

## The Role of Reflective Practice in Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Development and Classroom Effectiveness

### Abstract

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Reflective practice is widely recognized as a cornerstone of teacher professional growth and effective classroom teaching. This study investigated its impact on Iranian EFL teachers' development and their students' learning outcomes, specifically focusing on engagement and academic achievement. A nine-month longitudinal mixed-methods study was conducted with 30 Iranian EFL teachers (aged 24–50) selected based on snow ball sampling technique and 300 students (mixed gender, aged 12–18, intermediate proficiency) taught by those teachers from Safir Language Academy in Tehran. Teachers engaged in structured reflective activities, including journaling, peer discussions, and guided reflection sessions. Data were collected through reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and student performance assessments, and were analyzed using thematic analysis and paired samples *t*-tests. The findings revealed that reflective practice enhanced teachers' self-awareness and adaptability in instructional strategies, while students of reflective teachers demonstrated higher engagement and improved academic achievement. Barriers such as time constraints and limited institutional support were also identified. Overall, the study highlights the transformative potential of reflective practice in advancing teacher professional development and promoting more effective EFL classrooms in the Iranian context.

**Key Words:** Reflective Practice, Teacher Development, Classroom Effectiveness, Iranian EFL Teachers

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## 1. Introduction

Reflective practice is deemed as a transformative tool in teacher professional development and classroom effectiveness. It involves the systematic analysis of teaching experiences with the aim of improving pedagogical strategies and fostering professional growth (Farrell, 2018; Loughran, 2020). Unlike routine self-evaluation, reflective practice requires critical engagement with one's instructional decisions, classroom interactions, and learning outcomes (Larrivee, 2000). This continuous process enhances teachers' self-awareness, adaptability, and evidence-based teaching strategies, making it particularly valuable in the dynamic contexts of modern classrooms (Farrell, 2015a).

In the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), reflective practice has gained special importance because teachers should constantly adapt their methods to address linguistic diversity and cultural differences (Chaika, 2023). Research has shown that teachers who engage in structured reflection develop stronger classroom management skills, demonstrate higher adaptability, and adopt more student-centered approaches (Boud et al., 2020). However, the application of reflective practice in different educational contexts is uneven, with Iranian EFL classrooms remaining underexplored (Farrell, 2022; Kurosh et al., 2020).

Iranian teachers face distinctive institutional and cultural constraints, including hierarchical school structures, limited access to professional development opportunities, and time pressures, all of which hinder systematic reflection (Ashraf et al., 2016; Moradkhani et al., 2017). While Western studies have consistently highlighted the benefits of reflection for teacher growth and student engagement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Zembylas, 2018), fewer studies have empirically tested its effectiveness in Iranian contexts. As a result, reflective practice is often discussed theoretically rather than evaluated through measurable outcomes such as student engagement and academic achievement.

The present study sought to address this gap by empirically examining the role of structured reflective activities in Iranian EFL classrooms. Specifically, it investigated how reflection influenced teachers' self-awareness, instructional adaptability, and classroom practices, as well as how it impacted students' engagement and achievement. The study also explored barriers that might prevent Iranian EFL teachers from sustaining reflective practices, including institutional and cultural challenges, and considered potential strategies for overcoming them.

By combining qualitative and quantitative evidence, this study aimed to provide a clearer understanding of the transformative potential of reflective practice in Iranian EFL contexts. It

contributes to both global debates on teacher development and to the local improvement of classroom effectiveness by aligning reflective teaching with measurable outcomes.

Accordingly, this research pursued the following objectives:

1. To evaluate the impact of reflective practice on Iranian EFL teachers' self-awareness, instructional adaptability, and classroom strategies.
2. To investigate the relationship between teacher reflection and student engagement and achievement.
3. To identify barriers that hinder Iranian EFL teachers from adopting reflective practices and propose practical solutions.

In line with these objectives, the study addressed the following three research questions:

1. How does engaging in reflective practice influence Iranian EFL teachers' self-awareness, adaptability, and instructional strategies?
2. What is the impact of reflective practice on students' engagement and academic achievement in Iranian EFL classrooms?
3. What challenges do Iranian EFL teachers face in sustaining reflective practice, and what strategies can support its effective implementation?

