



# English Teachers' Use of Critical Reflection to Enhance Students' Engagement through Activity and Feedback: Higher Diploma Program Trained Teachers at Ambo University in Focus

Tamena Teferi\* & Wondimu Tagegne

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Social Science and Humanities,  
Ambo University, Ambo, Ethiopia

## Abstract

*The study investigated how English teachers trained in the Higher Diploma Program at Ambo University use critical reflection to enhance student engagement through classroom activities and feedback. Despite the emphasis on critical reflective practices training in the university, there is limited empirical evidence on how these are applied in practice. Using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 35 purposefully selected English teachers through classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires. In the first phase, classroom observations and follow-up interviews were carried out with five sections; in the second phase, questionnaires were distributed to all 35 teachers. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed, while quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics employing SPSS version 25. The findings reveal that there is minimal use of critical professional reflection to engage students, indicating a significant gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. This leads to the conclusion that there is a limited awareness among teachers regarding critical reflection in improving language learning. The study suggests the need for targeted professional development to bridge this gap and underscores the importance of embedding critical reflective practices more effectively into English language teaching.*

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\*Corresponding  
Author:

Tamena Teferi  
(PhD Scholar)

E-mail:  
[tamekorme@gmail.com](mailto:tamekorme@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Globalization has brought rapid societal changes by enabling communication and interaction across geographic and cultural boundaries (Zukhruf & Farid, 2025). Researchers note that globalization has profoundly reshaped social, economic, and cultural landscapes worldwide, influencing how people connect and exchange ideas on a global scale (Saidkamolxon & Omonova, 2025). Consequently, the English language has emerged as a dominant means of communication and a global lingua franca, facilitating interaction among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds in education, business, science, and technology

(Ibid). To meet these increasing demands, the English Language Teaching (ELT) method has undergone significant methodological changes, particularly since the 19th century (Habtamu, 2023).

This limitation of earlier methods led to a situation where teachers were often restricted to rigid instructional frameworks, unable to adapt to their students' evolving needs. In connection to this, Kumaravadivelu (2003) states that earlier ELT methods, which prioritized theoretical knowledge transfer, often positioned teachers as passive transmitters of content, limiting their ability to

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design instruction to local learner needs. In response to these limitations, the method-centered paradigm was increasingly challenged by scholars, giving rise to the post-method approach and reflective teaching frameworks (Habtamu, 2023). Consequently, the decline of the "method era" was accompanied by the emergence of post-method and reflective teaching approaches, which gained increasing influence in ELT contexts during the late 20th century (Akbari, 2007).

Critical reflective practice has its roots in the work of early theorists such as John Dewey, David Kolb, Donald Schon, Brookfield, and Zeichner, who emphasized the importance of critical reflection in education as a way of turning experience into learning (Girvan et al., 2016). The implication is that experiential learning takes the ability to reflect on experience as a means of shifting, confirming, creating, or rejecting previously held assumptions as its core target (Girvan et al., 2016).

At this point, it is essential to clarify the terminology used throughout this study. Critical Reflection (CR) is the core term used in this paper, encompassing related concepts such as critical reflection, *reflective teaching*, and *reflective practice*. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, critical reflection emphasizes intentional, evidence-based reflection that leads to actionable improvements in pedagogy (Akbari, 2007). For the sake of clarity and consistency, this study adopts "critical reflection" as its primary term, while acknowledging its roots in broader reflective paradigms.

Critical reflection enables teachers to engage in deliberate, conscious thought about their educative work, moving beyond simply applying generic techniques to integrating theoretical knowledge, personal beliefs, and contextual factors into their teaching acts (Ünsal et al., 2024). This enables teachers to fill their gap of teaching, which in turn has positive effects on students, particularly in terms of engagement, motivation, learning autonomy, and outcomes (Al-Rashidi & Aberash, 2024). In particular, in classroom contexts where teachers adopt critical reflection, students may

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receive more responsive, adaptive, and learner-centered instruction, which in turn fosters their Engagement (Ashraf et al., 2016).

Shifting to local context, in Ethiopia, English instruction began alongside the introduction of formal education around 1908 (Mijena, 2013). Since then, it has undergone numerous changes and developments in both curriculum and teaching methodology. Different writers (Mijena, 2013) indicate that with these shifts, the quality of English language teaching began to decline. A key factor contributing to this decline was the limited capability and preparedness of teachers, which played a crucial role (Ibid). In Ethiopia, English serves as a subject of study and a medium of instruction starting at least from Grade 9 onward. Particularly, in higher education institutions, students are expected to use English for reading, writing, presentations, and research.

However, it is obvious that learning the English language in Ethiopia is largely confined to the classroom, with few opportunities for students to practice outside. Daily communication in business centers, hospitals, courts, and government offices is conducted in local or national languages (Mijena, 2013). This implies Ethiopian students learn English in contexts where English is not a language of daily life, and b) the English language teacher is the sole source of English, be it bad or good English (Ibid). As a result, teachers remain the sole source of English exposure for students.

Therefore, English teachers bear dual responsibilities in the classroom: implementing the English curriculum and compensating for students' lack of practical exposure (Ibid). These demands require teachers to possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Consequently, professional development for English language teachers in Ethiopia is not merely a necessity but an obligation (Mijena, 2013).

This necessity requires teachers to continually develop their professional competencies by engaging in ongoing professional development (PD) activities. To meet modern educational demands, teachers must also demonstrate 21st-century competencies such as communication,

collaboration, critical thinking, and flexibility through reflective practice (Darling et al., 2017).

