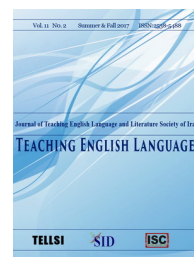


## Teaching English Language Journal

ISSN: 2538-5488 – E-ISSN: 2538-547X – <http://tel.journal.org>

© 2020 – Published by Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran



Please cite this paper as follows:

Ashrafi, N., Talebinejad, M. R., & Shahrokhi, M. (2020). The contribution of core reflection supervision through the onion model to Iranian EFL teachers' professional development. *Teaching English Language*, 14(2), 89-110. <https://doi.org/10.22132/TEL.2020.119499>

### Research Paper

# The Contribution of Core Reflection Supervision Through the Onion Model to Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Development

**Neda Ashraafi**

*PhD Candidate, Department of foreign languages, Shahreza Branch,  
Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran*

**Mohamad Reza Talebinejad<sup>1</sup>**

*Associate Professor, Department of foreign languages, Shahreza  
Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran*

**Mohsen Shahrokhi**

*Assistant Professor, Department of foreign languages, Shahreza Branch,  
Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran*

## Abstract

Rooted in the onion model of reflection, the core reflection approach can bring the power of ideals and personal qualities to bear upon teachers' experiences of teaching. This study explored the contribution of the approach to Iranian English language teachers' professional development. Forty general English teachers at the university level attended three supervisory sessions wherein the teachers were coached into reflective practice. Pre/postintervention semistructured interviews, classroom observations, field notes, and reflective journals were used to collect qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes at each layer of the model. Further analysis revealed a significant difference between teachers' perceptions and teaching behaviors before and after the supervisory meetings. The results demonstrated that teachers experienced a process of growth with a developmental trajectory from the outer layers to the inner layers of the onion model. As a result of the activation of core qualities through core reflection supervision, teachers developed a sense of identity and mission that had an impact on their environment, behavior, and beliefs in a way that they shifted their attention from their own concerns to their responsibilities and ideals. The findings have implications for various stakeholders in ELT.

**Keywords:** Core Reflection, Onion Model, Reflective Teaching, Teacher Development

*Received: March 29, 2020*

*Accepted: November 13, 2020*

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [mrezatalebinejad@gmail.com](mailto:mrezatalebinejad@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

The goal of teacher development which is now considered to be a fundamental aspect of English Language Teaching (ELT, henceforth) is to provide empowerment by which the teachers will be able to "know how to handle difficult situations, challenging relations, and how to make change happen" (Johnson, 2009, p. 76). A key element in teacher development is *reflective practice* which is defined as an ability to reflect on one's actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning (Zwart, Korthagen, & Attema-Noordewier, 2015). It is a consolidation of critical scrutiny, deliberate consideration of the ethical involvements and consequences of teaching practice, and profound examination of personal beliefs and presuppositions about human potential and learning (Meijer, Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2009). Reflective practice has appeared to be fruitful for teachers in detecting their weaknesses and strengths and improving their practice (Attema-Noordewier, Korthagen, & Zwart, 2013). More importantly, reflective practice can be an appropriate way to build linkages between theory and practice (Körkkö, Kyrö-Ämmälä, & Turunen, 2016).

Recently, a new approach to the reflective practice called Core Reflection (Korthagen, 2014, 2016, 2017; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, 2010), has begun to gain momentum. The approach builds on teachers' core qualities and ideals as the foundation of reflection, and associates the professional and the personal dimensions of teacher professional development (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2017).

During the past decade, a great number of studies have demonstrated the positive effects of *Core Reflection* on teacher development (e.g., Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Impedovo & Malik, 2016; Körkkö et al., 2016; Ruit, Korthagen, & Schoonenboom, 2019; Zwart et al., 2015). However, the provision of *Core Reflection* in L2 teaching and especially in ELT has been

weakly explored. Furthermore, previous studies have merely been carried out in case-study formats with a focus on the developmental processes of individual teachers who received core reflection supervision. Intended to narrow these gaps, this study explored the possible impact of supervision provided according to the guidelines of the Core Reflection framework on Iranian English teachers' professional development.