By examining these factors, this study attempted to provide evidence-based recommendations for integrating reflective practice into teacher education and professional development programs in Iranian EFL contexts.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

Reflective practice has been widely deemed as the key element of teacher development, particularly within the field of English language teaching (ELT). Since Schön's (2017) seminal work on the "reflective practitioner", scholars have emphasized the value of teachers critically examining their own practices to improve pedagogical decision-making. Wallace (1991) further formalized this perspective, framing reflection as an essential stage in the "reflective model" of teacher education. Building on these foundations, Farrell (2018) argued that reflection is not merely an individual activity but a dialogic and collaborative process that supports professional identity construction.

Research has consistently highlighted the role of reflective practice in enhancing teacher professional development. Akbari (2007) identified reflection as a key dimension of effective teacher education programs, noting that reflective teachers are more likely to engage in continuous self-assessment and adapt their methodologies to meet learner needs. Similarly,

Richards and Lockhart (1995) demonstrated that structured reflection enables teachers to recognize and adjust habitual teaching patterns, ultimately leading to greater classroom responsiveness. Reflection is also linked to broader constructs of teacher cognition, including beliefs, knowledge, and decision-making processes, which shape how teachers interpret and act upon classroom realities (Borg, 2006, 2011).

A related body of literature connects reflective practice with classroom effectiveness. Farrell (2015b) contends that reflective teachers develop greater instructional adaptability, which translates into more effective classroom management and improved learner engagement. Other studies have shown that reflection helps teachers incorporate student feedback, experiment with varied techniques, and integrate contextually appropriate strategies (Farrell, 2018; Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021; Richards & Lockhart, 1995). These findings suggest that reflection directly contributes to teachers' ability to create more supportive and interactive learning environments. Furthermore, reflective practice has been found to nurture teachers' emotional resilience and professional confidence, qualities that are increasingly recognized as central to sustaining long-term effectiveness (Day & Gu, 2010).

More recently, attention has turned to the impact of reflection on student outcomes. Research indicates that when teachers engage in systematic reflection, students benefit not only from improved instructional clarity but also from heightened motivation and academic achievement (Akbari, 2007; Farrell, 2018). Student outcomes in reflective practice research are commonly measured through standardized proficiency tests, classroom-based formative assessments, and end-of-term course grades (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Farrell, 2022). Formative assessments capture students' ongoing engagement and learning progress by evaluating quizzes, writing assignments, and classroom activities, while course grades provide a cumulative indicator of achievement at the end of a term. These measures offer a comprehensive understanding of both the process and the product of student learning (Guskey, 2003).

Taken together, the literature suggests that reflective practice not only strengthens teachers' professional growth but also enhances classroom effectiveness and student performance (Timperley et al., 2007). However, challenges such as institutional barriers, time constraints, and cultural norms may limit teachers' ability to engage in sustained reflection (Akbari, 2007; Farrell, 2018). These tensions underscore the importance of investigating reflective practice within specific contexts, such as Iranian EFL classrooms, where unique cultural and institutional dynamics may shape both teacher development and student outcomes. Despite the recognized benefits of reflection, relatively few empirical studies in the Iranian setting have systematically examined its dual impact on teachers and learners, leaving a gap that the present study seeks to address (Borg, 2011).

This research holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it builds on sociocultural perspectives such as Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, framing reflective practice as a scaffolding mechanism that helps teachers critically evaluate and refine their instructional strategies within their social and cultural contexts (Lantolf & Poehner, 2018). Practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for integrating structured reflection into teacher training programs, including tools such as journaling, peer discussions, and guided reflection sessions.

