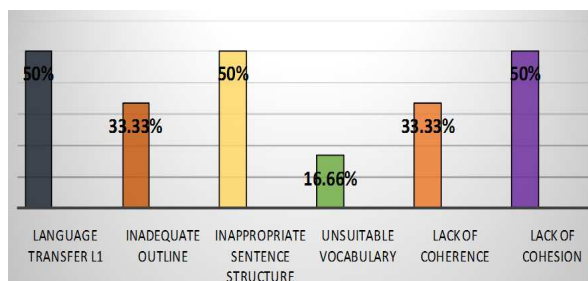
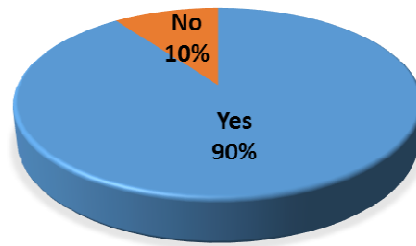


Figure 6: Teachers' Perception about the Writing Deficiencies

**Writing Difficulties of EFL Learners**

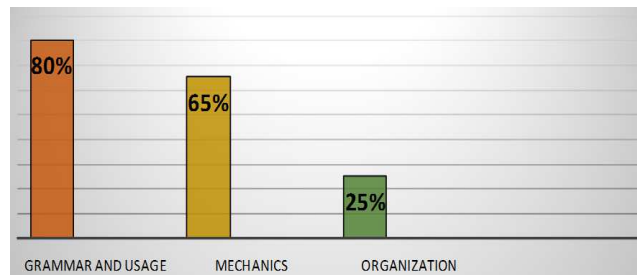
The following pie-chart illustrates that 90% of EFL learners mention that they face a strong deficiency in writing. Others, the minority of 10 % showed that they do not face obstacles when writing into the target language.



**Figure 7: Learning Difficulties in the Writing Skill**

### Types of Writing Difficulties

80 % of EFL learners state that their writing difficulties are mainly related to grammar uses as; problem of tenses, adverbs, sentence structure. In addition, 65 % of the respondents opt for the organization in selecting appropriate outline, identifying the topic sentence in their written productions. Almost 25 % of the informants select problem of mechanics as a third common type of writing difficulty, as shown in figure 8 below.



**Figure 8: Types of Learning Difficulties**

### Classroom Observation Results

The main objective behind using this tool, for gaining data about how EFL teachers instruct the written task, and the extent to which reflective teaching is used inside the language classroom. The researcher, in this phase, has divided the observation into three phases.

#### Phase One: Learners' Behaviour

Motivation does not exist among EFL learners, noisy classrooms, lack of interaction between language teachers and their learners. These teachers do not provide warming –up. Few learners participate and show an interest in order to study. There was a total lack of group work, because of the big number of learners. The use of the mother tongue (L1), and sometimes French (L2), and the language teacher does not prohibit that.

#### Phase Two: Teachers' Behaviour

EFL teachers try to control their classrooms, however, they did not show to their learners how to gather data from the other skills of language. In fact, there is a total lack among the use of ICT's in teaching writing. When the teacher provides the instruction of the task, he did not observe all the learners. Only excellent students are hard workers, and the weak ones are not asked to do a trial.

#### Phase Three: The Classroom Settings

The investigator provides a short description of the classroom settings, the first thing to notice is that there were an over-crowded classes that vary between 44 till 46 learners inside one class, that made the learning process more



difficult. In addition to that, it was rather impossible for the teacher to make them work in pairs or stimulate a discussion. Classroom management especially the sitting was not well organized and totally ignored.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

The data that have been gathered from the research instruments such as (questionnaires and classroom observation) have been analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The researcher is going to discuss and interpret the major findings.

The results obtained from teachers' questionnaire revealed that the main obstacles in teaching were crowded classes, and the EFL learners vary in their level of proficiency in terms of understanding the instruction of the written task. In addition to that, the problem of controlling all the learners, providing guidance, and assessment of their written productions. Therefore, EFL learners perceive a negative attitudes towards the English language in general, and the writing skill in particular, and this due to the lack of motivation. Additionally, Algerian EFL teachers are aware of the deficiencies faced by their learners, but there were a complete absence of providing techniques that stimulate and reinforce the teaching of the writing skill. In fact, there is a need to take into consideration 'teacher training' in order to improve the teaching proficiency and therefore helping EFL learners. The writing activities or the written tasks do not fit the required level of these learners. These latter are not able to handle their learning, and taking responsibility, in order to be autonomous learners.

