

## **Reflective Practice in Nigeria: Teachers' Voices and Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents data collected in a qualitative study of Nigerian English language teachers working in Nigeria. Many of these Nigerian teachers have not had a formal introduction to reflective practice. Most of them work in conditions of constraint and challenge, experiencing a lack of resources, support and often working with large classes. The study was focused on establishing whether they saw themselves as reflective and could articulate ways in which reflection was important for them in their everyday practice. Even with those teachers who have been introduced to reflective practice, our data suggests that teachers may perceive reflection differently from their trainers. The article draws on interviews, questionnaires and focus groups in detailing how Nigerian teachers conceptualise reflection and in what ways it is important for them. The article finishes by arguing that more data, perhaps in the forms of reflective vignettes of experience, interview extracts, journal entries and descriptions of teaching challenges from teachers is important in making reflective practice less vague and more achievable for teachers. The data suggests that reflection can happen in an intuitive and self-determined way and these experiences (and associated texts) would make good data for making reflection in teaching more tangible for trainee and novice teachers.

### *Introduction*

It is difficult to argue that reflection is not a good thing for teachers. It is more problematic to show what reflection actually looks like or to establish its importance and impact for individual teachers. Mann & Walsh (2013, p. 289) argue that 'while reflective practice (RP) has established itself as a ubiquitous presence in professional education and practice, its current status is not supported by detailed, systematic and data-led description of either its nature or value.' This article concentrates on presenting an analysis and discussion of the views and experiences of Nigerian teachers. Some of them are qualified English language teachers but a few have first degrees in English or other fields but no teaching qualifications. Most of them have not been

introduced to reflective practice in any formal or theoretical way. This study aimed to detail the viewpoints of Nigerian teachers with regard to their conceptualization of reflective practice. We consciously did not try to theorise reflection when talking to them but rather to elicit their perspectives.

This article then investigates teachers' experiences and perceptions of reflection in Nigeria. In doing so, it foregrounds and gives space to their voices. This is an important contribution of this article, as Nigerian language teachers' voices and viewpoints have usually been ignored. We argue that not only do we need to find out more about how teachers perceive and value reflection, but we need to use those accounts to close the gap between teacher's actual experience and trainer's idealized or theoretical versions of reflective practice.

### *Background and context of the Study*

For over one hundred and fifty million Nigerians (NPC, 2004), English is significant both as a lingua franca and as a prestigious language that gives added value to its users. According to Adebija (2004) Nigeria is "characterized not only by dense multilingualism, but also by dense multidialectalism in virtually every State" (Adebija, 2004, p. 195). As there are nearly 500 different languages spoken in Nigeria (Bisong, 1995; Kari, 2002; Heine & Nurse, 2002; Adebija, 2004) English in Nigeria is described as a 'dominant minority language,' spoken by 20% of Nigeria's population who are mostly elite (Adebija, 2004, p. 196). Bisong argues that in Nigeria, English is a convenient choice, stating that 'Nigerians are sophisticated enough to know what is in their interest, and that their interest includes the ability to operate with two or more linguistic codes in a multilingual situation' (Bisong, 1995, p. 131). Wright explains the significant status and prominence of English in countries like Nigeria, when he says: 'learning English is now regarded as a basic educational goal for people in many countries because of its pre-eminence as a global language' (Wright, 2010, p. 265). In Nigeria, English is the language of instruction at all levels of education. Thus English language teaching is a significant aspect of Nigerians' educational development and the significant failure rate in English at GCE levels is often cited as evidence of worrying educational standards in Nigeria.

In the Nigerian context, there is no shortage of statements of blame and potential culprits for falling educational standards. Many accounts portray the Nigerian government and its inaction as culpable (e.g., Bello-Osagie & Olugbamila, 2009). Some blame students (see Famade, 2012) and others blame the parents (Arong & Ogbadu, 2010). However, Nigerian teachers are also often blamed for the falling standards in Nigerian education (see Arong & Ogbadu, 2010). They are also accused of being apathetic and uncommitted to their profession (Oduolowu, 2009). Recent studies suggest that many Nigerian primary school teachers usually have negative attitudes towards teaching because they reluctantly joined teacher education programs due to their inability to qualify for other preferred courses with higher entry criteria. Teaching is still apparently viewed by many in Nigeria as a stepping-stone to a better job (Adeleke, 1991; Akinbote, 2007; Ojo et al.; 2007; Adeleke, et al., 2011). Studies also show that teacher preparation in Nigeria may be inadequate (Okebukola, 2007). On the other hand this problem is compounded by teachers' poor salaries, lack of motivation or

support systems, few (if any) teaching resources, overpopulated classrooms and a shortage of Nigerian English teachers (Urwick, 1987; World Bank, 2000; Okeke, 2001; Udofot, 2005; Ajayi, 2007; Egbo, 2011). Teachers in the study reflect some of this reality. As Udofot (2005) says:

*Nigerian teachers are the most traumatised and the most de-motivated in the world from the primary to the tertiary level. They are...de-motivated right from the time they are recruited into the profession through their training to the period of deployment. Even when they retire from the service they are not paid their retirement entitlement. (2005, p. 73)*

Afe (2002) observes that Nigerian teachers have low social status and identifies poor teacher morale and the inability of Nigerian teachers to raise educational standards or to control entry into their profession as part of the problem. One of the goals of teacher education in the Nigerian National Policy of Education (NPE) is “to encourage further, the spirit of inquiry and creativity” (FRN, 1989, p. 38). However, to be innovative, the average Nigerian teacher must surmount the challenges of teaching in difficult circumstances. Through a study of Nigerian English teachers, we illustrate the role of reflection as an important experience in attempts by these teachers to come to terms with their professional challenges and to find new ways of supporting their practice and development as teachers of English. By using reflection in specific ways they demonstrate the need for a rethinking of how reflection could be taught in teacher education programs.

