

## The Reflexive Insider-Outsider Researcher: A Falcon Observes its Reflection on a Clear Lake

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### ABSTRACT

*The interpretive paradigm posits that social reality is constructed by individuals and embedded within their social contexts, requiring researchers to interpret this reality through processes of analysis and sense-making. In qualitative research, where subjectivity is embraced rather than avoided, reflexivity—the practice of critically examining how the researcher’s subjectivity and context influence the research process—becomes indispensable. Despite its importance, reflexivity is frequently addressed superficially in the literature, leaving novice researchers grappling with its application. This gap is particularly pronounced in insider-outsider research, where the researcher’s dual positionality layers of complexity to the reflexive process. This paper explores the practical application of reflexivity in insider-outsider research, drawing on my experiences as a Saudi female researcher examining the professional identities of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors in remote Saudi universities. I reflect on my reflexive practices, focusing on two key strategies that enhanced my research: journaling and emotional reflexivity.*

**KEYWORDS:** Qualitative research; Positionality; Reflexivity; Insider researcher; Outsider researcher

The interpretive paradigm views social reality as constructed by individuals and shaped by social contexts, requiring researchers to "interpret" reality through analysis and sense-making (Wiesner, 2022). Within this paradigm, the researcher’s positionality is not a neutral backdrop but a central element of inquiry, shaping both the conduct of the study and the knowledge it produces. Positionality refers to the stance a researcher intentionally assumes within the context of a particular study (Goundar, 2025). It is influenced by factors such as gender, political beliefs, religious faith, historical and geographical background, ethnicity, race, and social class (Marsh, Ercan & Furlong, 2022). These factors inevitably permeate the research process, from methodological choices to interpretation of findings.

In qualitative research, reflexivity has been recognized as an indispensable practice for making these influences visible (Holmes, 2020). Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) describe reflexivity as “a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the

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research processes” (p. 241). Rather than striving for the illusion of neutrality, reflexivity acknowledges the value-laden nature of inquiry and strengthens credibility by making assumptions transparent (Holmes, 2020).

The researcher’s role in qualitative inquiry is particularly significant due to the subjective epistemology that underpins qualitative research. This subjectivity deepens the researcher’s involvement in data collection, analysis, and interactions with participants (Taylor, 2011). Scholars across various qualitative disciplines have explored the impact of their own assumptions on the research process (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Mohler & Rudman, 2022; Muhammad et al., 2015). This body of literature underscores the researcher’s powerful influence on research, given the view that reality is socially constructed and that reflexivity allows for the identification and examination of one’s assumptions.

However, reflexivity also carries potential risks. Finlay (2002) warned that it may become a “cliff edge,” leading to excessive self-analysis that overshadows participants’ voices. More recently, Reid, et al. (2018) echoed this concern, noting that while reflexivity is vital, excessive self-reflection can inadvertently center the researcher’s perspectives and dilemmas at the expense of participants lived experiences. Together, these critiques highlight the ongoing tension between reflexivity as a marker of rigor and reflexivity as a possible distraction from participants’ narratives.

One area where reflexivity becomes particularly intricate is in insider–outsider research, and recent scholarship has further complicated the insider–outsider dilemma by highlighting the fluid and shifting nature of positionality rather than treating it as a fixed binary. For example, Yip (2023) demonstrates how researcher identity can oscillate between insider, outsider, and “in-between” depending on the research stage and the dynamics with participants. Similarly, Moralli (2023) advances this view by framing reflexivity as a practice of care, emphasizing that positionality is not static but negotiated through shifting relationships, emotions, and contexts. Her work underscores that reflexivity must extend beyond methodological transparency to encompass an ethical and relational commitment, where researchers continuously attend to how their identities, emotions, and interactions shape the co-production of knowledge. This perspective aligns with the argument that insider–outsider positions are fluid and situational rather than fixed categories.