## **2. Literature Review**

The development of the core reflection approach began as a reaction to a common problem among practitioners. It has been observed that when teachers and instructors are challenged by a problem, they habitually resort to finding a rapid and on-the-spot solution rather than delving into underlying and hidden aspects of the problem (Korthagen, 2014). The problem at hand may be resolved temporarily; however, in the long run, this sweeping under the carpet solution has negative consequences and will eventually put teachers' professional development at risk (Korthagen, 2016). To arrive at new behavior, a deeper type of reflection is crucial which has been called core reflection (Korthagen, 2014, 2016, 2017; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, 2010). Core reflection posits that too much concentration on behavior and ways to improve teachers' behavior seems to be counterproductive as this obsession leads to neglecting teacher's inner potentials as well as their inner obstacles (Korthagen, 2014, 2016). That is the reason why Korthagen and Vasalos (2005, 2010) insist that the main foci of attention in the *Core Reflection* framework are teachers' core qualities, inner potentials, and perceived ideals. In other words, *Core Reflection* is more about power and individual strengths rather than problems and weaknesses (Korthagen, 2017).

This reflection on individual core potential and inner obstacles could be characterized through the onion model with six levels (or layers) of reflection

(Korthagen, 2004; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) which is represented in Figure 1.

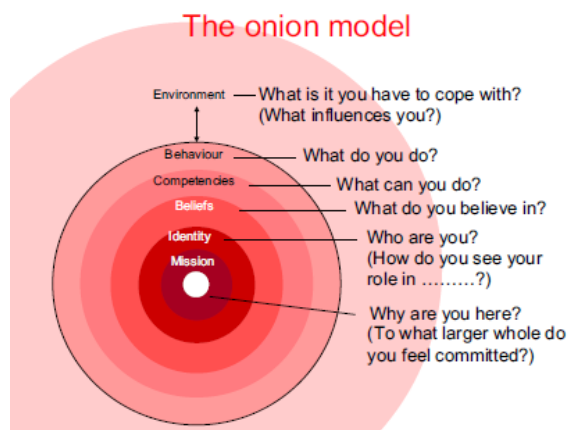


Figure 1. The onion model (Korthagen, 2004)

According to Korthagen and Vasalos (2005), the first layer of the onion model is *environment* which refers to the context and setting with which the teacher faces, for example, the students, the classroom itself as a separate entity, the school culture and the whole set of its implicit or explicit regulations, and so forth. The second layer is *behavior* which represents teachers' doings and actions in reaction to what goes on in the previous layer; that is, the environment. The third layer of the onion model, *competencies*, relates to teachers' knowledge, prowess, and skills. This involves the areas at which the teacher is competent and proficient. The fourth layer, *beliefs*, refers to teachers' presuppositions and convictions about themselves and their surrounding environment. These assumptions are usually undiscerning and unconscious. The fifth layer, *identity*, has to do with teachers' identification of themselves, their self-concept and frame of mind, and the professional characters that they assume for themselves. The sixth layer of the onion model is *mission* which is about their conceptualization of values and ideals

in their vocation or their source of inspiration and significance in their profession.

The basic assumption in the onion model is that the traditional obsession with problems and figuring out quick solutions to deal with problematic situations confine teachers' reflection to the two outer layers (environment and behavior). This superficial and limited type of reflection is not much advantageous and advisable because it does not contribute much to teachers' long-term professional development (Korthagen, 2016). On the other hand, focus on the inner onion layers can create a profound connection with the person's inner capacities and helps the teacher become cognizant of obstacles and factors inhibiting the realization of those capabilities and potencies. Another tenet underlying the model is that when the layers are harmonized and aligned with each other, the teachers can bring their inner capacities to the foreground and use them to make decisions and confront the problematic moments in class. Thus, this harmony not only leads to a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment in teachers but it also has a direct strong influence on their environment and behavior (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010). Exploiting the essence of teachers' core qualities and helping them to make effective alignment among the layers of reflection is an endeavor that takes place through a process of coaching of an experienced teacher in practicum sessions (Korthagen, 2014, 2016, 2017).