In response to the need for improved quality in higher education, Ethiopia has been striving to implement reflective teaching and learning with the aim of producing *reflective practitioners* who can critically evaluate their own instructional practices and contribute to ongoing professional development (Asmare et al., 2025). Within national educational frameworks, teachers are expected to demonstrate professional competencies that include reflective and inquiry-based teaching approaches; these promote continuous self-evaluation and improvement through formal teacher development programs and professional standards (Ministry of Education, 2015; Tesfaye & Mersha, 2024). One of the key competencies emphasized is the ability to engage in reflective practice and inquiry, which is supported through both pre-service teacher education and ongoing in-service training programs that foster critical self-reflection and pedagogical inquiry (Asmare et al., 2025; Tesfaye & Mersha, 2024).

Accordingly, all Ethiopian teacher education colleges and public universities have been providing various on-the-job training programs, including the Higher Diploma Program for academic staff. These initiatives aim to help teachers engage in self-reflection, enrich their professional capacities, and develop their pedagogical knowledge.

The HDP supports teachers with at least a bachelor's degree by enhancing their pedagogical skills and critical reflective capacity, ultimately contributing to national education goals (Mengistu, 2017). Through hands-on training, participants learn to promote active learning, conduct continuous assessments, and navigate instructional change, all grounded in critical reflection. The program positions educators as agents of professional growth and reform.

Ambo University is one of the Ethiopian universities located 120 km west of Addis Ababa. The Department of English Language and Literature has implemented continuous professional development (CPD) programs,

*Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., Oct. –Dec, 2025, 14(4), 112-130* including the HDP, to prepare reflective English teachers. These programs equip teachers to engage students through critical reflection that enables them to address gaps in knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Despite these various attempts, it is not known how ELT teachers' use of critical reflection in actual classrooms enhances student engagement through reflective activities and feedback. This uncertainty raises the need for further investigation into whether HDP-trained ELT teachers effectively implement critical reflection in actual classroom teaching in order to enhance student engagement.

Therefore, this exploratory sequential mixed-method research design, which falls within the mixed-method approach, aims at assessing English teachers' use of critical reflection to enhance students' engagement through activity and feedback: The Higher Diploma program trained teachers at Ambo University in Focus.

### Statement of the Problem

Despite concerted efforts that the university has made to enhance the quality of English language instruction, from the present researcher's lived experience, he has observed two core contradictory issues regarding ELT teachers' professional practices in the university: On the one hand, the university has invested numerous resources in terms of manpower, money, materials, and time to develop the ELT teachers' professional classroom practice through CPD, including the HDP. So far, the report from the department revealed that 40 ELT teachers completed the HDP training. Those who attended the HDP are supposed to update and develop their profession, which is supposed to enhance their professional classroom practices. To put it in other words, the HDP training is assumed to help teachers to be active and competent and is expected to play a crucial role in helping them to update themselves by addressing their gaps in teaching in knowledge/awareness, skills, and method aspects at the university.

In contrast, classes remain largely teacher-centered. Teachers have not been encouraged to critically examine and reflect on their practices in

order to transform their teaching methods. Consequently, the classroom environment continues to be dominated by the teacher, with students passively receiving knowledge instead of actively constructing it. In this context, the challenges associated with English language teaching appear to be more significant compared to other subjects, suggesting that teachers are struggling with the process of professional reflection.

Local studies such as Mengistu (2017), Tewodros et al. (2022), and Garkebo et al. (2023) have provided essential insights into the Higher Diploma Program (HDP) and its contribution to teacher development in Ethiopian higher education institutions. These studies collectively establish a foundation for understanding reflective practice in teacher education; however, they leave several critical gaps that the present study seeks to address.

Mengistu (2017) focused on the institutional implementation and significance of the HDP at Ambo University. Although the study underscored the program's role in improving teaching quality at a policy and structural level, it did not explore how individual HDP-trained ELT teachers apply critical reflection in their day-to-day classroom teaching. Specifically, the study did not address how reflective practices are used to promote student engagement through classroom activities and feedback mechanisms.

Besides, Tewodros et al. (2022) concentrated on teachers' perceptions and self-reported practices of reflection after HDP training. While this study contributed valuable insights into teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward reflective practice, it relied primarily on perceived practices rather than direct classroom-based evidence. As a result, it did not capture how critical reflection is operationalized in real teaching situations or how it influences students' reflective learning experiences.

Furthermore, Garkebo et al. (2023) examined the outcomes of HDP training in terms of professional awareness and general teaching

*Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., Oct. –Dec, 2025, 14(4), 112-130* effectiveness. However, their study did not specifically focus on ELT teachers, nor did it investigate the role of critical reflection in fostering student engagement through reflective activities and feedback provision in actual classroom contexts.

Despite the valuable contributions of these local studies, there is a clear gap in the literature concerning how HDP-trained ELT teachers practically use critical reflection in real classroom teaching. None of the reviewed studies systematically examined the classroom essential enactment of reflection, with particular emphasis on engaging students in reflective learning activities and providing reflective feedback.

Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by moving beyond institutional analysis, teachers' perceptions, and theoretical discussions. It empirically explores how HDP-trained ELT teachers implement critical reflection in actual classroom settings, focusing specifically on student engagement through reflective activities and feedback provision over one academic semester (six months) in the 2024 G.C academic year. By doing so, the study contributes context-specific, practice-oriented evidence that enhances understanding of the practical impact of the Higher Diploma Program on teaching and learning in English language classrooms at Ambo University.