This evolving view of positionality is particularly relevant to research in Saudi higher education, where a researcher may share linguistic, cultural, or professional backgrounds with participants while also differing in institutional status, gender expectations, or geographical location. Such contexts make visible the need for nuanced reflexivity that acknowledges both connection and distance simultaneously. From a scholarship perspective, the turn toward reflexive accounts that reveal these shifting roles aligns with calls for richer engagement with positionality in qualitative inquiry (Yip, 2023; Moralli, 2023). From a policy perspective, Vision 2030 reforms are rapidly reshaping Saudi higher education, especially through the expansion of universities in remote regions. This makes it essential to examine how such transformations affect the professional identities of English as a Foreign Language (EFL hereafter) instructors. And from a practice perspective, reflexive tools are urgently needed for novice and early-career researchers who must navigate positionality while producing credible, context-sensitive research.

This study responds to these needs by critically reflecting on my positionality as both insider and outsider in researching the professional identities of EFL instructors in remote Saudi universities. By emphasizing journaling and emotional reflexivity as key strategies, I aim to demonstrate how reflexivity can be grounded in practice to balance subjectivity with rigor, offering methodological insights for other researchers navigating similarly complex contexts. In particular, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- How does the dual positionality of being both an insider and outsider shape the researcher's engagement with participants and interpretation of data in the context of Saudi higher education?
- In what ways do reflexive strategies such as journaling and emotional reflexivity enhance the transparency, rigor, and depth of insider–outsider research?

### **Insider-Outsider Researcher Position**

The researcher's dual role as both an insider and an outsider within the studied community has been a subject of ongoing debate. Traditionally, discussions on positionality emphasized a clear-cut distinction between insider and outsider roles. In the early twentieth century, when white researchers such as Elkin (1935) studied Indigenous populations in their own environments, it was relatively straightforward to differentiate between the natives (insiders) and the researchers (outsiders). However, in the latter half of the century, the notion that “there is no self-understanding without other-understanding” (Fay, 1996, p. 241) shifted the focus toward similarities between researchers and participants rather than differences. This new perspective suggested that belonging to a group does not necessarily mean the researcher is identical to its members, just as not being a member does not imply stark differences (Sibbald, Phelan & Beagan, 2024). This perspective is crucial in qualitative research, which seeks to explore the fluid and complex nature of human experiences (Balmer, et al. 2021). Such evolving views have fueled growing interest in the researcher's dual role as both an insider and an outsider.

Over time, insider-outsider research has become a debated topic in social sciences, particularly concerning whether insider status enhances or undermines credibility (Gair, 2012; Griffith, 1998; Rabe, 2003). The insider-outsider dilemma was first comprehensively examined in Robert Merton's seminal work. Proponents of the insider perspective argue their position grants them “privileged access to social truth” (Merton, 1972, p. 19), unlike outsiders, who supposedly cannot fully grasp experiences of groups they have not socially engaged with. Conversely, advocates of the outsider perspective value detachment from studied groups, as it enables them to “escape the cave” (ibid, p. 30) and access more objective knowledge. Ultimately, Merton (1972) concludes the rigid division fails to capture the complexity of truth-seeking, as both perspectives offer valuable insights.

Recognizing the limits of the insider-outsider dichotomy has led to strong criticisms of its simplistic nature, as it fails to capture the fluidity of the researcher's role (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). To move beyond this binary, researchers are encouraged to acknowledge both similarities to and differences from participants, allowing for nuanced positionality rather than confinement to one category. Achieving this requires reflection and deep reflexivity regarding one's identity in relation to research.

Although literature on reflexivity in qualitative research is extensive, it is often addressed superficially, increasing confusion for novice researchers. This paper seeks to provide concrete reflexivity practices, drawing from my personal experiences as the author.

Through reflexivity, I critically examine my dual positionality as both insider and outsider in my PhD dissertation, highlighting benefits and challenges. I approach this from the perspective of a well-educated, urban Saudi female instructor of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), affiliated with a top-ranked Saudi university.