These approaches can improve teachers' self-awareness and adaptability, while also fostering collaborative professional development through peer coaching and mentoring models. For policymakers and administrators, the study highlights the importance of institutional support—such as dedicated time, resources, and collaborative platforms—for embedding reflection into EFL teacher education.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Design**

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine the impact of reflective practice on Iranian EFL teachers' professional development and student outcomes. The design consisted of an initial quantitative phase (pre- and post-tests of student achievement) followed by a qualitative phase (teacher journals and interviews) to provide deeper insights into the quantitative results.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The study involved two groups of participants: teachers and students. There were thirty Iranian EFL teachers (aged 24–50) from different branches of Safir Language Academy in Tehran recruited through snowball sampling. They represented three experience levels: novice (less than 5 years, 40%), experienced (5–10 years, 35%), and veteran (over 10 years, 25%). Eligibility criteria included at least two years of teaching experience and willingness to engage in structured reflective activities. In addition, 300 students (aged 12–18; 55% female, 45% male) taught by the participating teachers also took part. They were placed at intermediate proficiency level according to the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). Inclusion criteria required regular classroom attendance and participation in pre- and post-testing.

All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Teachers' and students' identities were anonymized. Participation was voluntary, and data were stored securely.

### 3.3. Instruments

Three complementary instruments were used to collect data. Reflective journals were maintained weekly by teachers for nine months, documenting teaching challenges, instructional decisions, and classroom interactions, and serving as the primary source of qualitative data on teachers' evolving self-awareness and adaptability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 30 teachers in three rounds (early, mid, and late stages of the study), each lasting 30–45 minutes, conducted in Persian, and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interview prompts focused on teachers' perceptions of reflective practice, instructional strategies, and barriers to sustained reflection, and transcripts were anonymized and returned to participants for member checking. Finally, student outcomes were evaluated using three complementary measures to capture both language proficiency and classroom achievement:

#### 1. Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT):

This standardized proficiency test was administered to all students at the beginning and end of the study. It provided a reliable benchmark of overall language proficiency gains.

#### 2. Formative Assessments:

These included classroom-based tasks such as short quizzes, written assignments, and in-class activities administered throughout the nine-month study. Formative assessments reflected students' ongoing engagement and progress in the learning process. Scores were systematically recorded by teachers as part of their routine evaluation practices.

#### 3. End-of-term Grades:

Final grades assigned by the institution at the end of each course cycle served as a cumulative measure of student achievement. These grades aggregated performance across examinations, assignments, and classroom participation, providing a summative indicator of overall learning outcomes.

Together, these measures offered a multi-dimensional picture of student learning by combining standardized testing, ongoing engagement indicators, and institutional achievement records.

### 3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected in three phases over nine months:

1. **Pre-Intervention (Month 1):** Teachers completed baseline reflective journals and interviews; students took the OQPT and initial classroom assessments.
2. **Intervention (Months 2–7):** Teachers engaged in structured reflective activities: (a) weekly journals, (b) biweekly peer reflection groups, and (c) monthly guided reflection sessions facilitated by the researchers. Classroom observations were conducted twice per teacher ( $n = 60$  observations) to document reflective practices in action.
3. **Post-Intervention (Months 8–9):** Teachers completed final journals and interviews; students repeated OQPT and classroom assessments.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

- ≠ **Qualitative Data (Journals & Interviews):** Analyzed thematically using Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework with NVivo software. Two coders independently coded the data; inter-rater reliability ( $\kappa = 0.81$ ) indicated strong agreement. Themes included self-awareness, instructional adaptability, and barriers to reflection.
- ≠ **Quantitative Data (Student Assessments):** Pre- and post-test scores were compared using paired-samples t-tests to measure gains in student performance. Cohen's  $d$  was calculated for effect sizes. Correlation analysis examined the relationship between frequency/depth of teacher reflection and student outcomes.
- ≠ **Integration:** Results from the two strands were merged in the interpretation stage, with qualitative insights used to explain quantitative patterns.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the findings according to the three research questions. Quantitative and qualitative data were combined to demonstrate the impact of reflective practice on teachers' professional development and student outcomes.