### *Literature Review*

This literature review provides some background on the nature of reflection, including a definition and a consideration of some perceived deficiencies in the concept itself. Despite a general acceptance that any form of professional practice will be supported by ongoing reflective practice, reflection as a concept suffers from a number of ailments. Apart from a lack of data in its presentation to trainee teachers (see Mann & Walsh, 2103), there is a lack of a common definition about its nature. Nelson and Sadler (2013, p. 43) argue that reflection ‘remains problematic, due in part to differences in how it is defined, implemented, and measured.’ According to Rodgers, “over the past 15 years, reflection has suffered a loss of meaning. In becoming everything to everybody, it has lost its ability to be seen” (Rodgers, 2002, p. 843). Fendler captures the multi-faceted challenges in reaching a common definition for reflection as follows:

*[T]oday's discourse of reflection incorporates an array of meanings: a demonstration of self consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one's authentic inner voice, a means to become a more reflective teacher, and a strategy to redress injustices in society. Reflective teaching has become a catchall term for competing programs of teacher education reforms. (Fendler, 2003, p. 20)*

Some might argue that the pursuit of a universal concept of reflection is anyway, by its nature, an impossibility. Indeed, for those of us working in a constructivist or socio-cultural paradigm, reflection is necessarily perceived and constructed in a reflexive way

in its local context of use and need. Therefore, in our focus on Nigerian English language teachers and their perceptions and experience of reflection, we are conscious of the possibility that teachers may perceive reflection differently from their trainers. We will end the article with suggestions for narrowing such a gap in perception.

In the rest of this literature review, we review key contributions regarding the importance and nature of reflective practice. We concentrate on Dewey and Schön but briefly consider the importance of a critical dimension with reference to Brookfield. Certainly Dewey is widely credited with establishing the importance of reflective thought in the 20th century. He drew on ideas from Confucius, Plato and Aristotle to describe reflection as a way of thinking and of “knowing what we are about when we act” (Dewey, 1964 p. 211). This knowing involves “some reconstruction, some reworking” (1938, p. 64), especially around points of doubt or perplexity. Dewey described reflective thought as: “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 118). When reflective thinking is applied to real action it becomes ‘reflective action,’ different from “routine action” that is guided by impulse, authority and tradition (Dewey, 1933, p. 17).

Schön (1983; 1987) extends the theories of Dewey by foregrounding professional learning. Through studying Dewey, Schön came to believe that learning which is based on positivist traditions which he described as ‘technical rationality’ is unsuitable for professionals. Schön and others (e.g., Eraut, 1995) put the emphasis on tacit knowledge that needs to be reformulated into relevant knowledge. Schön called on professionals to make explicit the implicit knowledge gained from years of experience and practice through a process of reflection that, as he argues, is necessary for developing professional knowledge:

*Competent professional practitioners often have the capacity to generate new knowing-in-action through reflection-in-action undertaken in the indeterminate zones of practice. The sources of knowing-in-action include this reflection-in-action and are not limited to research produced by university-based professional schools. (1987, p. 40)*

Schön here articulates a clear demarcation between “new knowledge” arising out of practice. We would agree that academic knowledge is not enough for professionals, but it does raise important questions about the capacity of novice professionals to generate “new knowledge” from practice through a reflective process and this study aims to throw some light on this issue in Nigeria. Nevertheless, Schön provides us with a vocabulary for seeing how professionals work in an “indeterminate zones of practice,” where there is: “uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict” because these problems often “escape the canons of technical rationality” (1987, p. 6) and, for us, this terminology is significant. We would also agree with Schön’s argument that overdependence on knowledge generated from university research does not help professionals cope with their challenges. This is relevant to our study as it illustrates the possibility that in their unique contexts Nigerian teachers must find new ways of facing challenges through a process of reflecting in practice and on practice.

Akbari captures the tension between Schön's view that professional knowledge is an "intuitive, personal, non-rational activity" (Akbari, 2007, p. 196) and Dewey's primary view that sees the source of professional knowledge as science and scientific methods. He states, "[W]hen Schön uses the term reflection, what he has in mind is knowledge which is the direct result of practice, not the type of knowledge which has been based on scientific approaches as advocated by Dewey." For Schön, reflective practice is a "dialogue of thinking and doing through which... [professionals] become more skilled" (1987, p. 31). According to Schön:

*Reflection gives rise to on-the-spot experiment. We think up and try out new actions intended to explore the newly observed phenomena, test our tentative understandings of them, or affirm the moves we have invented to change things for the better.... What distinguishes reflection-in-action from other kinds of reflection is its immediate significance for action. (1987, pp. 28-29)*

Such on-the-spot experimentation, trying ideas out, observing, testing and affirming puts the emphasis on small-scale innovation. This is likely to be particularly significant for contexts of constraint like Nigeria where resources are few and teachers have to find new ways of teaching and responding in difficult circumstances. Mann (2013) argues that teacher innovation is not generalizable but is determined by contextual factors including dynamics, affordances and constraints. It is important for teachers to understand that innovation and change needs to be achievable and appropriate to context and to take such local factors into account. By reflecting on their actions in context, teachers can step back to re-examine their practice with improvement in mind (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Buchman, 1990; English, 2005).