Over the past years, the core reflection approach has been practiced across the globe in various teacher education agendas. The function and results of this approach for teachers and learners have been scrutinized and evaluated in various research studies showing that core reflection supervision leads to profound and thorough improvements in the attitudes and behaviors of the supervisees (Adams, Kim, & Greene, 2013; Attema-Noordewier et al., 2013; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Impedovo & Malik, 2016; Khazaenezhad,

Tavakoli, & Amirian, 2018; Körkkö et al., 2016; Meijer et al., 2009; Ruit et al., 2019; Zwart et al., 2015). However, there is a lack of research in the field of ELT on the contribution of core reflection to language teachers' development especially in the EFL context of Iran. To bridge this gap, this study set out to investigate the possible impact of core reflection through the onion model on Iranian English teachers' development by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the reflective practice attitudes and strategies of Iranian English teachers before and after the core reflection supervisory meetings?
2. To what extent can each layer of the onion model be actualized in Iranian English teachers' professional development after the core reflection supervisory meetings?
3. Which aspects of Iranian English teachers' core qualities after the core reflection supervisory meetings change through different phases of core reflection based on the onion model?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants were 40 Iranian EFL teachers who were all from Iran and shared Persian as their mother language. They were 22 females and 18 males within the age range of 23 to 45. They all held the same academic degree (M.A. in TEFL) with 2 to 10 years of teaching experience. All of them came from similar sociocultural background and comparable social status. At the time of the procedure, all the participants were teaching English in general English courses for non-English majors in different higher education institutes of Shiraz, Iran.

#### **3.2 Instruments**

A combination of qualitative data collection instruments including pre/postintervention semistructured interviews, classroom observation checklists, field notes, and reflective journals were used. These techniques

are among the most common and prevalent techniques of qualitative data collection (Dörnyei, 2007). The aim of employing a combination of data collection instruments (i.e., triangulation) was to ensure the validity and reliability of the research (Riazi, 2017). The semistructured interview questions and the classroom observation checklist items (with a yes/no prompts format) were prepared based on the questions posed by Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) for each layer of the *onion model*, as represented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Interview Questions Raised for Each Layer of Onion Model (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005)*

Onion Layer	Interview Question
Environment	What are the biggest outdoor problems that may affect your in-class performance?
Behavior	How do you behave when something problematic happens in class?
Competencies	What are your top competencies and skills as an English teacher?
Belief	Do you have any limiting beliefs that might hinder or negatively influence your teaching?
Identity	How do you see your role as an English teacher?
Mission	Why did you choose to become an English teacher?

### 3.3 Procedure

#### 3.3.1 Core reflection supervisory meetings

The supervisory intervention consisted of three meetings during one academic semester which took place approximately every three weeks. The meetings were held in the higher education institute of Shiraz wherein the participants taught. Each meeting lasted around one and a half to two hours. In the first supervisory session, after an exchange of pleasantries, the researcher proceeded to outline the general aims and procedures of the study. After the briefing, the researcher introduced the supervisor to the participants (henceforth, supervisees) as the instructor who was supposed to coach them through the *Core Reflection* process. The role of the supervisor was undertaken by an experienced ELT teacher who was quite knowledgeable

about the insights and principles of *Core Reflection* and kindly accepted the researchers' request to take part in the study.

In the first session, using a projector screen to show presentation slides, the supervisor acquainted the supervisees with the basic notions underlying the onion model of core reflection based on the insights from Korthagen and his colleagues (e.g., Korthagen, 2014, 2016, 2017; Korthagen & Nuijten, 2017; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, 2010). The supervisor explained that the onion model is an innovative way of developing awareness about the less rational factors involved in teaching. Further, the six levels of reflection as well as the concept of core qualities were briefly presented to the supervisees. It was mentioned that the focal point in applying the core reflection approach to teaching practice includes more inward layers in the process of reflection. Put differently, teachers should not confine themselves just to the outward layers and dwell on the problems arising in class (*environment*) or how they are going to sort out the problem (layer of *behavior*). Rather, they should reflect on their own perceptions of the situation (*beliefs*) and about what kind of teacher they want to be (professional *identity*), and what vocational ideal they assume for themselves (*mission*).

Then the supervisor started the supervisory procedure following the phase model of core reflection (Korthagen, 2014, 2016, 2017; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, 2010). The phase model, as schematically represented in Figure 2, is a practical procedure to apply the *Core Reflection* method to all the layers of the onion model, and to align the layers so that the inner core qualities can fully develop.