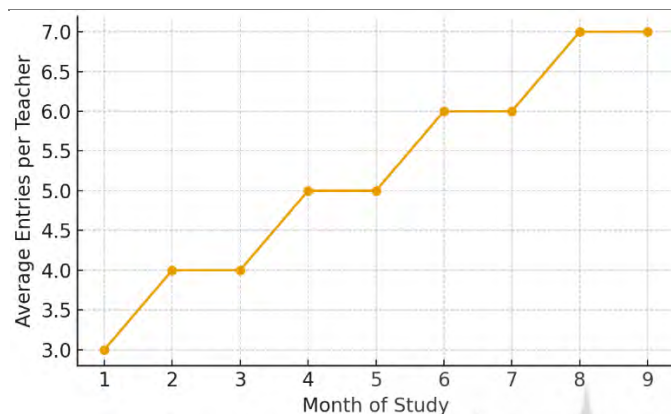
### 4.1 Research Question One

**4.1.1 Quantitative Findings.** Analysis of journal entries revealed consistent growth in teachers' reflective practice over the nine-month period. As shown in Figure 1, the number of entries increased steadily across the study period. Coding of journals identified three recurring themes—self-awareness, instructional adaptability, and collaboration—whose frequency increased substantially from pre- to post-intervention (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Frequency of Reflective Themes across Phases*

Theme	Pre-Intervention	Mid-Intervention	Post-Intervention
Self-awareness	40	65	90
Instructional Adaptability	35	60	85
Collaboration	20	35	60



**Figure 1.**

*Growth in reflective journal entries over nine months*

**4.1.2 Qualitative Findings.** The thematic analysis highlighted three dominant areas of teacher development:

1. **Improved Self-Awareness** – Teachers became more conscious of their teaching behaviors. One of the teachers stated:

*“Writing journals forced me to reflect on my feedback style. I realized I was too general and started giving specific comments.”* (Teacher 12)

2. **Instructional Adaptability** – Teachers increasingly modified strategies in response to student needs. One of the teachers explained that:

*“After reflecting on disengagement, I introduced pair work. It was remarkable to see the students’ interaction improved.”* (Teacher 7)

3. **Collaboration** – Peer reflection groups encouraged sharing and experimentation with new methods. One of the teachers noted that:

*“Listening to colleagues helped me rethink classroom discipline. I tried their approach and it worked better.”* (Teacher 19)

In conclusion, it can be said that engaging in structured reflective practice produced demonstrable growth in teachers’ professional capacities, significantly enhancing self-awareness, prompting adaptive instructional changes, and increasing collaborative problem-



solving as evidenced by rising frequencies of reflective themes and supporting interview data.

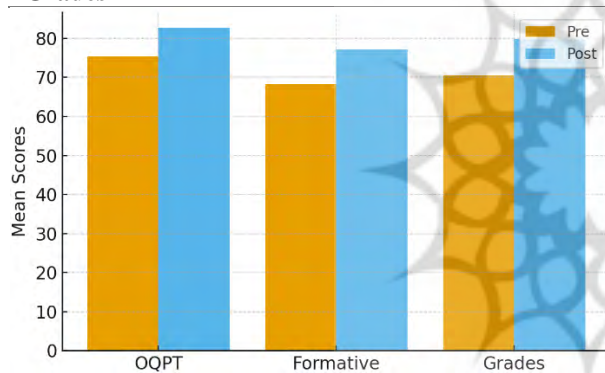
## 4.2. Research Question Two

**4.2.1. Quantitative Findings.** Students demonstrated significant improvements across all three measures: OQPT scores, formative assessments, and end-of-term grades. As displayed in Table 2, paired-samples t-tests confirmed statistically significant gains ( $p < .001$ ), with moderate to large effect sizes. Figure 2 visually illustrates the pre to post improvements across all measures.

**Table 2.**

*Student Performance Pre- and Post-Intervention*

Measure	Pre-Intervention (M, SD)	Post-Intervention (M, SD)	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
OQPT Scores	75.4 (10.2)	82.6 (9.8)	4.35	< .001	0.70
Formative Assessments	68.3 (12.5)	77.1 (11.4)	4.10	< .001	0.72
End-of-term Grades	70.5 (11.3)	79.8 (10.7)	4.25	< .001	0.76



**Figure 2.**

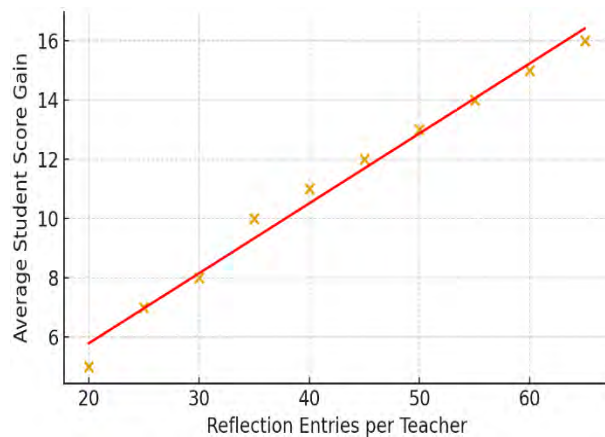
*Pre- and post-intervention student performance*