Reflection is a process of dialogue and "conversation with self" (Prawat, 1991) but it can also be done in collaboration with other teachers (see Mann and Walsh 2013). Whether reflection happens on an individual level or more collaboratively, reflexive dialogue between knowledge and experience can result in greater awareness (Bolton, 2002) of teaching and the teaching context. For teachers who find it difficult to sustain a reflecting approach to practice, there are a number of ways this process can be encouraged, prompted, guided and structured. Indeed, many guides to reflective practice and particular models of reflective cycles have been put forward (e.g., Day, et al., 2002; Parsons & Brown, 2002). Farrell in particular has been influential in TESOL promoting reflective practice in ways that are accessible to teachers (e.g., Farrell, 2004; 2007). A number of studies have demonstrated that more reflective teachers are better able to monitor, make real-time decisions and respond to the changing needs of learners than less reflective teachers (Yost, et al., 2000; McMeniman, et al., 2003).

Brookfield (1995) adds an important dimension to reflective practice because he takes ideas about reflection in a more critical direction and we are interested in whether Nigerian teachers display any critical reflection. He highlights the need for teachers to be more critical of their practice and assumptions through a process of questioning their assumptions, especially in the context of power relations. Assumptions are described by Brookfield as: "the taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that seems so obvious to us as to not need stating explicitly...in many ways we are our assumptions" (1995, p. 29). For Brookfield, without critical reflection, teachers stand the

risk of making wrong decisions and poor judgments. Brookfield believed that by probing of self and practice we “confirm or challenge existing power relations” (1995, p. 30) and he suggested four critical lenses that can be used by teachers to challenge their assumptions in more critical ways. These are:

- through their autobiographical lens (as learners and teachers)
- through the eyes of their students
- from colleagues’ experiences
- by exploring theoretical literature and practice

Each of these lenses involves some exploration of self and practice. The need for teachers to reflect on perspectives derived from their learners is also highlighted by Brookfield (1995). As he says: ‘the most fundamental metacriterion for judging whether or not good teaching is happening is the extent to which teachers deliberately and systematically try to get inside students’ heads and see classrooms and learning from their point of view” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 35). The third lens is also crucial for its exploration of self and practice from the perspective of colleagues. This requires collaboration in practice through the sharing of ideas, receiving feedback from colleagues and mentoring. Brookfield adds that excellent teachers use the first three lenses in practice. The fourth lens calls for teachers to interact more with the higher education literature, carry out research, present papers, publish and participate in peer review. However, if excellent teachers increase competence when they use the first three lenses is the fourth lens necessary for successful practice in classrooms?

The use of the fourth lens is emphasized in university training classrooms and calls into focus the distinctions that Akbari identifies from his analysis of Dewey and Schön (discussed earlier) about knowledge that draws directly from scientific research versus knowledge that comes from experience of practice through some knowing in action. It also raises new questions about the cause of teacher resistance to reflection that recent studies highlight. These studies show that in many teacher education programs teachers display negative attitudes towards reflection (Zeichner & Liston, 1987; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1991; La Boskey, 1993; van Manen, 1995; Roberts, 1998; Loughran, 2002; Fendler, 2003; Hargreaves, 2004; Farrell, 2004; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Russell, 2005; Hobbs, 2007; Akbari, 2007; Otieno, 2009; Akbari, 2010). This however, could be a repudiation of the ways in which reflection is taught in teacher education programs and of the types of tools used to further the idea that teachers need to be taught *how* to reflect (Russell, 2005). Akbari (2007, p. 200) explains that there is an assumption that “teachers have not been reflective and should be taught, using academic models, as to *how* to reflect” [our emphasis]. Many teacher education programs have been criticized for teaching reflection from an assumption that teachers are not naturally reflective, not creative and lack imagination (Conway, 2001; Birmingham, 2004; Akbari, 2007). Arguments like these suggest that teacher educators may need to explore their own assumptions about teachers’ ability to reflect and the power relations that exist between them and their trainees through the same four lenses that Brookfield (1995) highlights. Either way, it leaves us with an additional question of how reflection should be taught. We will return to this later in the paper.

## Methodology

This next section outlines key elements of the methodology of this study. In simple terms, this is an account of “how researchers gain knowledge in research contexts” (Scott and Morrison 2005: 153). This is not just a case of signing up to a particular paradigm and its *modus operandi*. Having said that, any reliable research process must be “systematic and sustained” in nature and “planned and self-critical” (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 113). In order to clarify our research orientation, we would refer to it as interpretive in nature. As previously mentioned, we take an epistemological stance that sees knowledge as relative and socially constructed (Richards, 2003; Crotty, 1998). This is particularly the case in detailing and exploring “experiential knowledge” rather than recycling “received knowledge” (Wallace, 1998). The aim of this study was to understand Nigerian teachers’ notions of reflective practice and understand how reflection shapes their “meaning and action” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 83). The two-year study developed along pragmatic lines and the three phases of the research project will be explained in the next section. Research participants were spread across three regions in Nigeria, in four different towns and cities including an island (Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Bonny Island). Table 1 shows the research participants with some information about them including the study phase and type of school: primary or junior secondary school (JSS). It also shows whether they were part of a TG (Teacher Group).