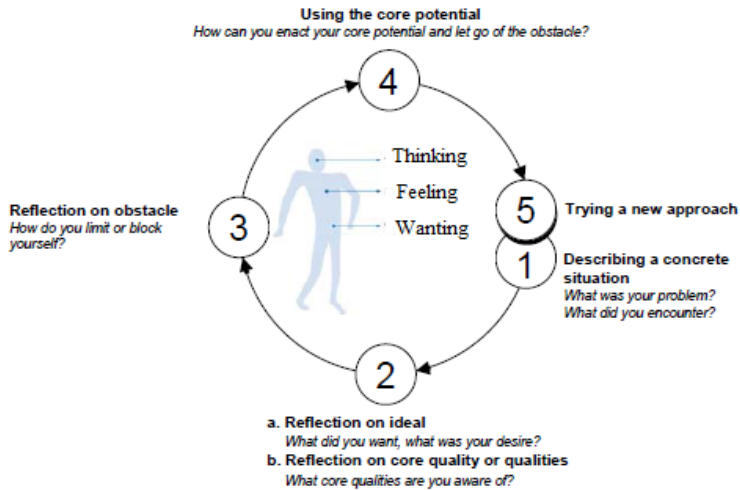


Figure 2. Korthagen's (2014) phase model of core reflection.

According to the phase model, to deal with problems, after a brief description of the problem, the supervisee should be coached into phase 2 where her core qualities are identified and emphasized. At phase 3, the supervisee starts looking for possible inner obstacles that may hinder her core qualities. At phase 4, the supervisee practices how to use her core potentials to overcome her inner obstacles which eventually results in trying a new approach (phase 5). The new behavior which is a direct outcome of a core reflective analysis and alignment between the onion layers is fundamentally different from the kind of behavior resulting from a merely rational evaluation of the problem at hand (Korthagen, 2014, 2016, 2017).

The phases were followed by the supervisor in the supervisory meetings. The supervisees were asked to bring up their experiences, issues, and problems they had encountered in their classes. Then, the supervisor tailored the described situations to the phase model. The supervisor and the supervisees contemplated the supervisory interventions, their influence on the

supervisees' learning processes, and the ways those interventions could be transferred to actual problematic situations in their classes.

### **3.3.2 Data Collection Procedure**

Before collecting the data, a pilot study was carried out with 10 random participants from the target population to ensure the clarity of items in the semistructured interview and observation checklist. The main phase of the data collection procedure started at the outset of the semester by conducting semistructured interviews and classroom observations before the supervisory intervention. Then, follow-up semistructured interviews and classroom observations were conducted after the supervisory meetings. The participants were interviewed by one of the researchers in a face-to-face format at their convenient time and place. Classroom observations were done by the same researcher as well. Also, the field notes were recorded by the same researcher who was present in the supervisory meetings as an observing participant (e.g., Dörnyei, 2007). In other words, the researcher sat through the sessions and observed and recorded the discussions without intervening in the procedure. For ethical considerations, the participants' consent was obtained to audio-record the interviews and supervisory meetings. Furthermore, the supervisees were required to keep reflective journals to document their progress throughout the process. By the end of the research span (i.e., one academic semester), three reports were written by each supervisee directly after each meeting which were hand-delivered or emailed to the researcher.

### **3.3.3 Data analysis procedure**

The analysis of the collected data was guided by thematic analysis procedures (Clarke & Braun, 2014). The data obtained from verbatim transcribed interviews, observation checklists, field notes, and reflective journals were meticulously analyzed in order to identify recurrent themes. The researcher along with two research assistants analyzed the data independently of each



## The Contribution of ...

	Asking about students' ideals	0		40	100			
Competencies	Instructional delivery	25	63	8	20	14.8	2	0.000
	Personal competencies	15	37	32	80			
	Demotivation	18	45	0	0			
Belief	Insufficient self-efficacy	12	30	0	0	12.4	4	0.000
	Insufficient autonomy	10	25	0	0			
	Increased self-confidence & self-efficacy	0	0	38	95			
	Increased autonomy	0	0	32	80			
Identity	Source of knowledge	40	100	0	0	15.1	1	0.000
	Multiple roles	0	0	40	100			
	No inspiration	21	53	0	0			
Mission	Passion for their own major	12	30	5	12	11.9	3	0.000
	Preference for academia	7	17	2	5			
	Centrality of students	0	0	33	83			