Challenging the notion that teaching in urban and remote areas is the same, my study uncovered overlooked realities of teaching English at remote Saudi universities. It focused on the individual, institutional, and contextual factors shaping teachers' professional identities in these settings.

The study gathered data from nineteen EFL instructors at remote Saudi universities. All had at least five years' experience. Thirty-six percent, holding annual contracts, came from South Africa, Egypt, India, and Pakistan, while the remaining were Saudi instructors with permanent positions. All held either master's or doctoral degrees in English-related fields, and forty-seven percent were female.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards throughout all stages of the research process. Ethical approval was formally granted by the University of Exeter, United Kingdom (Approval reference D1920 010). Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. All participants were fully informed of the study purpose, procedures, and their rights prior to data collection, including their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or negative consequences. No incentives were offered, and no disadvantages were associated with nonparticipation. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly protected. All personal identifiers were removed during transcription, pseudonyms were assigned, and all data were anonymized prior to analysis. Digital data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. These measures were taken to ensure ethical integrity, protect participant wellbeing, and uphold trust throughout the research process.

The following section explores my reflexive engagement with the research, examining insider-outsider positionality and outlining two strategies that supported my reflexivity.

### **My Reflexive Practice**

In recent years, scholarly literature has offered various definitions of reflexivity in qualitative research. For me, reflexivity is a crucial part of the research process, where the researcher consciously examines and reflects on their thoughts, assumptions, and both their conscious and unconscious reactions toward the study participants, the data collected, and the analysis process. When research is conducted by a single researcher, reflexivity becomes even more important, as there are no other perspectives or approaches to provide alternative insights.

I'll begin by admitting that accessing my own thoughts, assumptions, and both conscious and unconscious reactions was not an easy task, let alone understanding their influence on the research. My self-proclaimed awareness and strong passion for the project were insufficient to uncover many of the blind spots in my identity that were, either directly or indirectly, connected to the study. Like other researchers such as Hsiung (2008) and Martinez-Merino et al. (2022), I faced feelings of uncertainty and at times resistance in examining my relationship with the research topic, the participants, and the data. There were also moments when I couldn't predict when reflexivity would be most necessary or which aspects of my motivations, biases, expectations, or vulnerabilities needed to be addressed. As Probst (2025) points out, these challenges reflect the inherently complex and unstructured nature of reflexivity, highlighting why it is so difficult to achieve.

Despite the personal challenges I faced in navigating my positionality, I am firmly convinced that the chaotic nature of reflexivity reflects the complexity of human nature, our social world, and, by extension, social science research. The uncertainties and occasional contradictions we encounter when examining our implicit roles are crucial and require continuous critical self-reflection and self-negotiation. This belief has been a driving force behind my efforts to confront my struggles with reflexivity and find methods that would make its impact more visible in my research.

Through multiple cycles of critical self-reflection, I started to imagine myself as a falcon, one wing grounded in the research context and the other firmly attached to the research project. This image allowed me to view myself as both inside and outside the research, recognizing that I could not reach new heights without the coordinated use of both wings. Below, I expand on this conceptualization of my identity as the researcher.

### **Me as an Insider**

To engage in critical self-reflection, I incorporated my personal experiences as an EFL university instructor in Saudi Arabia, along with my thoughts and emotions about that role. Recognizing that these factors directly influenced both the research process and its outcomes, I consistently revisited, questioned, and challenged my prior experiences.

My position as an insider in this research was shaped by my professional background. Having spent nine years teaching in Saudi Arabia's higher education system at the time of the study, I was an active participant in the research. The insider perspective often facilitates a deeper understanding of the subject being studied (Saidin & Yaakob, 2016), and my familiarity with Saudi higher education—especially its regulations and organizational structures—allowed me to navigate and interpret the data effectively. Additionally, as a Saudi, my profound understanding of the country's social, cultural, and political dynamics enabled me to offer nuanced interpretations of the participants' lived experiences within a context I deeply know.