**Table 1. Research participants (pseudonyms, gender and association)**

S/N	Name	Gender	Type of school	Study Phase	Association
1	James	Male	Private JSS	Phase 3	Member of ELTAN Abuja
2	Kenny	Male	Government JSS	Phase3	Member of ELTAN & PLG Abuja
3	Grace	Female	Government JSS	Phase 3	Member of PLG Abuja
4	Jordan	Female	Government JSS	Phase 3	Member of PLG Abuja
5	Mary	Female	Government JSS	Phase 3	Member of PLG Abuja
6	Manny	Male	Private primary	Phase 3	Former course participant, Bonny
7	Sylvia	Female	Private JSS	Phase 3	Former course participant, Port Harcourt

S/N	Name	Gender	Type of school	Study Phase	Association
8	Lola	Female	Private primary	Phase 3	Former course participant, Port Harcourt
9	Nicky	Female	Private primary	Phase 3	Former course participant, Port Harcourt
10	Gloria	Female	Private primary	Phase 3	Former course participant, Port Harcourt
11	Delores	Female	Private primary	Phase 3	Former course participant, Port Harcourt
12	Rihanna	Female	Private primary	Phase 1	Participant from Lagos TG
13	Teacher group	8 Female teachers including Rihanna	Private primary	Phase 1	Participants from the TG in Lagos

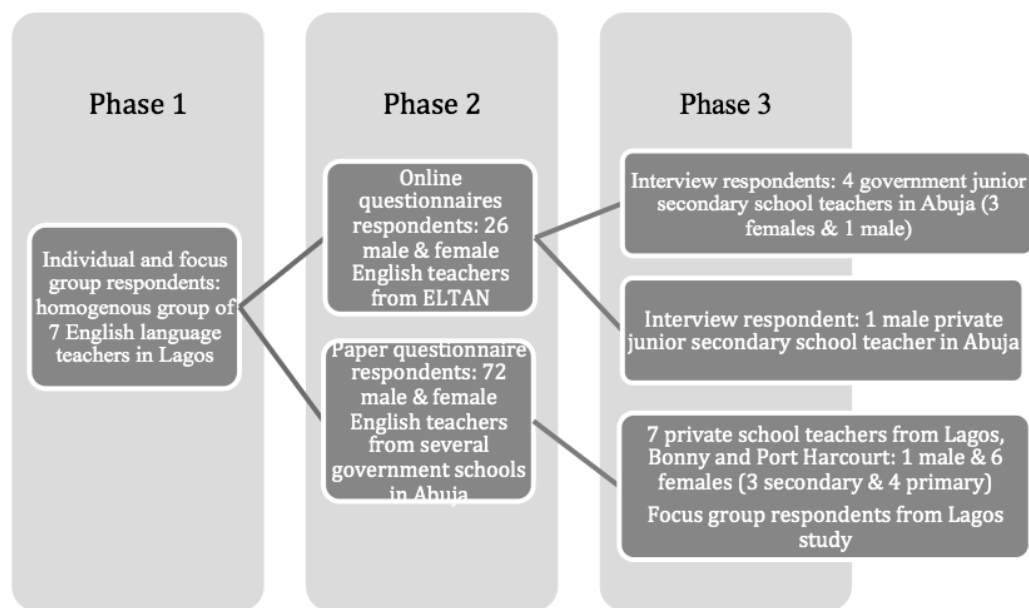
Participants were English teachers who either worked in government-operated schools or in private schools, within the universal basic education system (UBE) which represents the first nine years of compulsory education in Nigeria. They were a mix of primary and junior secondary school teachers. The inclusion of private school teachers in the study was led by findings in recent studies that show that in countries like Nigeria, at primary levels, private (independent) schools may serve more children (especially the poor) than government schools (Watkins, 2000; Nambissan, 2003; Adelabu & Rose, 2004; Tooley & Dixon, 2005; Tooley, et al., 2005; Tooley & Dixon, 2006).

Nineteen teachers directly participated in the study. Eight of these participated in an intervention group (a TG) that centered on a materials writing project. This intervention was started in order to instigate reflective practice in the context and include the possibility of more collaborative reflective practice. After classroom observations and post- observation interviews, these teachers carried out classroom explorations and also shared their experience through written reports a few months later. The original group shrunk to seven when one teacher left the school within the two-year study period. Most of these teachers provided primary and secondary data through two focus group interviews. Eleven other participants were interviewed individually, contributing primary data to the study. Four of these teachers were members of another teacher group (PLG) that was started by one of Timi's contacts in Abuja during the study. Other participants were members of English language teacher associations or former course



participants in an international reflective course that Timi had run previously. In terms of ethics, all participants provided informed consent and the research plan was approved by The Centre for Applied Linguistics' Ethics Research Director at the University of Warwick.

Apart from the 8 original participants in the Lagos TG, all members of the other TG (called PLG) were from the same government junior secondary school. An additional 98 other English teachers in different schools across Nigeria gave background information for the study through a questionnaire. The following chart shows all participants in the study and the phases that they participated in.



**Figure 1. Participants in the 3 study phases**

In Phase 1, the intervention group met once a week in a private Nigerian school in Lagos Nigeria. By collaborating through a joint project to develop materials, they shared their experience as teachers within an 18-month period when they held TG (Teacher Group) meetings. During this period, data shows that they took new ideas and new learning from the TG to their classrooms to try out and returned feedback and new insights to the group. In Phase 2 of the study, 98 participants responded to Questionnaire A that sought perspectives and experiences of teacher development in the context. In the last phase of the study (Phase 3) 12 participants were interviewed individually or through a focus group interview of the initial TG in Lagos, Nigeria. A total of 12 former course participants including 6 who participated in the individual interviews responded to an unstructured questionnaire (Questionnaire B).

Research instruments used in the study include field notes, maps of classrooms from 8 classroom observations carried out in the Lagos school, post-classroom exploration reports and non-structured and semi-structured questionnaires. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically by using an inductive approach without any pre-

existing code frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A grounded theory approach that used open coding, selective coding and axial coding of data was also used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2004; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The use of analytic memos aided the process of analysis and interpretation. Four major codes emerged from data showing the use of reflection for specific purposes in the context. These are: learner-centered reflection, teacher-centered reflection, skill-centered reflection and knowledge-centered reflection. These main codes (or broad themes) comprised other smaller categories that were related in different ways. This article describes some of the smaller categories that are significant to our current discussion. The following briefly describes the research process.