**Correlation Analysis.** Further analysis revealed strong positive correlations between the frequency of teacher reflection (journal entries and peer group participation) and student performance gains ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as well as between the depth of reflection (coding complexity) and student performance ( $r = .58$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These findings are presented in Table 3. A scatter plot of reflection frequency and student gains (Figure 3) illustrates this relationship.

**Table 3.**

*Correlation between Reflection and Student Performance*

Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Reflection frequency	0.62	< .01
Reflection depth	0.58	< .01



**Figure 3.**

*Correlation between reflection frequency and student gains*

**4.2.2. Qualitative Findings.** Teachers noted higher levels of student engagement and achievement following reflective adjustments to teaching strategies. For instance, one of the teachers remarked that “*Before reflecting, I thought my students were just not interested. After adding interactive tasks, their participation soared.*”(Teacher 4). Another teachers also expressed that “*Students became more responsive when I used real-life scenarios after reflecting on their needs.*” (Teacher 22)

In summary, the finding of the second research question revealed that reflective practice had a clear, measurable positive impact on students: learners of reflective teachers showed statistically significant gains on the OQPT, formative assessments, and end-of-term grades ( $p < .001$ ; Cohen’s  $d \approx 0.70$ – $0.76$ ), with strong positive correlations between teacher reflection and student performance gains.

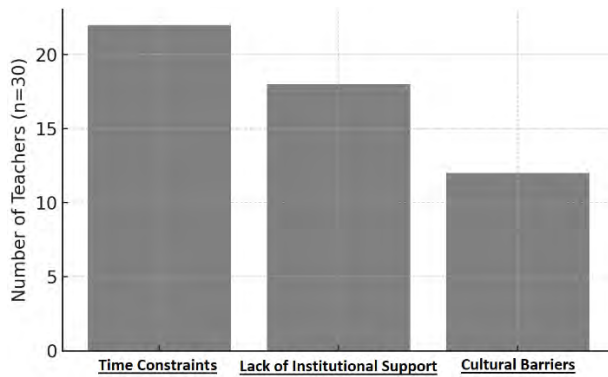
### **4.3. Research Question Three**

**4.3.1. Quantitative Findings.** Teachers reported three main barriers: time constraints (73%), lack of institutional support (60%), and cultural barriers (40%). These results are summarized in Table 4 and illustrated in Figure 4.

**Table 4.**

*Teacher-Reported Barriers to Sustained Reflection*

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage
Time constraints	22	73%
Lack of institutional support	18	60%
Cultural barriers	12	40%



**Figure 4.**

*Reported barriers to sustained reflection*

**4.3.2. Qualitative Findings.** Interview data reinforced these challenges as can be seen from the following interview extracts. One of the teachers explained that *“Between lesson planning and grading, I struggled to keep up with journaling”* (Teacher 6). Or another teacher stated that, *“Some schools do not encourage peer reflection, so it was difficult to sustain discussions”* (Teacher 15). Also one teacher expressed that *“Open reflection is sometimes seen as criticism of authority, so teachers hesitate to share honestly”* (Teacher 27).

Teachers suggested strategies to address these barriers, such as institutional support for reflective activities, formal inclusion of reflection in training curricula, and anonymous platforms for sharing sensitive reflections.