As Table 2 portrays, at the first layer of the onion model, namely environment, before the supervisory intervention, the teachers found a number of obstacles standing in the way of their effective practice. The analysis of the supervisees' interviews, reflective journals, and supervisory discussion fieldnotes revealed that the main obstacles hindering their effective teaching practice included:

- a. Financial problems and economic hardship (90%);
- b. Personal problems such as the conflict between marriage and being a parent with the teaching profession, heavy workload under the pressure of time, health, etc. (80%);
- c. Lack of proper educational facilities such as library or resource center, high-speed Internet access, video projectors, computer labs, and other state-of-the-art amenities (73%);
- d. Curricular issues such as insufficient allotted time to English courses, unsuitable policies, and outdated course books. (53%);

e. Unmotivated students who seem lackluster, sluggish, and emotionally flat and do not care about classes, knowing the subject matter, studying, tests, etc. (45%);

Nevertheless, the analysis showed that after the supervisory meetings, the supervisees experienced a considerable change of attitude and reported that ever since they got familiar with core reflection insights, the outside factors could hardly affect their teaching (0% of personal problems, lack of facilities, and unmotivated students) or were very rare (financial problems 5% and curricular issues 5%). Regarding the results of the Chi-square test, as shown in Table 2, the frequencies of themes appeared to be significantly different before and after the supervisory intervention  $X^2(5, N = 40) = 10.1, p = .000 (p < .05)$ .

At the second layer of the onion model, namely behavior, based on the interview, observation, fieldnotes, and reflective journal data, before the supervisory meetings, the supervisees' strategies to handle a problematic situation encompassed a variety of traditional techniques such as talking about the misbehavior (60%), ignoring the misbehavior (30%), punishing the misbehaving student (8%), and even losing cool (2%). However, after the supervision, the supervisees did not use any of the former strategies as they had realized that the patterns of their old behavior were defective and they broke their habits and opted for strategies advocated by core reflection insights such as focusing on strengths rather than problems (100%), and asking students about their ideals (100%). As demonstrated in Table 2, the chi-square test yielded  $X^2(5, N = 40) = 11.6, p = .000 (p < .05)$ . In other words, there was a significant difference between supervisees' behaviors before and after the supervisory meetings.

As for the third onion layer, namely competencies, before the supervisory intervention, the majority of the supervisees perceived instructional delivery

The Contribution of ...

as their top competency (63%) and personal competencies came second (37%). Interestingly, however, as a result of the core reflection supervision, the significance they attached to each of these competencies changed considerably and most teachers perceived personal competencies as their top competency (80%) and instructional delivery became their second alternative (20%). Table 2 shows that results of Chi-square test at this layer revealed a significant difference  $X^2(2, N = 40) = 14.8, p = .000 (p < .05)$ . This verifies a significant difference between the supervisees' perception of their competencies before and after the supervisory meetings.

At the fourth onion layer, namely belief, before the intervention took place, the supervisees regarded themselves as highly demotivated individuals (45%) with little sense of self-efficacy (30%) and autonomy (25%). However, their attitude completely changed after the meetings and, due to the use of core reflection, they started viewing themselves as highly motivated teachers with increased levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy (95%), and autonomy (80%). According to Table 2, the results of the Chi-square test indicated a significant difference between supervisees' beliefs before and after the coaching meetings  $X^2(4, N = 40) = 12.4, p = .000 (p < .05)$ .

The results of the analysis at the fifth layer of the onion model, namely identity, was quite interesting because the supervisees exhibited a remarkable change before and after the core reflection intervention. Before the supervisory meetings, all the teachers (100%) were oriented toward their formal designated responsibilities and viewed themselves as a source of knowledge. However, this long-established and traditional view was modified during the supervisory meetings; after the supervision all the teachers (100%) assumed a variety of different roles for themselves such as facilitator, counselor, planner, and so forth. As table 2 indicates, the Chi-

square test demonstrated a significant difference  $\chi^2 (1, N = 40) = 15.1, p = .000 (p < .05)$  at this layer.