### *Narrative analysis*

This next section fulfills two main functions. In traditional terms it presents an analysis of the collected data but it frames this process as narrative inquiry (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). Therefore the section aims at:

- Representing a process of narrative inquiry (in that we were consciously eliciting narratives and experiences from Nigerian teachers) in a similar way to Barkhuizen and Waite (2008) and Tsui (2007)
- Giving the reader insight into a process of data collection and the resulting narrative analysis

The research began in November 2009 in a private school in Lagos, Nigeria. The preference for a private school was guided by a belief that if an intervention could not succeed in a small private school, which is not subjected to incessant teacher strikes or government bureaucracy, it was unlikely to work in a government school. Within two weeks four schools in Lagos were visited to share the research project's purpose including potential benefits to schools. Teachers from one of these four schools agreed to join the study and to open up their classrooms after obtaining consent from parents and the school administrator. This school was small and friendly, with children from a Nigerian middle class background. It had been converted from residential quarters so most classrooms were small with 9-15 young learners. Learners were chatty when outside their classrooms but quiet within their classrooms. Classroom observations show that they rarely interrupted the teacher with questions but waited for the teacher to invite them to ask or answer questions. The lower classes (Years 1 and 2) were more interactive than the other classes. All teachers in this group had no clear experience or knowledge of reflective practice. They were not members of any teachers' association.

After 8 classroom observations, post-observation interviews were undertaken to get a sense of these participants' understanding of events in their classrooms. This was done by questioning and probing the mundane and taken for granted practices in these teachers' classrooms. All eight teachers agreed to suggestions that they carry out individual classroom explorations of their classrooms. Seven participants wrote reports of this experience that they shared a few months later. Reports were analyzed for evidence of reflection through a qualitative instrument that developed from the theoretical perspectives on reflection of Dewey and Schön. Only one report had any clear evidence that the classroom exploration involved a reflective process. Following a

focus group interview with the group, a TG meeting was initiated which centered on the joint development (by these teachers) of a primary English workbook. The teachers were left to work collaboratively on this project for two months.

Discovering evidence of reflection in one of the 7 post classroom exploration reports was significant because it showed the possibility that teachers who have no formal experience of reflection could engage in some structured reflective process. Further teachers were recruited in Abuja through the English Language Teachers' Association of Nigeria (ELTAN). Free workshops were offered where ideas about reflection were shared including the benefits of teacher groups. A few months later, one of the contacts in ELTAN (a research participant) started a TG in Abuja called "PLG." This group was made up of English teachers from eight government junior secondary schools within a school district. By keeping in touch with the research participant who started the TG in Abuja, the study was able to collect information about workshops for government English teachers. In addition, an online questionnaire collected 98 responses by a wider cohort of members of ELTAN from across Nigeria.

Unfortunately the TG in Lagos was not meeting regularly because of time constraints and pressure from work. The teachers in this TG were offered the option of withdrawing from the study, but they insisted on continuing. Following a meeting with them and their school administrator, a regular meeting time was negotiated for them when their school administrator suggested that their weekly departmental meetings be used for the TG and a book project. In Phase 3 of the study, a focus group interview was undertaken. This interview showed that all teachers in the group could now articulate a new experience of reflection after integrating a measure of reflection into their practice. In the second focus group interview they called their classrooms 'laboratories' and the TG 'an extension of their laboratories' from where they drew new ideas and returned with new learning or with a need for advice or support. Finally, in Phase 3, individual interviews were carried out to explore understandings and possible experiences of reflection with four members of PLG as well as a member of ELTAN in Abuja.

In order to draw on experiences from a wider group of teachers, the study included perspectives from participants who had experienced reflection in a formal course that required them to reflect on their classroom experiences. Most of these participants were interviewed face-to-face (a participant in Bonny Island and Rihanna from the Lagos TG were interviewed by phone). Questionnaire B was administered by email or hard copy to former course participants. These former course participants not only maintained reflection in their practice, they had developed new understandings about its benefits in their practice months and years after completing the formal reflective course. For these participants reflection had become practice.

### *Findings*

The findings discussed here illustrate how Nigerian English teachers reflected in specific ways to meet classroom needs, develop new understandings of practice and make sense of themselves as teachers and their teaching. This section begins with looking at

evidence that reflection can begin intuitively. It then looks for evidence that reflection became more structured over time and then looks at evidence for assumptions being questioned by participants. The section finishes with an overview of metaphors teachers used to articulate reflective processes.

### **Reflection can start intuitively**

Data from the study shows that reflection was started intuitively by some participants who integrated a measure of reflection into their practice long before the study. For example Grace, a member of PLG who had no formal knowledge or experience of reflection prior to the study could identify its use in her practice:

168 Grace Yeah (.) so at that point you the teacher also have to (sic)  
169 reflect on what is the next thing for me to do to get this child  
170 to be able to identify nouns because now you have seen that  
171 you have a child that can't identify a noun in the class (.) so  
172 you have to think over it immediately (.) know how to  
173 strategise to let the child be able to identify (.) so at that  
174 point reflecting (.) thinking (.) can come in which can also come at  
the end of your lesson (Grace/168)

Grace describes her response in class to a child who cannot identify nouns. In Lines 171-174 she explains that by reflecting (Line 171-172: “think over it”), she considered immediate solutions to a child’s learning need. Grace and other participants demonstrated that reflection could be used intuitively in practice (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1991; Atkinson & Claxton, 2000; Mason, 2002; Fendler, 2003; Lynch & Metcalfe, 2006; Akbari, 2007; 2010). Dewey talks of “the mind” leaping forward to “a possible solution” (Dewey, 1933, p. 107), suggesting some spontaneous activity that engages the mind in reflective thinking. However, such solutions need to be tested through action:

*Ideas, as we have seen, whether they be humble guesses or dignified theories, are anticipations of some continuity or connection of an activity and a consequence which has not as yet shown itself. They are therefore tested by the operation of acting upon them’ Dewey (1916, MV 9, p. 167). [Our emphasis]*

From Dewey we can infer that intuition should not lead practice. New ideas (‘humble guesses’) must be tested through deliberate action as indeed should ‘dignified theories’ as potential resources for extending learning. In the following section, we illustrate one such process from data in the study.