As an insider to the study, I believe this role provided me with access to insights and deeper meanings that might have been overlooked by an outsider. For example, the recurring issue of administrative overload caused by universities pursuing accreditation, which participants often mentioned, strongly resonated with my own experiences in a similar environment. My prior knowledge and firsthand familiarity with these challenges allowed me to craft more meaningful and probing interview questions, leading to richer, more authentic descriptions of the participants' professional experiences and identities as remote EFL instructors. During the interviews, I took the opportunity to ask questions I had always wished someone would have asked me when I was in their position. While this could be seen as a potential bias, I believe the depth and authenticity of the responses, which went beyond surface-level answers, could only have been achieved by someone who had once been in their shoes—an insider. At the same time, I was able to probe less obvious, more nuanced aspects of the issues participants faced in their workplaces, drawing on my previous experience in the Kingdom to inform both the questions I asked and the way I asked them.

Beyond professional familiarity, my insider status was also shaped by shared linguistic, cultural, and affective dimensions that extended well beyond institutional knowledge. Speaking Arabic as a first language allowed participants to move fluidly between English and Arabic during interviews, particularly when expressing frustration, humor, or emotional fatigue. These moments often carried meanings that would have been diluted or misunderstood had the interviews been conducted by a non-Arabic speaking researcher. Research on reflexivity emphasizes that sharing language and cultural contexts with participants can deepen interpretive understanding and reduce miscommunication during qualitative interactions. Researchers' awareness of their own social positions and communicative practices helps them recognize when participants' meaning making might otherwise be obscured by assumed common ground or unexamined cultural frames (Greene & Park, 2021).

My insider position also meant that participants frequently assumed shared understanding and did not always explicitly articulate contextual details. While this familiarity facilitated rapport, it simultaneously demanded heightened reflexive vigilance. In response, I deliberately paused interviews to ask participants to elaborate on issues that felt familiar to me but might not be self-

evident to external audiences. This practice transformed insider familiarity from a passive advantage into an active analytic tool.

Emotionally, being an insider intensified the research experience. Participants narratives of marginalization, professional stagnation, and administrative pressure frequently echoed experiences I had previously normalized within my own academic trajectory. Recent reflexive scholarship demonstrates that emotional resonance in insider research can function as a critical analytic resource when it is consciously examined rather than suppressed, allowing researchers to engage more deeply with meaning making processes and relational dynamics (Wang & Fu, 2025). Attending to this resonance enabled me to interpret my emotional responses as signals that warranted further analytic attention, prompting deeper questioning rather than premature agreement with participants accounts. Through this process, emotional engagement became a site of reflexive insight that sharpened interpretive sensitivity and strengthened analytic rigor.

Importantly, my insider identity was not static. It fluctuated across moments of alignment and distance, particularly when participants described institutional realities that diverged sharply from my own experience in a research-intensive urban university. Emerging research on positionality highlights that insider status is relational and situational rather than absolute, shifting according to context, cultural locations, and social dynamics encountered during the research process (Yip, 2024). By documenting these shifts reflexively, I was better able to maintain analytical depth while honoring the relational ethics of insider qualitative inquiry, acknowledging how my changing stance influenced both access and interpretation.

### **Me as an Outsider**

My understanding of the study context (Saudi higher education) was expected to influence the study's design, the data sought, and the approach to data analysis, potentially leading to findings shaped by prior knowledge rather than actual results, as noted by Blythe et al. (2013). However, stepping away from teaching to focus on my studies allowed me to maintain a certain level of detachment from the research, minimizing my influence on the process and outcomes. Additionally, my move to the UK further reinforced this objectivity. As Hamdan (2009) points out, an insider researcher who is physically removed from the phenomenon being studied can, if reflexive, develop a more critical perspective on it.

