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An Investigation into the Level of Reflection and Barriers to EFL Teachers' Reflective Practice

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' level of reflection and the barriers to their reflection. To do so, based on an experimental research method, 98 EFL teachers were recruited and the English language teacher reflection inventory (ELTRI) was distributed among them. To consolidate the findings of the inventory, 20 volunteers from the same pool were interviewed. As the next phase of the study, to investigate the barriers to the teachers' reflectivity, the same participants were given an open-ended questionnaire to probe their ideas about barriers to reflective practice. Based on the obtained data and the related literature, a Barriers to Reflective Practice Questionnaire (BRPQ) was developed and distributed among the participants. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics, one sample t-test, and content analysis were employed. The findings revealed that EFL teachers did not practice reflection at high levels. They considered top-down curriculum, disrespect for teachers' authority, teachers' inclination to the conventional teaching practice, lack of appropriate context for reflection, teachers' workload, and lack of appropriate training courses as the most important factors which bar their reflection. Teacher education programs should raise EFL teachers' awareness regarding the concept and use of reflective practice.

Keywords: EFL teacher, barriers, Iranian context, reflection, reflective practice

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1. Introduction

Teachers play a key role in the instruction of students and the growth of an educational system depends on their efficiency. One of the much-needed teachers' qualities is their higher-order thinking and in particular, their reflective thinking. Reflection is an essential part of the teaching process since "teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (Borg, 2003, p. 81). More specifically, reflective practice is regarded as the process of gaining new insights from experience and learning from insights related to self and practice (Boud et al., 1985, cited in Finlay, 2008). Without degrees of reflection, it may be difficult for teachers to deal with the inappropriate views of education one has received during his/her years of learning and teaching (Mumford & Dikilitaş, 2019). In addition, in the absence of reflection, teachers may teach as they were taught, and, by so doing they may adopt ineffective teaching strategies (Braun & Crumpler, 2004).

Reflection, as a professional development strategy, provides language teachers with assets to explore, articulate, and represent their own teaching practices (Rahnama, Abdolrezapour, & Ayatollahi, 2016). In fact, reflective teaching enhances problem solving and decision-making skills paving the way for language teachers to become critical thinkers. Reflection takes on a very prominent role in the domain of second language (L2) curriculum planning and teaching where raising the awareness of language teachers towards reflective thinking and consolidating reflective practice constitute an integral component of most teacher education programs (Burton, 2009; Farrell, 2007, 2016).

Specifically, language teachers can apply reflection, as Schon (2009) contends, to secure a clearer grasp of fairly thorny and/or disorganized ideas and is heavily dependent on understanding and restructuring old and new knowledge. In more practical terms, reflective practice entails that language teachers constantly monitor their own progress and that of their students in an attempt to obtain a thorough picture of the whole class progression whose ultimate function is to guide their teaching practices with specific reference to adaptations and modifications they exert (Shirazizadeh, & Moradkhani, 2018; Thomas & Dykes, 2011).

Systematic reflective thinking is said to generate meaning and link older and newer experiences as well as one's own and others' knowledge (Shavit & Moshe, 2019). Reflective practice is both the means and the ends to one's awareness of the self which is prerequisite to the one's personal and professional development. Reflective teachers are those who "locate problems, question goals, explore contexts, analyze possibilities, and craft appropriate educational experiences to benefit learners" (Baleghizadeh & Javidanmehr, 2014, p. 21). Reflective practice strengthens the interpersonal relationships between the teacher and the students, boosts teacher's and students' motivation and self-efficacy (Akbari, 2007).