### **Reflection can be structured even when started intuitively**

A former course participant describes a structured reflective process he used to explore his practice that helped him to identify why his students unexpectedly passed their English GCE exams (provided by West African Examination Council). This happened

about eight years before the study and several years before he encountered reflection conceptually in a formal course. He explains the process that he started intuitively from surprise and perplexity at his teaching success:

307       Manny       Well I collected the results (.) I looked at their  
308                   grades and I was able to work out the  
309                   percentage for instance (.) those that made A1  
310                   A2 A3 C4 C5 C6 and all that (.) and I looked  
311                   at candidates (.) the children themselves (.)  
312                   who you know fell within these categories (.) I  
313                   looked at all these things (.) I put all these  
314                   things together and then I thought back about  
315                   their own classroom practices (.) I tried to  
316                   match the results with their classroom  
317                   practices (.) and within a couple of weeks I'm able to put these  
                  things together (Manny/307).

Above, we see a structured reflective process that started intuitively and became systematic. The participant, Manny, analyzed his students' grades, reviewed the different candidates (Line 310) and placed them into meaningful categories, while reflecting through the perspectives of their own experience (Lines 314-315). According to Kinsella (2007):

*[I]n practice, reflection often begins when a routine response produces a surprise, an unexpected outcome, pleasant or unpleasant...when intuitive, spontaneous performance yields expected results, then we tend not to think about it; however, when it leads to surprise, we may begin a process of reflection. (2007, p. 108)*

This suggests that teachers have encounters in their classrooms that engage their interests and can potentially trigger a process of reflective exploration. Manny was able to sustain this process for weeks resulting in 'new' findings which he began to replicate in other classroom sessions several years following. Maughan (1996) explains this possibility:

*[W]hen we develop a pattern of behaviour that works in certain situations, we will tend to repeat it until it becomes automatic. We can't describe the processes involved because we are not aware of what is going on. It is only when something goes wrong or something unexpected happens that we may stop and think about what we did and what we could or should have done in the situation. (1996, p. 76)*

Since classrooms are unpredictable places (Wright, 2005) we can expect that teachers will continue to question and explore the unexpected or surprising episodes which regularly occur in practice. Manny and Grace demonstrate what Schön describes as reflection-in-action, a knowing-in-action (Schön, 1987, p. 40) and reflection-on-action

(Schön, 1983; 1987) respectively. One is an immediate and spontaneous process while the other is a lengthier structured process. They also demonstrate that reflection is not only part of the teaching process but that teachers may reflect in or on practice (van Manen, 1995; Loughran, 2002; Akbari, 2007) to meet specific needs even when they have no formal experience or knowledge of reflection.

### **Reflection challenges assumptions**

Data from the study shows that teachers' assumptions are related to power relations between teachers and their learners. Sylvia, a participant who engaged regularly in reflective practice after her experience in a formal course, describes one such episode where she was able to overcome her assumptions by being reflective.

- 96 Sylvia Yes (.) I observed and by facial expression you know (.) and the  
97 child kept throwing the hand wild if you asked a question (.) I  
98 picked that out and for that particular child I had to do a  
99 conferencing to find out exactly what his problem was
- 100 R Now can you just focus on that scenario? You were teaching a  
101 lesson and you were observing a child and the facial expressions  
102 and gestures were suggesting things to you (.) at that moment  
103 were you reflecting or is it that you went out after the lesson and  
104 you reflected? What really happened?
- 105 Sylvia It didn't occur to me immediately to attend to that need but when I  
106 reflected it came back to mind
- 107 R So that image came back?
- 108 Sylvia Yes (.) it came back to mind so that's why I wrote down  
109 somewhere that while reflecting I use visual images (.) scenes  
110 replay (.) I had to go back (.) get the child and ask questions (.)  
111 why were you throwing your hand about? And I saw your facial  
112 expression and had a feeling you didn't really understand the  
113 lesson and he was quite shy and said (.) "No (.) I didn't" (.) but he  
114 was among those who said they understood everything (.) so I had  
115 the opportunity to talk with him (.) If I didn't have a time when I  
116 could replay the scenes in class I probably wouldn't have done  
anything about what I noticed (Sylvia/96)

Above Sylvia describes a teaching episode where a child whose claim that he understood the lesson (Lines 113-114) was contradicted in his body language. The power relations between teacher and child are evident in this contradiction. According to Sylvia “the child kept throwing the hand wild if you asked a question...it didn’t occur to me immediately to attend to that need but when I reflected it came back to mind” (Lines 96-97, 105-106). It appears that the child gave the “expected” response to his teacher when she asked if learners understood the lesson. However, he was visibly confused. Although his teacher observed this contradictory body language during the lesson she did nothing about it in class, perhaps following her assumptions and settling for an acceptance of the child’s expected response. Brookfield (1995) asks teachers to challenge their assumptions by looking at their practice through the eyes of their learners. Dewey (1933) challenges routine action that hinders reflective action. The learner’s inability to articulate his confusion during the lesson, until he was approached by the teacher sometime afterwards (Lines 98-99, 111-114) illustrates the power relations within classrooms that teachers may need to be conscious of.