However, I was not solely an insider in this study. Having taught at one of the top universities in a major Saudi city, I was, in many respects, an outsider to the experiences of EFL instructors working at newly established universities in remote areas. I lacked firsthand knowledge of the institutional, social, cultural, and economic factors shaping their professional lives. Paradoxically, this outsider perspective proved advantageous, allowing me to approach the phenomenon more objectively. As Tinker & Armstrong (2008) argue, researchers who share values or beliefs with participants may unintentionally impose certain interpretations on the data. The differences between my professional background and the participants' experiences created a necessary sense of distance, enabling me to critically examine unfamiliar aspects of their work and uncover deeper insights.

Acknowledging my dynamic roles as both an insider and an outsider enriched my understanding of the diverse perspectives revealed in this study. By reflecting on both my similarities and differences with the participants, I continually examined my assumptions about the research process, the context, the participants, and the methods of data collection and analysis. Embracing the fluidity of my insider-outsider positionality throughout the research cycle challenged my preconceived notions as a Saudi EFL teacher, ultimately enhancing the validity and depth of the study's findings.

This dual position allowed me to explore the phenomenon of remote EFL teaching from multiple angles—both internally and externally. As a scholar studying my own community while living abroad, I was able to recognize both the marginalization and the privileges associated with this research topic. While I was acutely aware of the underrepresentation of remote EFL teachers in the Middle East as a research subject, I also recognized the privilege of being the one to give voice to their experiences in the first study of its kind.

The literature discusses both the advantages and challenges of insider and outsider research. Insider research is often criticized for lacking a critical and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Fleming, 2018), while outsider research is often faulted for not fully grasping the lived experiences of a community to which the researcher does not belong (Bridges, 2001). Engaging with these discussions made me realize that, since neither approach is flawless, the key lies in maximizing the benefits of both. I also strongly resonated with Holmes' (2020) argument that no study can be entirely free from bias and subjectivity, as the meaning of words is individually and subjectively constructed. To move beyond the dilemma of defining my research identity—whether as an insider or an outsider—and determining how much subjectivity to embrace, I chose to position myself in between. I aimed to balance both roles, drawing from each perspective while remaining reflexive in my inevitable subjectivity.

Interestingly, although there has been significant research on positionality and researchers' experiences with it, there is a noticeable gap in the published work on the practical implementation of reflexivity, especially in insider-outsider research. Much like a falcon with one wing grounded in the research context and the other tethered to the project itself, I had to find ways to observe my own reflection in the study's metaphorical lake while soaring above it. Further elaborating on my position as an outsider, I recognized that distancing from participants shared cultural or institutional experiences shaped both challenges and analytic opportunities. When I encountered narratives that diverged significantly from my own background and institutional context, I often felt like an outsider to the lived realities being described. Qualitative methodologists note that outsider researchers frequently bring analytical distance that can illuminate taken-for-granted assumptions within participant accounts, yet this same distance can generate challenges in rapport building and contextual comprehension (Chhabra, 2020). Rather than simply viewing distance as a deficit, I treated it as an opportunity to question my assumptions and engage with participants' perspectives more deliberately. Research on positionality suggests that outsider status can prompt critical questioning about who defines meaning and whose interpretations are privileged, thereby enhancing reflexive rigor when acknowledged and interrogated conscientiously (Holmes, 2020). By documenting moments when my outsider perspective both facilitated critical distance and required active contextual learning, I was able to deepen the complexity of my analysis and honor the multiple lenses through which participant experiences were understood.

In the following discussion, I explore journaling and emotional reflexivity as two key strategies that significantly enhanced my reflexive approach to this research.

### ***Strategy 1: Journaling***

Sirris (2022) highlights the significance of reflexivity not only after data collection but also from the outset of the research process. A common criticism is that reflexivity is often treated as an afterthought, typically applied once data has been gathered and perhaps analyzed (Browne, 2013). However, my awareness of this issue, coupled with extensive readings before starting the project, allowed me to address it proactively. To maintain continuous reflexivity, I kept a research journal documenting key decisions and the reasoning behind them. As Annink (2017) and Birks et

al. (2008) suggest, journaling helps researchers record, critically reflect on, and build upon analytical insights.