The major deficiencies in writing among EFL learners are mainly related to grammar rules, and its usage. They have a total lack in the organization and the structure of writing, for example, outline of writing, the use of mechanics; punctuation. Besides that, EFL learners were not taught how to consider the form and the content in writing. There is a strong realization among Algerian EFL teachers of the difficulties faced by their learners, but they are not aware of the process of reflection that may be considered as an alternative way to overcome those writing difficulties. Therefore, EFL learners need reflective teachers to be autonomous learners. They even need interesting, and suitable topics to write about it that also fit their required level.

The main results obtained from the classroom observation is the behaviour of both the learners and teachers. Learners were not motivated, or interested with the topics provided. No attention provided to the presence of the teacher or the delivery of the lesson. There was no response to write after the instruction of the written task. The only interaction of these learners were given through the use of the mother tongue (Arabic) or through the second language L2 (French), and prohibition was not offered by the teacher. The Algerian educational approach of secondary schools, and mainly the English language is taught under the competency-based approach (CBA), and language teachers follow blindly the principles provided in this approach, without providing creating, with no innovation, with any use of Information Communication technology (ICT's). In fact, there is awareness among EFL teachers about the writing difficulties, but there is no positive step to overcome these writing deficiencies, because there is no rationale among language teachers to what extent reflective teaching may save then process of teaching / learning.

## SUGGESTIONS

The researcher tries to provide some suggestions in order to guide Algerian language teachers to be more reflective, and to overcome the writing difficulties in the teaching / learning process. It is very crucial, that EFL teachers would rely on the process of reflection this means learning from their experience. EFL learners need to be motivated and

directed through suitable writing activities. Here are some pedagogical implications as a form of tasks that may be used by teacher education development are stated under the following points provided by **Arikan (2006)**:

- Academic Readings; language teachers have to provide their learners by relevant course books, and academic handouts. In this way, the quality of written productions may be improved.
- Peer reviewing; EFL learners may provide feedback to each other through the exchanging of written productions. The role of teachers relies on mentioning the grading criteria. Then, language teachers may reflect on these assessments.
- Pair work and discussion; after providing the instruction of the written task, the teacher is required to discuss with his learners the nature of the instruction provided. When stimulating the discussion, the teacher may be aware of the difficulties faced by them.
- Writing journals; includes remarks, questions, interesting comments, evaluations, in order to share it with their instructors. Because the observation of the teachers is not enough.

In addition to that, a set of applicable teaching techniques are suggested below, in order to make the teaching of the writing skill more relevant:

- The use of pictures: the teacher may rely on the pictures of textbook and paste it on the blackboard, and then stimulating discussions. The teacher may offer each group with a picture, or the learners may share their owns, and they express the ideas tackled, and teachers may support their imagination (**Raimes, 1983**).
- The use of language skills: this can be through brainstorming and a free expression of ideas. The teacher here, is not allowed to correct mistakes, writing without considering grammar rules / mechanics, spellings etc. Moreover, it can also be through dictating a passage read by the teacher slowly and in careful way, and the learners have to be aware of each word uttered. It is very crucial to show to EFL learners ways to summarize the most important points and the way to take notes (**Raimes, 1983**)
- The use of practical writing: **Raimes (1983: 83 – 84)** suggests some practical techniques in order to get EFL learners engaged in the target language. Language teachers may rely on these techniques summarized as the following;
  - Letters: such as letter of application, invitation, apologize. These kinds of letters convey a lot of information in terms of sentence structure, function, vocabulary and stylistics used.
  - Lists: EFL teachers may instruct their teachers to group words according to a specific category, classifying lexical words according to their alphabetical order.
  - Daily notes: or journal writing that includes summaries, daily writing activities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The globalisation process enhances the status of the English language. It gives a high development in the field of English language teaching (ELT), by permitting language teachers to cope with the contribution with the different approaches. Furthermore, by creating an environment that best fits the competencies of EFL learners of the required

language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Thus, it is recognized that Algerian EFL learners are not able to handle their learning process, and therefore, they are unable to write adequately and appropriately. In addition to that, language teachers do not even perceive what reflective teaching would mean.

This paper tackles different phases, it provides both the theoretical and practical parts, as far as, concerning the writing skill and the process of reflection. At the end, some suggestions and pedagogical implications are provided in order to rise both students and teachers awareness, and for overcoming the difficulties in the teaching / learning process. The investigator conducted an exploratory case study relying on two research instruments; questionnaire for EFL teachers and learners, and classroom observation. The major findings revealed that EFL pupils faced a strong deficiency in both the form and the content of writing. In addition to that, problems related to grammar rules, mechanics, outline, organization and structure of writing. EFL teachers faced many obstacles such as mixed ability classes, and lack of awareness about reflective teaching, and how it is applied to overcome the writing deficiencies and lack of innovation.

The process of reflective teaching is still debatable, and this paper does not tackle all the principles that best suit the teaching pedagogy. Therefore, it deals to further research such as; to what extent my reflective teaching enhance reflective learning? How it may develop the critical thinking of the learners?

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