## Research Question

*How do HDP-trained English teachers at Ambo University use critical reflection in actual classroom teaching to enhance student engagement through activity and feedback provision?*

## Conceptual framework

The study is grounded in a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that illustrates the interplay between HDP, CR, teacher competencies, teacher self-awareness, and student engagement.

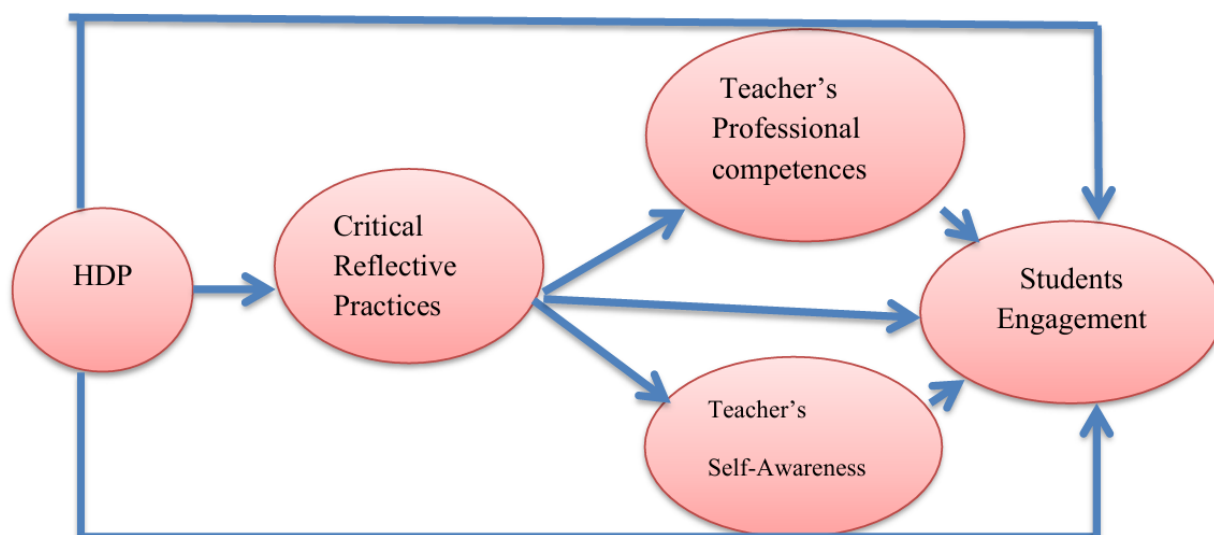


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Design of the Study

An exploratory sequential mixed-method research approach was adopted to achieve the study's objective. This approach prioritized qualitative data collection, observing teachers' use of reflective activities and feedback provision during actual classroom teaching. The design integrated both qualitative (QUAL) and quantitative (quan) methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of critical reflection. Emphasis was placed on the qualitative aspect, as it is best suited for exploring processes, behaviors, and meanings (Cresswell, 2014). Supporting this, Loseke et al. (2007) assert that qualitative methods offer deep insights into human behavior and experience.

### Participants of the Study

This study required both qualitative and quantitative data to achieve the objective of the study. Thus, to collect data from the questionnaire, all (thirty-five) English language teachers who have already completed the HDP training were selected employing a purposive sampling technique from Ambo University in the 2024 academic year. According to Creswell (2014), purposive sampling is an approach that specifies the choice of participants because of the data they

hold and based on the explicit objective to get the richest possible source of information to address the main question of the study. As well, for classroom observation, a convenience sampling technique was employed to select five sections for classroom observation in that those sections were accessible to the researcher.

### Instruments

Classroom observation was the primary data collection tool in this study because it enabled the researcher to capture real-time, authentic teacher behavior and the enactment of critical reflection during instruction. Classroom observation is widely recognized as a powerful method for examining teachers' instructional practices within their natural classroom contexts, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of educational research (Wolf et al., 2024). Scholars emphasize that structured observation tools allow researchers to systematically document instructional behaviors, teacher–student interactions, and reflective practices as they occur, rather than relying solely on self-reported data (Cassidy, 2018; Ukobizaba et al., 2025). Such tools also support both quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation of teaching practices, enabling researchers to link observed instructional strategies

with professional reflection and pedagogical improvement (Ukobizaba, 2025).

The checklist was adapted from a previously developed source (Schmidt et al., 2021) and was selected for its clarity and alignment with the study's objectives. It effectively captured ELT teachers' engagement of students through reflective activity and feedback provision style. A total of 15 non-participant classroom observations were conducted, followed by follow-up interviews to deepen understanding of teachers' reflective practices. To ensure credibility and reliability, the study employed triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, and recording devices (Creswell, 2014).

A questionnaire served as the second data collection tool, administered to all (35) HDP-trained teachers to support and validate qualitative findings. Items in the questionnaire are aligned with the items in the checklist.