Finally, at the sixth layer of the onion model, namely mission, the core reflection supervision contributed to a change of teachers' perception from a self-focused attitude to a student-centered one. Before the supervision, over half of the supervisees (53%) disclosed that they did not feel inspired at all and others acknowledged that what inspired them was their passion for their own major (i.e., the English language) (30%) or their passion for being connected to academia and academic life (17%). Nevertheless, after the supervisory sessions, the teachers' attitudes altered toward focusing on students rather than themselves. The majority of the supervisees acknowledged the centrality of students in the teaching profession (83%), yet a few of them insisted that what inspired them was their passion for their own major (12%) or their preference for academic life (5%). Table 2 illustrates that the Chi-square test showed a significant difference between the pre and postintervention data at this layer  $\chi^2 (3, N = 40) = 11.9, p = .000 (p < .05)$ .

Overall, the results revealed that the participants experienced a remarkable change of attitude throughout the study as a result of core reflection supervision. This establishes clear evidence of the actualization of core reflection on all six levels of the onion model and confirms the efficiency of this approach to enhancing the participating teachers' professional development.

## 5. Discussion

In general, the results of this study revealed that the supervisees experienced a trajectory of growth and development as a result of attending the core reflection supervisory meetings. This corroborates the findings of several previous research studies into the functions and results of the core reflection approach confirming that this approach leads to both short-term and long-run

professional development on the part of teachers and practitioners (e.g., Adams et al., 2013; Attema-Noordewier et al., 2013; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011, 2018; Meijer et al., 2009, Zwart et al., 2015 to name but a few).

The findings support the positions proposed by Korthagen and his colleagues (Korthagen, 2004, 2014, 2016, 2017; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, 2010) in that they demonstrated the effect of core reflection supervision on teacher cognitive and affective development. Core reflection experts (e.g., Korthagen & Nuijten, 2017; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, 2010) maintain that positive attitudinal and behavioral change occurs as a result of relying on not only rational thinking but also emotional and motivational aspects. Thus, if teachers decide to change through willpower and rational thinking they most likely fail because there are a plethora of negative feelings and impeding inner obstacles that they do not know how to deal with. They signify that supervision through core reflection offers the teachers a secure and reassuring environment for probing into their emotions and for welcoming deficiencies and feelings of insecurity as an inevitable part of any progressive trajectory (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2017).

This explains why the teachers in the present study exhibited such a remarkable change after the supervisory sessions. Before the supervision, the teachers experienced negative feelings of insecurity and frustration due to numerous obstacles and drawbacks such as financial or personal problems, curricular incongruences, lack of facilities, unmotivated students, lack of self-confidence and autonomy, demotivation, and so forth. Obviously, they had no idea how to deal with those feelings on their own because they were used to traditional practices in a school culture that encourages "a focus on obtaining a *quick fix*—a rapid solution for a practical problem—rather than shedding light on the underlying issues" (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, p. 4). Consequently, the teachers could not live up to their full potential in their



teaching no matter how hard they would try or think about overcoming the problems. However, the core reflection supervision stimulated the teachers to discover that by focusing on their strengths and by imagining their ideal, they could find more reflective solutions for their problems and motivate themselves as well as their students.

Considering the metaphor of onion layers, this shift of teachers' reflection from a focus on the many problems they encountered towards more awareness of their strengths and core qualities is represented in a movement from the exterior layers of the onion model (i.e., environment and behavior) to the interior layers, namely the layers of identity and mission. Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) lament that in the educational world, the inner layers of the onion metaphor have been neglected and the emphasis has traditionally been on the external layers. The teachers are accustomed to paying too much attention to these layers: they often focus on complications and quandaries in their classes and question how to work out those problems. This conventional preoccupation has led to the prevalence of prescribed behavior norms in educational culture such as lists of teacher competencies, class management techniques, and the likes. However, Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) argue that teacher growth is a process of going deeper within the inner onion layers not sticking to the outer layers.

The *Core Reflection* supervision in this study contributed to the supervisees' growth as their consciousness expanded from the surface of the onion towards the inner layers through a deliberate focus of attention. This deeper awareness helped them resolve the underlying issues of lack of confidence, motivation, and autonomy in their teaching. The evidence of movement from outer to the inner layers of the onion in the current findings comes from the observation that when teachers ceased to dwell on shortcomings of their social and educational environment (the outer layers),

they began to develop personal competencies (third layer) which modified their beliefs (fourth level), and finally they felt that their identity and mission (inner layers) in teaching could be entirely realized. Eventually, at the end of the process, they were concerned less about their environment, behaviors, and competencies (exterior layers of the onion) and more about deeper concerns related to their vocational values and sense of purpose as a teacher (interior layers of the onion). Indeed, the teachers developed a sense of identity and mission that had such an impact on their reflection about the environment that they shifted their attention from themselves to their students and their relationships with their students.