Findings from the study showed that in the context teachers were making adjustments to their practice based on their reflections on practice. However, these were not shared publicly because quite often they went against ‘recommended’ practice from school administrators who believe that teachers work in schools should be predictable and planned. There was enough evidence in the study to demonstrate that reflective teachers are more creative and innovative in their practice. By exploring participants’ perspectives and experience of reflection, we gain a sense of what reflection means to these practitioners and its importance in their practice.

### **Participants’ characterization of reflection**

Participants in the study characterized reflection through metaphors and by expressions that showed their perceptions of reflection. Sometimes this occurred naturally in their descriptions but sometimes was prompted (through a request for a metaphor of reflection) during the interview. Block (1992, p. 51-53) explains that metaphors are used as ‘explanatory vehicles’ and these participants used them as vehicles for articulating intangible but significant experiences, perhaps also where participants lacked an explicit theoretical perspective to describe reflection. A number of studies have focused on how metaphors can be used for reflective and developmental purposes for teachers (see (Elliot, 1994; Farrell, 2006; Mann, 2008). Table 2 shows how Nigerian teachers viewed reflection:

**Table 2. Metaphors about reflection from the study**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Metaphor</b>	<b>Comments by participants</b>
Delores	Mirror	‘At times I don’t even like ... what I see in the mirror ... at times I see myself looking worried ... then it will now bring er (.) into my consciousness (.) ‘oh you need to relax!’”

Participant	Metaphor	Comments by participants
James	A chewing goat 'ruminating'	'it's healthy for a goat because some of the pasture he took earlier were not well grinded by the teeth maybe because of ... so as the goat stays back (.) he brings it up again and then chews it again'.
Kenny	Propeller	'It's a propeller of learning'
Manny	Moment of truth	'Um (.) yeah (.) it is a moment when you tell yourself the truth... you may not even realize that it was a mistake then but now while you're sitting down (.) that is when you tell yourself the moment of truth'
Gloria	Cooking	'Now if you just steam when you are supposed to marinate you will get a different result ... if you don't taste what you have steamed or marinated you will lose the opportunity you could have got (.) you could have discovered that oh I should have done this instead of this'
Nicky	Back of the palm	'There's no way you look at the palm (.) you'll automatically look at the back of your hand because it's just something natural'
Lola	Ladder	'In reflection it comes step by step (.) gradually you know (.) it is piling up (.) building up from step to step till you get to where you are going to (.) so you start from somewhere and reflection must start from somewhere (.) so I see it as a ladder climbing till you get to where (.) till you reach your target'
Rihanna	Oasis	'There is dryness, there is no light (.) everything is dry and no comfort and then you suddenly discover this little you know (.) stream of water and it's like 'oh thank God! At least I have water (.) Oh!''
Sylvia	A motor engine	I will just call it the engine (.) the motor for the practice

Other descriptions from individual interviews were compared with the metaphors collected, in order to gauge the meanings of participants' reflection constructs. Delores and Manny used similar constructs to describe reflection, as a mirror and as a 'moment of truth' in that both views of reflection prioritised self-critical aspects (the identification of their mistakes), limitations and shortcomings through a reflective process that was teacher-centered. This process could also trigger a form of intervention or action: as Delores says: "then it will now bring er (.) into my consciousness (.) Oh you need to relax!" Their constructs correspond with other data in the study that demonstrated that reflection could be teacher-centered (a tool for exploring or



developing the self in practice). James shows his perceptions of reflection as a teacher-centered and ongoing process. For him, it is like a goat regurgitating the grass it had already eaten, re-chewing it again and again until it's completely broken down. By saying "it's healthy for a goat," he is pointing to its beneficial and developmental aspects. It also illustrates how teachers develop personal knowledge through an ongoing process of reflective thinking. Gloria's metaphor is cooking a meal. From her description we see her perception of reflection as a purposeful process with different corresponding aspects. It is a selective process that requires thoughtful action: "if you just steam when you are supposed to marinate you will get a different result." Thus from Gloria, we see an illustration of reflection as a systematic process that shows the careful consideration of the kind that Dewey (1933) describes. We can assume that the meal the cook (teacher) is carefully cooking is for her learners; and so in terms of Brookfield's lenses, this is reflection being used, at least partly, in a learner-centered way. It is, at the same time, self-evaluative; by recommending that the 'cook' (teacher) tastes the meal as it is being cooked, Gloria is bringing into focus a process that involves trying out, testing and experimenting. Such instances of data from the study reveal a skill-centered kind of reflection. This is important in a process of gaining competence as a teacher.