### **Data Collecting Procedures**

The research design started with qualitative data collection through in-depth classroom observations, which was subsequently substantiated by quantitative data gathered through questionnaires. Initially, five teachers were observed in their natural classroom settings prior to any distribution of questionnaires. This strategic sequencing aimed to capture authentic reflective teaching practices without the influence of premeditated responses. Administering the questionnaire beforehand could have prompted teachers to tailor their instructional methods to align with their answers, thereby compromising the integrity of observed behaviors. Such a situation would hinder the researcher's ability to document genuine reflective practices. Ultimately, it affects the reliability of the study's findings. Following the observation phase, questionnaires were then administered to all (35) teachers to substantiate the qualitative data.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

Observational qualitative data analysis involves the systematic organization, examination,

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interpretation, and reporting of textual data such as transcripts and field notes in order to generate meaning and understanding (Creswell, 2014). Accordingly, in analyzing the observational data for this study, the researcher first transcribed the data recorded using the audio and video recorders onto written documents, alongside the follow-up interview data. The transcribed data were then checked and rechecked for accuracy by repeatedly listening to and viewing the recordings, a process recommended to enhance data credibility and trustworthiness. At the third stage, the lessons conducted in each period were divided into different extracts following the qualitative descriptive approach, which emphasizes presenting participants' actions and experiences in a manner that stays close to the data (Ibid). Within these extracts, each activity performed by both teachers and students in the classroom was presented directly and descriptively, minimizing interpretation at this stage to preserve the authenticity of the observed interactions (Creswell 2014). Finally, the data were organized into tables for each respondent and systematically described, interpreted, and discussed based on identified activity types and feedback provision styles.

Whereas, in reporting the results from the use of reflective activities and the reflective feedback provision questionnaire, Mokhtari et al. (2002) employed a key to comprehend the mean scores on the questionnaire. Thus, for the sake of the analysis, the following arrangement and cut-off point were adopted. Scoring, a mean score of 3.5 and above indicated high usage, while a mean score within the range of 2.5-3.4 denoted moderate usage, whereas, a mean score of 2.4 and below indicated low usage. Based on the above classification, the aggregate mean score of the overall teacher's use of reflective activity and reflective feedback they used, and the aggregated Standard Deviation were used to indicate the variation of the scores from the means.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### Analysis of Observational Data on Teachers' Use of Reflective Practices

The objective of the study is to describe how HDP-trained ELT teachers use critical reflection in actual classroom teaching to enhance students' engagement through reflective activities and reflective feedback provision. Hence, this section

*Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., Oct. –Dec, 2025, 14(4), 112-130* presents the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. Accordingly, [Table 1](#) presents a structured checklist used to record TEI's classroom reflective practices related to the use of reflective learning activities and the provision of reflective feedback across three observed lessons (L1, L2, and L3). The table outlines two main areas: the teacher's engagement of students in reflective learning activities and the teacher's provision of reflective feedback on students' performances.

**Table 1**

*Summary of TEI's Use of Reflective Activities and Feedback to Enhance Student Engagement*

Key Areas		Observed Practices	L 1	L 2	L 3
Teacher's Engagement of Students in Reflective Learning Activities	1. Does the instructional activity relate to real-world reflective learning practices?		N	N	N
	2. Does the teacher arrange reflective activities in pair/group and make them discuss?		N	N	N
	3. Does the teacher connect the lesson with students' previous learning experience?		N	S	N
	4. Does the teacher promote students' language use during reflective practices?		N	N	N
	5. Does the teacher guide students in a group while they perform group work activities?		N	N	N
	6. Does the teacher monitor students' engagement in reflective activities?		N	N	N
	7. Does the teacher make rapport with students' difficulties in reflective language learning?		N	N	N
Teachers' Provision of Reflective Feedback to students' Performances	1. Do the teachers give the students reflective feedback on their learning progress?		S	N	N
	2. Did the teachers give feedback during the lesson?		N	S	N
	3. Do the teachers give feedback at the end of the lesson?		N	N	N
	4. Did the teachers provide constructive feedback to students Performance?		N	N	N
	5. Did the teacher provide learners with timely reflective feedback?		N	N	N
	6. Does the teacher provide learners with a goal-directed reflective Feedback?		N	N	N
	7. Does the feedback focus on tasks of learning?		N	N	N
	8. Does the feedback focus on the process of learning?		N	N	N
	9. Does the feedback focus on outcomes of learning?		O	O	O
	10. Does the teacher encourage peer reflective feedback		N	N	N

*Note. O: observed; N: not observed; S: sometimes observed; N/A: not applicable.*

TE1 demonstrated minimal implementation of reflective classroom practices. It was observed that the teacher was teaching grammar (active and passive voice). Across all three lessons, no real-world contextualization of grammar concepts (i.e., active and passive voice) was observed. The teacher acknowledged this absence during interviews, stating: "Students are not motivated to express their idea... I preferred to use the lecture method."

There was no use of pair/group reflective activities, and no observable attempts to promote student language use, collaboration, and monitor reflective engagement. TE1's justification highlighted concerns about unequal participation among the group: by saying "Some students might dominate the conversation while others remain passive."

Only in Lesson 2 did TE1 sometimes connect the activity to students' prior knowledge. However, this was not sustained. His rationale reflected low expectations about students' linguistic capabilities, relevance of reflection: "Some students... might not see the relevance... they do not have a good language background."

Feedback practices were limited to outcome-focused responses without any indication of constructive, process-oriented, and timely feedback. Even though he practiced outcome feedback (e.g., marking correct answers) was consistently observed, deeper reflective or formative feedback was absent. No effort was made to encourage peer feedback or goal-directed correction. The approach remained teacher-centered and form-focused, with students' largely passive recipients of information.