In addition to documenting methodological decisions, journaling functioned as a structured reflexive space where emotional, ethical, and epistemological tensions were explicitly examined. Rather than limiting entries to procedural notes, I used the journal to capture moments of discomfort, surprise, and internal conflict immediately after interviews. These entries became sites where I interrogated not only what participants said, but also how their narratives resonated with or unsettled my own assumptions. Reflexive scholarship emphasizes that journaling is most effective when it records affective responses alongside analytic reasoning, allowing researchers to trace how emotions shape interpretation over time (Alase, 2017).

From the outset, I was mindful of my presence in the study and concerned about its influence on the research. To manage this, I consistently recorded decisions and activities in a digital journal, detailing each step with reflections. Like Ortlipp (2008), my goal was not to eliminate bias but to make it transparent and acknowledged. This practice revealed how my perspectives shaped the research process. For instance, in my thesis introduction, I reflected on personal experiences motivating my topic. Furthermore, the methodology and discussion chapters explain how my experiences, emotions, and viewpoints influenced data collection, analysis, and interpretation. For example, after interviews in which participants expressed resignation toward excessive administrative demands, my journal entries revealed an initial impulse to normalize these experiences based on my own professional history. Writing through this reaction forced me to question whether normalization functioned as an analytic shortcut rather than an interpretive insight. Rather than accepting familiarity as understanding, journaling allowed me to slow down interpretation and re-examine what participants were actually communicating.

My journaling even led me to add data collection methods not initially planned. I also integrated theoretical insights from readings, which helped me define my ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions. It was not just a place to reflect but also to develop new insights by justifying each decision.

Journaling also served as a temporal bridge across the research process. Early entries reflected uncertainty, emotional closeness to participants, and moments of over identification, while later entries documented increased analytical distance and conceptual clarity. Revisiting earlier entries during data analysis enabled me to trace how my interpretations evolved and to explicitly acknowledge how shifts in positionality shaped emerging themes.

Beyond recording learning, the journal became a tool for ongoing development, requiring me to justify each step. I did not limit my reflections to the journal alone. As Nelson and Forrest (2023) argue, researchers must "step out of the shadows in their writings and be honest and reflective about their role in the project" (p. 47). In line with this, my thesis included a reflexivity section, where I openly addressed biases and emotions, discussing their impact on planning and execution. For example, I reflected on my belief in building rapport with participants, while questioning whether this approach led to less meaningful data than a more formal style. I also explored power dynamics between myself as a local and expatriate participants with low job security. I questioned whether social desirability bias (Latkin et al., 2017) influenced responses, particularly when they said what they thought I, as a Saudi, wanted to hear or avoided sensitive issues. Reflexivity allowed me to critically examine my role and how my perspectives shaped the research.

Crucially, my reflexive approach extended beyond data collection, embedded throughout the entire process. This ongoing engagement allowed me to counter Browne's (2013) critique that reflexivity is often an afterthought. By continuously evaluating my position, I strengthened both my connection to and distance from the research, enhancing depth and credibility. This ensured

transparency in shaping the study, contributing to a more rigorous and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

### *Strategy 2: Emotional Reflexivity*

It is important to note that emotions are not something new or unique to ethnographic researchers working with vulnerable or marginalized groups, despite what some literature suggests. Emotions are an inherent part of any research (Seal, 2012). A closer examination of the literature on emotions in qualitative research reveals that emotions are often treated as separate from the research process (Hordge-Freeman, 2018). Furthermore, research incorporating emotions often views them as a threat to objectivity, leading to debates about whether or not to report on the emotional aspects of research (Romocea, 2016).