Thus, EFL teachers' development through the *Core Reflection* supervision was closely connected to the development of their identity and sense of mission. The conversational exchanges between the supervisor and the teachers provided a medium that enabled the teachers to contemplate their attitudes toward the teaching profession, their ideas of themselves as a teacher, and their strengths and weaknesses. This was in line with their emerging professional identity, deepening and diversifying their perception of themselves as a multi-role teacher. Teachers' new understanding of the concept of identity was quite distinct from their traditional conceptualization of teacher-as- knowledge-resource-person and reflected the image of a caring teacher with multiple identities that harmonized with one another.

The supervisor's feedback also empowered the teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their ideals and important values that reside at the layer of mission (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2017; Ruit et al., 2019). The teachers' experience in this study showed that reflecting on issues beyond the professional domain such as sense of inspiration, spirituality, and mission could unveil the power of interior onion layers and promote breakthrough professional growth on the part of teachers.

On the whole, following views expressed by previous researchers in the realm of core reflection (e.g., Adams et al., 2013; Attema-Noordewier et al., 2013; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Ruit et al., 2019; Zwart et al., 2015), the findings of this study indicate that an inclusive acquaintance with the layers of the onion and how these layers go hand in hand may help teachers to move toward their optimal way of teaching. Overall, the study supports that core reflective supervisory guidance can effectively contribute to language teachers' development by reframing their beliefs and raising their awareness of new teaching practices.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study sought to investigate the contribution of core reflection supervision to Iranian English language teachers' professional development. The results showed significant outcomes of the approach. The findings indicated that the participating teachers experienced a significant increase in their feelings of self-confidence, autonomy, and self-efficacy. They endured increased personal competencies, renewed insights into teaching, modified ideas about interaction with students, and increased awareness of their core qualities. The fact that after the supervisory procedure the teachers perceived themselves more effective as a teacher confirms that the core reflection model is a profitable and worthwhile approach for English language teachers which helps them understand and undertake their responsibilities as a teacher in more efficient and proficient ways.

Regarding the metaphor of the onion layers, the findings demonstrated that teachers' cognitive and emotional growth was in line with a developmental trajectory from the outer layers towards the inner layers of reflection. Identifying core qualities turned the teachers' reflections from environmental issues and behavioral conflicts to issues of confidence, autonomy, self-efficacy, positive thinking, and relationship-building. The

core reflection sessions provided an opportunity for teachers to examine their behaviors, beliefs, values, and emotions, and to approach their teaching in a somewhat different way.

The findings may suggest some implications for ELT programs especially for EFL settings such as the EFL context of Iran which has traditionally been a centralized and top-down system (Aliakbari & Tabatabaei, 2019) in which there has been a sharp contrast between English teachers' preferences and policies for program development and materials (Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014). In such contexts, personal, financial, social, and curricular problems have led to serious issues of job dissatisfaction, burnout, and demotivation (Soodmand Afshar & Hosseini Yar, 2019). In such a climate, professional conversations cannot be merely focused on the inner onion layers such as identity and mission. Even the idea of taking feelings and emotions into account may cause resistance, hindrance, and confrontation (Korthagen, 2017).

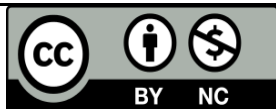
The findings of the study verify that such a resisting belief may change completely when the core reflection approach is practiced. Core reflection has great potential for changing the traditional habits and norms in teacher education because this approach builds not only on negative but also on positive experiences, not only acknowledges and explores vulnerabilities but also activates core qualities to confront them, and addresses professional identity and higher values (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2017). That is why despite all the problems and limitations that teachers perceived before the supervision, the core reflection practice contributed valuably to fostering self-confidence, self-efficacy, autonomy, and construction of identity as well as mission. Thus, the findings verify the *Core Reflection* approach as a valuable strategy for teachers' professional development and support putting forth the

required effort to establish routine supervisory meetings as part of teacher education agendas.