Similarly, [Table 2](#) presents a concise record of TE2's reflective classroom practices, focusing on student engagement in reflective learning activities and the provision of reflective feedback. The table outlines specific classroom actions related to real-world connections of activity, group and pair work,

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use of students' prior experiences, language use, monitoring of engagement, and responsiveness to students' learning difficulties. It also records the timing, focus, and nature of feedback provided during, at the end of, and after lessons, including constructive, goal-directed, timely, and peer-supported reflective feedback across three observed lessons. TE2 used a strong example of reflective practices to engage students in language learning. Lessons consistently included real-life contexts. For instance, using short stories or personal writing topics like "arriving at campus to teach grammar lessons". TE2 explained: "This motivates students to write for they can easily generate idea... it enhances engagement and connects theory to reality."

Group and peer activities were frequently employed, especially in Lesson 1 and 3, with roles clearly assigned to ensure equitable participation. Student reflections were actively facilitated through open-ended questions such as: "How did it change the meaning or focus of your sentence?"

TE2 also demonstrated constructive and timely feedback throughout lessons. For example, during sentence transformation exercises, he guided learners toward accuracy and purpose by saying: "Try to start with 'The meal' and use a form of 'to be' so it should be 'The meal was cooked by her.' Although feedback on students' overall progress was not consistently provided, feedback was often goal-directed, as in: "Your use of the active voice in your writing was good. In your next assignment, try to incorporate more passive voice structures."

Peer feedback was encouraged via structured exchange of paragraphs and guided discussion questions. TE2 also showed an ability to empathize with learners' difficulties, using rapport and monitoring to adapt his approach: It means that the teacher acknowledges and empathizes with the challenges or obstacles... and offers support tailored to their needs.

**Table 2**

*Summary of TE2's Use of Reflective Activities and Feedback to Enhance Student Engagement.*

Key Areas		Observed Practices	L 1	L 2	L 3
Teacher's Engagement of Students in Reflective Learning Activities	1.	Does the instructional activity relate to real-world reflective learning practices?	O	O	O
	2.	Does the teacher arrange reflective activities in pair/group and have them discuss?	O	N	O
	3.	Does the teacher connect the lesson with students' previous learning experience?	O	O	O
	4.	Does the teacher promote students' language use during reflective practices?	O	O	O
	5.	Does the teacher guide students in a group while they perform group activities?	O	N	O
	6.	Does the teacher monitor students' engagement in reflective activities?	O	O	O
	7.	Does the teacher make rapport with students' difficulties in reflective language learning?	O	S	O
Teachers' Provision of Reflective Feedback to Students' Performances	1.	Do the teachers give the students reflective feedback on them learning progress?	N	N	N
	2.	Do the teachers give feedback during the lesson?	S	O	O
	3.	Do the teachers give feedback at the end of the lesson?	S	O	N
	4.	Do the teachers provide constructive feedback to student's Performance?	O	O	O
	5.	Does the teacher provide learners with timely reflective feedback?	O	S	O
	6.	Does the teacher provide learners with goal-directed reflective feedback?	O	O	O
	7.	Does the feedback focus on tasks of learning?	O	O	N
	8.	Does the feedback focus on the process of learning?	N	O	N
	9.	Does the feedback focus on outcomes of learning?	O	O	O
	10.	Does the teacher encourage peer reflective feedback?	S	O	O

**Table 3** summarizes TE3's use of reflective activities and reflective feedback practices observed across three lessons (L1, L2, and L3) to enhance student engagement. TE3 demonstrated minimal reflective practice throughout all observed lessons. While he covered essential grammatical structures like future tenses, instruction remained heavily lecture-based and decontextualized. No efforts were made to connect activities to students' lives or foster collaborative learning. The teacher explained the types and forms of the language, but did not relate them to real-life usage.

Although in Lesson 2, prior knowledge was activated briefly, this was not sustained. As TE3 explained: "Some students prefer more structured grammar lessons, so I stick to that." However, this preference led to low student engagement and little active use of language.

No group activities were observed, and no scaffolding or monitoring occurred. TE3 acknowledged, "I did not arrange group work as it is difficult to manage participation." Students were passive listeners, often filling blanks with words rather than engaging in meaningful use of language.

**Table 3**

<i>Summary of TE3's Use of Reflective Activities and Feedback to Enhance Student Engagement</i>					
Key Areas		Observed Practices			
			L 1	L 2	L 3
Teachers' Engagement of Students in Reflective Learning Activities	1. Does the instructional activity relate to real-world reflective learning practices?		N	N	N
	2. Does the teacher arrange reflective activities in pair/group and have them discuss?		N	N	N
	3. Does the teacher connect the lesson with students' previous learning experience?		S	N	S
	4. Does the teacher promote students' language use during reflective practices?		N	N	N
	5. Does the teacher guide students in a group while they perform group activities?		N	N	N
	6. Does the teacher monitor students' engagement in reflective activities?		N	N	N
	7. Does the teacher make rapport with students' difficulties in reflective language learning?		N	N	N
Teachers' Provision of Reflective Feedback to students' Performances	1. Did the teachers give the students reflective feedback on their learning progress?		N	N	N
	2. Did the teachers give feedback during the lesson?		O	O	O
	3. Do the teachers give feedback at the end of the lesson?		N	S	N
	4. Did the teachers provide constructive feedback to student's Performance?		N	N	N
	5. Did the teacher provide learners with timely reflective feedback?		N	N	N
	6. Does the teacher provide learners with goal-directed reflective Feedback?		N	N	N
	7. Does the feedback focus on tasks of learning?		N	N	N
	8. Does the feedback focus on the process of learning?		N	N	N
	9. Does the feedback focus on outcomes of learning ?		S	S	S
	10. Does the teacher encourage peer reflective feedback?		N	N	N

Note. O: observed; N: not observed; S: sometimes observed; N/A: not applicable.