To conclude, the results of the third research question indicated that although reflective practice yields clear benefits, its sustainability is constrained mainly by time pressures, limited institutional support, and cultural barriers. Nevertheless these challenges can be alleviated by formal institutional backing (allocated reflection time, curricular inclusion) and safe/collaborative platforms for teacher reflection, as proposed by the participants.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the central role of reflective practice in promoting teachers' professional development and improving student outcomes. With regard to the first research question, teachers who engaged in systematic reflection reported gains in self-awareness, instructional adaptability, and collaborative learning. These results are consistent with the findings of Farrell (2018), who emphasized that reflection strengthens teacher identity and enhances decision-making in the classroom. Similarly, Schön's (1992) notion of reflection-in-action is evident in the way teachers adjusted strategies during lessons, while Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle is reflected in their iterative process of planning, acting, reflecting,

and revising. The present findings thus extend earlier work by showing that these theoretical models remain relevant in the Iranian EFL context, where reflective practices are often less institutionalized.

The second research question concerned the impact of reflective teaching on students. Quantitative data revealed significant gains in engagement and academic achievement, aligning with Richards and Lockhart (1995), who argued that reflective teachers create more responsive classrooms. Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) found that reflective practice enhances classroom management and fosters higher student achievement. The strong correlation observed between teachers' frequency of reflection and students' performance provided empirical support for Bera & Mohalik (2015), who reported that reflective journals contribute to more effective teaching strategies. However, while most international studies report qualitative evidence of improved student outcomes, the present study added quantitative confirmation within a non-Western EFL context. This could address the gap noted by Farrell (2022), who emphasized that Iranian research on reflection rarely includes robust, longitudinal, or mixed-methods data.

At the same time, the results diverge from some earlier findings. For example, Akbari (2007) argued that reflective practice in Iran often remains superficial due to cultural and institutional constraints. While barriers were indeed identified in this study, the significant improvements in both teacher and student outcomes suggested that structured and sustained reflection, when supported by guided activities, can overcome some of these challenges. In this sense, the study demonstrated that reflection can be effectively implemented in hierarchical educational contexts if institutional backing and facilitation are provided.

The third research question highlighted barriers to sustaining reflection, with time constraints, limited institutional support, and cultural norms being the most frequently reported ones. These findings resonate with Moradkhani et al. (2017), who also documented teachers' concerns about workload and lack of support. They also parallel Farrell's (2015b) observation that reflective practice requires a supportive environment to move beyond individual experimentation. Unlike some previous studies, however, teachers in the present research proposed specific solutions, such as embedding reflection into official teacher education curricula and offering institutional time for reflection. These recommendations underscore the practical importance of aligning reflective initiatives with systemic reforms.

Taken together, these findings contribute to ongoing debates about the value and feasibility of reflective practice in teacher education. They suggest that reflective practice should not be regarded solely as an individual cognitive process, but rather as a socially mediated and institutionally supported activity (Vygotsky, 1978). When structured reflection is

integrated into teacher development programs, it not only advances professional growth but also produces measurable gains in student engagement and achievement.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that reflective practice, when implemented systematically and supported institutionally, can play a pivotal role in enhancing teacher development and improving student outcomes in Iranian EFL classrooms. Teachers who engaged in structured reflection developed stronger self-awareness, greater adaptability in instructional strategies, and more collaborative approaches to teaching. Significantly, students of these teachers also exhibited higher engagement and significant gains in academic achievement, underscoring the direct pedagogical impact of reflection.

The findings contribute to the wider literature by providing quantitative evidence from a non-Western EFL context, where reflective practice has traditionally been underexplored. While much of the existing scholarship (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Farrell, 2018; Richards & Lockhart, 1995) has emphasized the benefits of reflection, this study extended the field by offering longitudinal, mixed-methods data that illustrated its transformative effects in Iran. At the same time, the challenges identified—time limitations, lack of institutional support, and cultural barriers—highlighted the need for systemic solutions that move reflection beyond individual initiative.

Implications for practice include the integration of reflection into teacher education curricula, the provision of institutional time and resources for reflective activities, and the encouragement of collaborative reflective communities among teachers. Policymakers and school administrators should recognize that reflective practice is not merely a personal habit but a professional competency that requires formal support. Future research might investigate the role of digital tools and AI-assisted platforms in sustaining reflective practices, particularly in contexts where time and workload pressures hinder traditional approaches. Longitudinal comparative studies across cultural contexts would further illuminate how reflection can be adapted to diverse educational systems. In conclusion, reflective practice emerges not only as a means of individual professional growth but also as a strategic approach to raising teaching quality and student achievement in EFL education.

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