As a human being and, particularly, as a woman, emotions hold significant meaning for me. Since my time during my PhD was one of the most emotionally intense periods of my life, I was motivated to explore how to use emotions to enhance my reflexivity as a researcher. Despite being a novice scholar at the time, I did not feel the need to distance myself from the emotional labor of the PhD, as Vincett (2018) and Warden (2013) suggest, nor did I feel the urge to caution others about the dynamics and consequences of such emotions. Instead, I learned to embrace and enjoy my intense and conflicting emotions, viewing them as an essential part of the research process. I was not only affected by the emotions of the participants, but I also allowed my emotions to influence the research process, guiding me to deeper insights. Being emotionally reflexive helped me in two key ways: immersion in the field and fostering creativity.

Emotional reflexivity in this study extended beyond recognizing feelings to actively interrogating their epistemic value. Rather than treating emotions as methodological noise, I approached them as interpretive data that signaled areas requiring deeper analytical attention. Recent methodological work highlights that ongoing reflexive self-examination of emotions enhances the quality and credibility of qualitative research by helping researchers identify how personal responses shape interpretations and relationships in the field (Peddle & Tregunno, 2021).

During the interviews, I often felt as though I was hearing my own emotions when participants expressed discomfort, sadness, or anger about various work-related issues, such as work overload, top-down management, low motivation, and teacher burnout. Sharing these emotions with the participants deepened my engagement in the field, as it made me more aware of my own vulnerabilities—vulnerabilities I had not realized until the participants raised similar concerns. Acknowledging the participants' negative feelings toward the profession helped me connect my experiences with the research, framing them as contextual and collective rather than personal and individual, which in itself brought me comfort. One vivid example emerged during interviews with expatriate instructors employed on annual contracts. Feelings of discomfort surfaced when participants described fear of administrative retaliation despite assurances of confidentiality. My emotional response was not neutrality but unease. Rather than suppressing this reaction, I documented it reflexively and examined how institutional precarity shaped both the content and tone of participants narratives.

Moreover, embracing my emotions allowed me to create a generative space for new insights that fed back into the research. For example, when participants discussed their social isolation as EFL teachers in rural, Arabic-speaking communities, instead of focusing solely on my own feelings as I listened to their struggles and isolation, I allowed these emotions to guide me to new lines of inquiry. This led me to ask questions about the role of universities in community service and their engagement with the broader society—questions that were not part of the original study focus but emerged through the emotional responses of the participants. Rather than dismissing my emotional

reactions to the data or viewing them as biases, I allowed them to become an active force in shaping the direction of the research, thereby enhancing my creativity and the depth of the study.

Emotional reflexivity also fostered methodological creativity. Moments of emotional intensity prompted follow-up questions that expanded the conceptual scope of the study, particularly around issues of institutional belonging, professional invisibility, and voice. By treating emotions as analytic prompts rather than threats to rigor, I was able to deepen data interpretation and strengthen the study theoretical contribution, consistent with approaches that frame emotional reflexivity as an ongoing methodological practice rather than a personal disclosure.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the complexities of dual positionality in qualitative research by reflecting on my role as an insider-outsider researcher investigating the professional identities of EFL instructors at remote Saudi universities. The main findings show that dual positionality can be both a methodological asset and an emotional challenge. Strategic reflexive practices, especially journaling and emotional reflexivity, help observe, track, and manage changing positionality over time. These approaches turned what could be a limitation, like subjective bias, into a strength both methodologically and epistemologically.

Two major findings emerged. First, the fluidity of positionality challenges the conventional insider-outsider binary in qualitative research. The position of a Saudi woman researcher, characterized by shared cultural and linguistic awareness but distinct institutional and geographical backgrounds, underscores the necessity of conceptualizing insider-outsider roles as fluid rather than fixed. The empirical findings, as detailed in the reflexive account, show that this duality offered unique advantages: the insider perspective granted privileged access to nuanced cultural and institutional understandings, enabling the formulation of probing interview questions that elicited rich, authentic data about administrative overload and professional challenges. Conversely, the outsider perspective, afforded by geographical distance and a different institutional background, provided the critical detachment necessary to question assumptions and identify less obvious issues, such as the profound social isolation of EFL instructors in remote communities.