Feedback practices lacked depth. Though brief praise like "good" and "very good" was common, it was neither specific nor constructive. TE3 admitted: "Not all students are motivated to reflect... some prefer direct correction." Feedback was sometimes timely but never goal-directed or focused on process.

Peer feedback was completely absent. As it was noted, there were no opportunities created for students to discuss or critique each other's work."

Table 4 presents a summary of TE4's classroom reflective practices related to the use of reflective

learning activities and the provision of feedback to enhance student engagement across three observed lessons. The table outlines specific indicators of student engagement in reflective activities and different forms of reflective feedback, showing whether each practice was observed, sometimes observed, or not observed during the lessons. In TE3, teaching was mainly trans missive, focused on rules and form (active/passive voice), without connection to real-life application.

**Table 4**

*Summary of TE4's Use of Reflective Activities and Feedback to Enhance Student Engagement*

Key Areas	Observed Practices	L 1	L 2	L 3
Teachers' Engagement of Students in Reflective Learning Activities	1. Does the instructional activity relate to real-world reflective learning practices?	N	N	N
	2. Does the teacher arrange reflective activities in pair/group and have them discuss?	N	N	N
	3. Does the teacher connect the lesson with students' previous learning experience?	N	N	N
	4. Does the teacher promote students' language use during reflective practices?	N	N	N
	5. Does the teacher guide students in a group while they perform group activities?	N	N	N
	6. Does the teacher monitor students' engagement in reflective activities?	N	N	N
	7. Does the teacher make rapport with students' difficulties in reflective language learning?	N	N	N
Teachers' Provision of Reflective Feedback to students' Performances	1. Did the teachers give the students reflective feedback on their learning progress?	N	N	S
	2. Did the teachers give feedback during the lesson?	O	O	O
	3. Do the teachers give feedback at the end of the lesson?	N	O	N
	4. Did the teachers provide constructive feedback to student's Performance?	N	N	N
	5. Did the teacher provide learners with timely reflective feedback?	O	O	O
	6. Does the teacher provide learners with goal-directed reflective Feedback?	N	N	N
	7. Does the feedback focus on tasks of learning?	N	N	N
	8. Does the feedback focus on the process of learning?	N	N	N
	9. Does the feedback focus on outcomes of learning ?	O	O	O
	10. Does the teacher encourage peer reflective feedback?	N	N	N

*Note. O: observed; N: not observed; S: sometimes observed; N/A: not applicable*

Observers noted that the instructional activities were not linked to students' experiences. Group work and peer discussions were entirely missing. TE4 explained: "With more than fifty students in class, it is hard to create group interactions." Consequently, students had no space for active reflection, collaborative tasks, or expressing their understanding. There were no activities designed to monitor individual difficulties or to build rapport. As noted, no effort was made to personalize support or understand student challenges. Feedback was

mainly corrective during exercises. TE4 did provide timely but generalized comments (e.g., "That's correct"), which lacked specificity or constructive depth. When asked, he responded: "I believe quick correction helps them learn faster." Although outcome-focused feedback was evident (e.g., praise for correct answers), there was no goal-linked or task-specific guidance. TE4 also failed to promote peer reflection or encourage students to evaluate each other's language use.

**Table 5**

*Summary of TE5's Use of Reflective Activities and Feedback to Enhance Student Engagement*

Key Areas	Observed Practices	L 1	L 2	L 3
Teachers' Engagement of Students in Reflective Learning Activities	1. Does the instructional activity relate to real-world reflective learning practices?	O	S	O
	2. Does the teacher arrange reflective activities in pair/group and have them discuss?	O	O	O
	3. Does the teacher connect the lesson with students' previous learning experience?	O	S	O
	4. Does the teacher promote students' language use during reflective practices?	O	O	O
	5. Does the teacher guide students in a group while they perform group activities?	S	O	O
	6. Does the teacher monitor students' engagement in reflective activities?	O	S	O
	7. Does the teacher make rapport with students' difficulties in reflective language learning?	O	O	O
Teachers' Provision of Reflective Feedback to students' Performances	1. Did the teachers give the students reflective feedback on their learning progress?	N	N	N
	2. Did the teachers give feedback during the lesson?	N	N	N
	3. Do the teachers give feedback at the end of the lesson?	N	O	N
	4. Did the teachers provide constructive feedback to student's Performance?	N	N	N
	5. Did the teacher provide learners with timely reflective feedback?	S	S	S
	6. Does the teacher provide learners with goal-directed reflective Feedback?	N	N	N
	7. Does the feedback focus on tasks of learning?	N	N	N
	8. Does the feedback focus on the process of learning?	N	N	N
	9. Does the feedback focus on outcomes of learning ?	O	O	O
	10. Does the teacher encourage peer reflective feedback?	N	N	N

*Note. O: observed; N: not observed; S: sometimes observed; N/A: not applicable*

**Table 5** summarizes TE5's use of reflective learning activities and reflective feedback across three observed lessons, such as reflective activities, arranging pair or group discussions, promoting students' language use, connecting lessons to prior learning experiences, monitoring engagement, and addressing students' difficulties, with practices data was to explore how English teachers engage students in reflective learning activities and provide reflective feedback to support their engagement.

being observed or sometimes observed. It also presents TE5's feedback provision practices, including goal-directed, constructive, timely, outcome-focused, process-focused, task-focused, and peer reflective feedback to engage students in language learning.