Reflection is characterised by Kenny, Lola, and Sylvia using metaphors related to movement, journey, and propulsion ('ladder,' 'propeller,' and 'a motor engine'). Lola details her characterization of reflection as a gradual process when she says: 'it comes step-by-step (.) gradually you know...till you get to where you are going,' again characterizing reflection as providing some direction. However, Kenny and Sylvia illustrate reflection not as a gradual thing but as a powerful source of energy that can move learning or practice forward at different speeds. When they use 'propeller' and 'motor engine' respectively to characterize their perceptions of reflection in practice they show that reflection can be a vehicle that motivates the teacher to further learning. This corresponds to other data in the study that showed that a few participants like Manny, deliberately reflected on (or in) their practice in order to identify the things they were doing right. This is interesting because many prompts for reflection in the literature are problem-based. However, these are more like puzzles practice. Allwright argues that 'puzzle' has less negative connotations than 'problem' and can focus on poorly understood successes and wanting "to try to understand better" (2003, p. 117). Also, reflecting on such puzzles also allows us 'to uncover our most deeply embedded allegiances and motivations as teachers' (Brookfield, 1995, p. 32). In the Nigerian context, reflection instigated a motivation for pressing on as teachers working in challenging circumstances. Rihanna from the Lagos TG articulates this idea when she characterizes reflection as a powerful resource. It is an oasis in the desert (another metaphor for her practice). She explains: "there is dryness, there is no light (.) everything is dry and no comfort and then you suddenly discover this little you know (.) stream of water and it's like 'oh! Thank God! At least I have water (.) Oh!'" In a few words Rihanna sums up the experience of teachers who teach in Nigeria. Whether in government or privately owned schools reflection can become an important resource that motivates and drives small innovations when teachers find new ways of achieving or sustaining their teaching goals.

Nicky's construct of reflection is as a natural thing (process) that is always present when she describes it as the back of the palm: she explains how by looking at one's palm, one automatically looks at the other side of the hand. This description suggests that reflection triggers further exploration of the familiar. It also suggests the familiarity of reflection. Participants' metaphors are powerful characterizations of reflection that were usually spoken with conviction and passion. They suggest that reflection is a significant feature in practice that helps teachers to explore themselves as teachers and their practice to make informed decisions. When Nicky describes reflection as the 'back' of the palm, she is stressing the necessity of reflective practice in a practical everyday way similar to that which Akbari (2007) stresses, "[T]eachers have always been reflecting on what they have been doing in their classes. It would be impossible to imagine a context in which we have human interaction on a cognitive level and no reflection going on" (p. 200). Zeichner (1996) and van Manen (1995) argue that since teaching is itself reflective, teachers have some form of reflection in their practice.

### *Discussion & Conclusions*

There are very few accounts of what reflection looks like in practice or what teachers think of it outside university or training settings (Mann and Walsh 2013). This study of Nigerian English teachers provides some insights into the way teachers view reflection and the kinds of work reflection does for them in the classroom. The study demonstrates that reflection is a tangible and beneficial aspect of their professional lives. It shows that such reflection is largely intuitive and not something learned in a theoretical way and then applied. It also goes some way to supporting the view that reflective teachers are more self-critical, more self-aware of their development needs and more learner-centered. However, an important idea that emerged from the study is the idea that in the research context, reflection may need to be taught more explicitly with input from theoretical perspectives if it is to become more critical. Teachers in the study reflected mainly from two perspectives: from the perspective of self and their learners. Only a few participants showed some evidence or some progression into the use of Brookfield's (1995) third lens: reflecting from the perspectives of their colleagues. However, the use of the first two lenses described by Brookfield (1995) was significant in these teachers' practice because they brought more reflexivity, more self awareness and significant awareness of learners' needs; resulting in adaptations and review of practice and progression from old perspectives to new ones. Small innovations were carried out by participants in their classrooms through a reflective process of trying out and testing ideas and approaches and by classroom experiments. Thus, change came through self-initiated interventions that brought new knowledge and understanding. The 'new knowledge' participants developed appears to have strengthened and renewed their practice.

In the study, participants who had previous experience of reflection in a formal course expressed that reflection should be taught more explicitly. One participant stated that this would have made it easier for him to respond to the structured feedback his examiners required in the formal reflective teacher development course (c.f. Hobbs, 2007). He also questioned the criteria used to judge his reflections and wondered if he would not have met these expectations more precisely if he understood them. Quoting

from Johnson (1996, p. 766), Akbari (201, p. 198) states that for teacher educators, ‘the main liberating motive behind the reflective paradigm is moving away from theory towards practice due to the fact that “theory often fails to inform practice because the problems that arise in practice are generally neither caused by nor the result of teachers’ lack of knowledge about theory.”

How reflection is taught is significant, since the use of generalized academic methods have only made teachers more poorly disposed to the idea (Fendler, 2003; Farrell, 2004; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Russell, 2005; Hobbs, 2007; Akbari, 2007; Otienoh, 2009; Akbari, 2010). This study of Nigerian teachers shows that reflection is used in specific ways in practice to resolve problems and further teacher and student learning. It also illustrates that reflection is varied and multifaceted as participants’ different metaphors for reflection demonstrate. Therefore, teacher educators will need to develop specific tools that take teachers’ individual needs, personal experience, their contexts and history as learners into account in the design of reflective courses. We would agree with Wright and Bolitho (2007, p. 81) when they say that we must start from “where teachers are at.” They argue that “new learning builds on the foundation of existing knowledge and practice” (Wright & Bolitho, 2007, p. 79). This is significant in the light of Kolb’s (1984) view that all learning is in fact re-learning. Teacher educators will also need to take into consideration evidence that developing systematic reflection takes time (Farrell 2004, Liou 2001) and that reflection happens in stages (Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Stanley, 1998; Baxter Magolda, 1999; Rodgers, 2002; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Farrell, 2004; Ward & McCotter, 2004; Lee, 2005; El Dib, 2007). Therefore, it should not be rushed (Hobbs, 2007). Unless these issues are acknowledged in teacher education programs, resistance to reflection as it is currently taught will continue. The treatment of reflective practice needs to be more data-led but at least some of this data should feature more intuitive and everyday reflection; showing how it is helpful in a constant and ongoing process of small scale innovation. We would argue that more teachers’ voices and experiences, especially those dealing with constraints and less than ideal teaching conditions in teachers’ own contexts, should be integrated into teacher education programs.

### **About the Authors**

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