## References

- Adams, R., Kim, Y. M., & Greene, W. L. (2013). Actualizing core strengths in new teacher development. In F. A. J. Korthagen, Y. M. Kim, & W. L. Greene (Eds.), *Teaching and learning from within: A core reflection approach to quality and inspiration in education* (pp. 61-75). New York: Routledge.
- Aliakbari, M., & Tabatabaei, F. S. (2019). Evaluation of Iranian teacher education programs for EFL student-teachers. *Journal of Modern Research in English Language Studies*, 6(1), 131-105.
- Attema-Noordewier, S., Korthagen, F. A. J., & Zwart, R. C. (2013). Core reflection in primary schools: A new approach to educational innovation. In: F. A. J. Korthagen, Y. M. Kim, & W. L. Greene (Eds.), *Teaching and learning from within: A core reflection approach to quality and inspiration in education* (pp. 111-130). New York: Routledge.
- Clarke, V. & Braun, V. (2014) Thematic analysis. In T. Teo (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of critical psychology* (pp. 1947-1952). New York: Springer.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hoekstra, A., & Korthagen, F. A. J. (2011). Teacher learning in a context of educational change: Informal learning versus systematic support. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62, 76-92.
- Impedovo, M. A., & Malik, S. K. (2016). Becoming a reflective in-service teacher: Role of research attitude. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(1), 6.
- Johnson, K. E. (2009). *Second language teacher education: A sociocultural perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Khazaenezhad, B., Tavakoli, M., & Amirian, Z. (2018). Core reflection as a way towards integrating theoretical knowledge and pedagogical practice in the Iranian context: the case of prospective language teachers. *Teaching English Language*, 12(1), 61-87.
- Körkkö, M., Kyrö-Ämmälä, O., & Turunen, T. (2016). Professional development through reflection in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 55, 198-206.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2004). In search of the essence of a good teacher: Towards a more holistic approach in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(1), 77-97.

- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2014). Promoting core reflection in teacher education: Deepening professional growth. In L. Orland-Barak & C. J. Craig (Eds.), *International teacher education: Promising pedagogies* (pp. 73-89). Bingley, U.K.: Emerald.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2016). Pedagogy of teacher education. In J. Loughran & M.L. Hamilton (Eds.), *International handbook of teacher education*, (pp. 311-346). Singapore: Springer Science.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2017). Inconvenient truths about teacher learning: Towards professional development 3.0. *Teachers & Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 23(4), 387-405.
- Korthagen, F. A. J., & Nuijten, E.E. (2017). Core reflection approach in teacher education. In: J. Lampert (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of education* (pp. 189-206). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Korthagen, F., & Vasalos, A. (2005). Levels in reflection: Core reflection as a means to enhance professional development. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 11(1), 47-71.
- Korthagen, F. A. J., & Vasalos A. (2010). Going to the core: Deepening reflection by connecting the person to the profession. In N. Lyons (Ed.), *Handbook of reflection and reflective inquiry* (pp. 529-552). Boston, MA: Springer.
- Meijer, P. C., Korthagen, F. A. J., & Vasalos, A. (2009). Supporting presence in teacher education: The connection between the personal and professional aspects of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(2), 297-308.
- Pishghadam, R., & Saboori, F. (2014). A socio-cultural study of language teacher status. *International Journal of Society, Culture, and Language*, 2(1), 63-72.
- Riazi, A. M. (2017). *Mixed methods research in language teaching and learning*. NY: Equinox Publishing.
- Ruit, P., Korthagen, F., & Schoonenboom, J. (2019). The impact of working with core qualities on primary school pupils' wellbeing. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 36(3), 7-17.
- Soodmand Afshar, H., & Hosseini Yar, S. (2019). Investigating the relationship between attitude towards professional development, reflective teaching, self-efficacy, and job performance of Iranian English as a foreign language teachers. *Teaching English Language*, 13(2), 147-179.
- Zwart, R. C., Korthagen, F. A., & Attema-Noordewier, S. (2015). A strength-based approach to teacher professional development. *Professional Development in Education*, 41(3), 579-596.



2020 by the authors. Licensee Journal of Teaching English Language (TEL). This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0 license). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>).