The objective of this

TE5 showed a moderate effort to incorporate reflective learning activities but with major gaps in feedback provision. Observational data revealed partial use of real-world contexts during lessons.

However, these were often abstract and not grounded in students' immediate experiences. TE5 admitted the constraints, explaining: "To help students by providing them the activity that is relevant to their real-life situation, you need to get printed materials. But we do not have resources like printer, computer and photo copy machine... there is no conducive environment to do this to help students' engagement."

Group or pair reflective learning activities were included in all three lessons, but his pedagogical value was diminished by weak facilitation. As TE5 noted: "Managing group work requires monitoring and facilitating discussions, which can be challenging for me, especially in larger classes... Some students sit idle and deal with their phone. So, to avoid this problem, I prefer whole class teaching/lecture method."

Although some efforts were made to connect new content with students' prior knowledge, this was inconsistent and often not well designed to scaffold learning. The teacher struggled to activate learners' experiences or knowledge due to language barriers: "Some students face difficulty to express what they know/their ideas in English... there are variations in language proficiency of students."

Promoting students' language use during reflective activities was another area of weakness. Tasks were largely form-focused and lacked communicative purpose. When TE5 was asked, he said, : "Students are not motivated to get involved in reflective practice... You are expected to teach them based on the course material, which in turn limits your flexibility in teaching approaches."

Regarding monitoring and rapport, TE5 was observed to occasionally check students' involvement but lacked consistent strategies to address individual difficulties. His practice remained largely didactic, offering limited room for interactive reflection or discussion.

The most significant concern was the complete absence of meaningful reflective feedback. TE5 did not provide feedback during or after learning activities. Comments, when present, were

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superficial phrases like "good" or "great" without explaining what was effective or how to improve. He reflected on the perceived futility of feedback, given student attitudes: "Not all students may be equally motivated to reflect on their learning... Their main target is to get grade, as a result they do not give attention to improving their language skills." Moreover, goal-directed and process-focused feedback was absent, as was any effort to encourage peer feedback. TE5 acknowledged that he did not support peer feedback due to low student motivation and a lack of immediate benefits: "Students lack motivation to take part in reflective practices if they don't see the immediate benefits of doing so." Among the five observed teachers, only TE2 demonstrated a consistent and meaningful integration of reflective learning activities and feedback provision. In contrast, TE1, TE3, TE4, and TE5 showed minimal to moderate application of reflective practices. These teachers primarily relied on lecture-based instruction with little or no effort to contextualize lessons, engage students collaboratively and provide feedback that encouraged metacognitive engagement. While outcome-based feedback (e.g., identifying correct answers) was common across most participants, there was a notable absence of deeper, formative feedback, particularly that which is timely, task-specific, and oriented toward learning processes. Several teachers reported institutional and resource-related challenges, such as large class sizes, lack of materials, and perceived student disinterest, as barriers to adopting more reflective and interactive approaches. Overall, the findings reveals a disconnect between HDP training principles and actual classroom practices among most participants. While some elements of reflective teaching were occasionally observed, they were not implemented in a sustained or systematic manner. Teachers expressed challenges about student motivation, logistical constraints, and their own ability to manage group activities effectively. These issues contributed to a classroom culture that often limited students' active engagement and opportunities for reflection.

**Table 6**

*Key Findings on Teachers' use of Critical Reflective Practices to Enhance Students through Reflective Activities and Feedback*

Theme	Item No.	Observed Practices	N	Mean	SD
Reflective Learning Activities	1	I use reflective language learning activities that connect with students' real-life experiences.	35	2.29	0.458
	2	I incorporate pair or group discussions in reflective tasks to promote collaboration.	35	2.23	0.426
	3	I encourage students to relate new language concepts to their personal experience.	35	2.40	0.497
	4	I design reflective activities that require students to use English actively.	35	2.31	0.471
	5	I guide and support students during group-based reflective learning activities.	35	2.34	0.482
	6	I regularly monitor and assess students' engagement during reflective learning.	35	2.51	0.612
	7	I build positive rapport with students, especially when they face challenges in reflective activities.	35	2.43	0.502
Average				2.375	.493
Reflective Learning Feedback	1	I provide reflective feedback that highlights students' learning progress to boost engagement.	35	2.29	0.458
	2	I give immediate feedback during lessons to help students correct errors and stay focused.	35	2.23	0.426
	3	I allocate time at the end of lessons to discuss feedback and encourage self-reflection.	35	2.26	0.443
	4	My feedback identifies both students' strengths and areas for improvement.	35	2.46	0.505
	5	I praise students for their efforts and achievements through constructive feedback.	35	2.20	0.406
	6	I deliver feedback promptly after tasks to help students internalize the learning.	35	2.17	0.382
	7	My feedback is clearly aligned with the lesson's learning goals/objectives.	35	2.54	0.611
	8	I offer specific suggestions in my feedback on how students can improve.	35	2.20	0.406
	9	Feedback encourages students to solve problems and engage in the learning process.	35	2.26	0.443
	10	I help students understand how their learning approach affects their language development.	35	2.31	0.471
Average				2.37	0.490