This empirical account directly addresses the gap identified in the literature review, where reflexivity is often treated superficially (Browne, 2013), particularly in insider-outsider contexts. By moving beyond abstract discussion to provide a concrete, lived example of navigating this duality, this study answers the call from scholars like Yip (2023) and Moralli (2023) for more nuanced accounts of fluid positionality. It contributes to the current empirical understanding by showing that the value of this positionality lies not in choosing a side, but in the continuous negotiation between empathy and critique, immersion and distance.

Second, the study extends these theoretical conceptions by operationalizing them through two concrete strategies. It takes the abstract notion of "continuous critique" and demonstrates how it can be achieved through disciplined journaling from the project's inception, thus challenging Browne's (2013) critique of reflexivity as an afterthought. More profoundly, it extends the theoretical scope of reflexivity by championing emotional reflexivity. While traditional models often treat emotion as a contaminant to objectivity (Romocea, 2016), this study theorizes emotion as a critical data source and analytical tool. It shows how emotional responses can directly guide inquiry, and foster creativity. This builds on arguments in the literature (e.g., Sirris, 2022 and Nelson & Forrest, 2023) for more mindful, open, and emotionally reflexive practice in research.

The study contributes to theory by testing and extending the premises of the interpretive paradigm, particularly regarding subjectivity, social construction, and researcher involvement. The

falcon metaphor, with one wing grounded in context and the other aligned with the project, aptly describes interpretivism as the co-construction of knowledge through the researcher's perspective.

These results affirm Holmes' (2020) argument that reflexivity enhances credibility where subjectivity is acknowledged openly. They develop the discipline in that they propose reflexivity, and more particularly emotional reflexivity, can not only be used as a defense tool (to reduce bias) but as a discovery tool. This upends such previous models as Merton's (1972) insider/outsider dichotomy and instead affirms Dwyer & Buckle's (2009) argument that the "space between" is a rich site on which to conduct analysis.

Simultaneously, this study challenges the common methodological assumption that reflexivity is a stable skill that can be mastered. Instead, reflexivity emerged as an untidy, nonlinear, and dynamic practice. Emotional or subjective entanglement should not be viewed as a flaw but as an inevitable aspect of human-centered research.

### **Limitations and Pathways for Future Research**

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The first limitation is contextual specificity, as findings are based on the Saudi higher education context, particularly remote institutions. While some lessons may be transferable, future research should apply these strategies in diverse cultural and disciplinary settings. The second limitation is the autoethnographic foundation which centers on a single researcher's perspective. Incorporating reflexivity from multiple individuals, either through team-based practices or participant reflection, could provide a broader perspective.

Future research could examine:

- Cross-country variations in insider-outsider positionality within rapidly changing education systems.
- Comparative studies on the effectiveness of journaling and emotional reflexivity across different cultural contexts or research topics.
- Models of collaborative reflexivity where research teams engage in shared reflexive journaling or dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

This study has argued that dual positionality, as opposed to being a curse on methodology, is in fact a lens through which more robust, more authentic research is produced, if one is reflexive. It has presented evidence that reflexivity is not a flighty concept but a tangible, embodied practice, especially in insider-outsider research. Through journaling and emotional reflexivity, I was able to observe my own stance in the research as intimate and connected, but critical and detached.

These findings are part of an emergent literature that recognizes positionality to be dynamic, reflexivity to be generative, and subjectivity as a site of insight, not error. For early and novice researchers, particularly those researching within their own communities, this study offers confirmation and direction: your identities, feelings, and lived experiences are not extraneous to the research, but are part of it. As with the falcon which gazes at its own reflection on the clear lake, the reflexive researcher must both soar above and remain near the ground, ever observing the waves he creates and the image he interprets.

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## Data Availability Statement

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## Conflicts of Interest

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