*5.0 high usage, 2.5-3.49 moderate usage. 1.00-2.49 low usage*

To substantiate the qualitative results, quantitative data were collected to triangulate the qualitative results and to assess the extent to which observed patterns reflect broader trends among HDP-trained

English teachers in the department. This means that the purpose of the quantitative phase was to validate/triangulate whether the limited application of reflective activities and feedback practice explored in the observational data holds true across a larger sample. The items in the questionnaire are aligned with the items in the observation checklist. Accordingly, Table presents 17 items (7 items measure reflective activities and 10 items feedback provision) which were distributed to all(35) ELT teachers who have completed the HDP. To analyze the results, the average mean score and standard deviation were used. As it can be inferred in Table 6, items 1-7 measured ELT teachers' reflective learning activities to foster their engagement.

Regarding teachers' use of reflective learning activities, the average mean score across the seven items was ( $M = 2.375$ ), with a standard deviation of ( $SD = 0.493$ ), falling within the low usage range (below 2.5). This low mean suggests that most teachers rarely incorporate reflective activities such as real-life application, group collaboration, and personal connection into their teaching. The small standard deviation indicates consistency in responses, suggesting that this pattern of low usage is common across most teachers. Similarly, in the same table, items 1-10 in the second section measured ELT teachers reflective feedback provision practices. In terms of teachers' provision of reflective feedback, the average mean score was ( $M = 2.37$ ), with a standard deviation of ( $SD = 0.490$ ), again indicating low usage. Although one item related to alignment with learning goals scored slightly higher ( $M = 2.54$ ), most items fell below 2.4, highlighting that feedback was generally infrequent, non-specific, and not clearly linked to promoting student reflection or improvement.

These quantitative results align with qualitative classroom observations, which revealed that teachers were not effectively applying the principles of critical reflection in actual classroom teaching. Overall, the findings of this exploratory sequential mixed-methods study, which prioritized qualitative data through classroom observations supplemented by quantitative data, reveal a

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generally a very limited implementation of reflective practices among HDP-trained teacher in actual classroom to enhance student engagement.

## **Discussion**

The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings from this study reveals that English Language teachers at Ambo University make use of very limited reflective practices in their teaching to enhance student engagement. This was most evident in classroom observations, where only one teacher (TE2) consistently incorporated reflective practices to engage students through feedback and activities. In contrast, others (e.g., TE1, TE3, TE4, and TE5) demonstrated minimal application despite some level of theoretical awareness.

These findings are substantiated and triangulated by the quantitative results, which showed low mean scores for the use of reflective activities ( $M = 2.375$ ,  $SD = 0.5075$ ) and feedback provision ( $M = 2.375$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ), as shown in Tables 6. The low mean scores and standard deviations in both areas suggest that teachers rarely use critical reflection to engage students in language learning. While earlier interpretations attributed this underutilization primarily to a theory–practice gap, our expanded analysis suggests that multiple interrelated factors contribute to the issue. A key problem appears to be the relevance, design, and delivery of the HDP training itself. As noted by Ashenafi (2018), HDP content often lacks contextual relevance, making it difficult for teachers to transfer concepts into practical classroom settings. Additionally, teachers receive little or no post-training support, a concern echoed in studies by Tefera & Melesse (2021) and Mengistu (2017), where the lack of mentoring and follow-up has been shown to hinder the effective use of HDP training in practice.

Institutional and contextual barriers also emerged as significant factors limiting the implementation of HDP training. In this regard, a study by Garkebo et al. (2019) found that heavy workloads, the low perceived value of the HDP certificate, and the use of a single HDP training handbook for candidates from various

specializations negatively affected the practical application of the HDP certificate.

### Conclusion

This study explored how HDP trained English language teachers at Ambo University implement critical reflection in classroom teaching to foster student engagement. The results indicate that the use of critical reflection is very limited, particularly in engaging students through reflective activities and feedback. Additionally, many teachers appear to lack awareness of the concept and its significance in effective English instruction. This leads to the conclusion that many teachers lack awareness of critical reflection and its impact on student engagement. Although some possess theoretical knowledge of reflective practices, they seldom apply this knowledge or follow any structured approach. This highlights a gap between theoretical understanding and practical implementation, underscoring the need for targeted efforts to bridge this gap in academic settings.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following key recommendations are made for all stakeholders involved in implementing Critical reflection in ELT at Ambo University. English Language Teachers should move from theoretical awareness of CR to practical application in daily teaching. They are advised to use diverse reflective strategies such as journals, peer observations, action research, and self-assessment to implement critical reflection and engage students in language learning.

The department should develop a structured Critical reflection framework outlining principles, procedures, and tools. Critical reflection needs to be integrated into teacher performance evaluations.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Tamena Teferi:** Conceptualization, Data Collection, Model Development, Analysis & Writing Original Draft. **Wondimu Tagegne:** Supervision, Data Analysis & Model Validation, Review & Editing.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Ethical approval

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of English Language and Literature, Ambo University (reference No. A/U/D/E/472/2024 G.C) on April 15, 2024, prior to the commencement of the study, participants protection was ensured through the provision of informed consent, the maintenance of confidentiality and the safeguarding of participants' privacy and safety. Potential risks associated with participation were carefully assessed and appropriately mitigated.

### Data availability statement

The data used in this study are available upon request.

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