In the last decade, research on EFL reflective practice especially in the context of Iran has proliferated. However, little is known about the barriers to EFL teachers' reflective practice. The only study which investigated the inhibitors to reflective practice is that of Soodmand and Farahani (2017). As such, the researchers of the present study believe that investigation of the barriers, particularly in a developing context like Iran where teachers lack high reflectivity in their daily practice (Marzban & Ashraafi, 2016), deserves more attention. This study is an attempt to reveal Iranian EFL teachers' degree of reflective practice. At the same time, the researchers studied factors that hamper Iranian EFL teachers' reflection.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Reflective practice enables teachers in general and EFL teachers in particular to improve their daily practice to effectively meet the learning needs of their students. However, as a line of research in the area of reflective teaching, the investigation of teachers' perception of their level of reflection has not received due research attention. Furthermore, few studies have dealt with the inhibitors to EFL teachers' reflective practice. This can be attributed to the difficulty of developing and validating a scale for such a purpose. What gave impetus to conduct the present study was that the centralized Iranian educational system (Baniasad-Azad et al., 2016; Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2015; Rahimi & Chabok, 2013) like many other Asian educational contexts, has been impacted by the problems rooted in the collectivist view of education (see Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Enayat et al., 2015) and that teachers have to abide by the top down curriculum prevalent in the educational system (Avarzamani & Farahian, 2019). As such, highlighting the role of any form of higher-order thinking is crucial. Additionally, if reflective practice results in teachers' awareness of their underlying assumptions about learning and teaching, understanding the barriers to teachers' reflectivity is of great importance. Accordingly, the present study employed a mixed method research approach to

delve into the issue. Faghihi and Anani Sarab (2016) employed the scale developed by Akbari et al. (2010) to investigate EFL teachers' perception of their level of reflection. The results showed that the teachers used a relatively low level of reflection; however, the main instrument employed in the study was limited to a questionnaire and the participants were only from language schools.

Regarding the barriers to reflective practice, only a few studies investigated the inhibitors to reflective practice (Shirazizadeh & Moradkhani, 2018; Soodmand & Farahani, 2017; Tajik & Ranjbar, 2018) and among these studies, only Soodmand and Farahani (2017) developed a scale to measure the obstacles to EFL teachers' reflectivity; however, it seems that the findings were limited to EFL teachers from language schools. Due to the different objectives and teaching practices in language schools and high schools in Iran, a sample that is representative of both populations may render a more generalizable finding. It is noteworthy that EFL teaching is pursued in disparate ways in these two contexts; while all public schools across the country follow a curriculum and a teaching procedure mandated by the Ministry of Education in a rather top-down manner, language schools adopt a less centralized approach to EFL teaching. As a result, a single prescription cannot be written for both settings since EFL teachers in private language institutes are more actively engaged in reflection in comparison with their counterparts from public schools (Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, 2017). As such, future studies can recruit participants from both contexts. Furthermore, the present study drew upon both quantitative and qualitative research to investigate the barriers to reflective practice.

1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions were proposed:

1. To what extent do EFL teachers show evidence of reflective practice?
2. What are the perceived barriers to reflective practice from EFL teachers' viewpoints?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reflective Practice

John Dewey as a pioneer in progressive education suggested that reflective thinking is "an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that supports it and the conclusion to which it tends" (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). Dewey also asserted that reflective action is different from a routine action and explained that "reflective teaching provides an opportunity for teachers to perform in a conscious and deliberative manner rather than in routine and automatic ways" (Ansarin et al., 2015, p. 140). Building upon Dewey's idea, Schön (1983, 1987) suggested reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. As he proposed, reflection-on-action happens after an event and requires one to think back, evaluate, and reflect on the incident. On the other hand, reflection-in-action takes place when the individual considers their actions when s/he is involved in the situation. This intuitive on-the-spot reflection is the active evaluation of one's thoughts and actions.

Later on, various theoretical frameworks were offered for the concept of reflection (e.g. Akbari et al., 2010; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). Since the research reported here utilized a mixed-method approach to collecting the data, two main frameworks (i.e., Akbari et al., 2010; Gibbs, 1988) were selected and built upon to support the content and construct validity of the instruments and to strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Both frameworks highlight reflective elements on two apparently different but complementary perspectives. Gibbs's framework lists the basic stages of reflection which seem to be globally inclusive. In other words, they seem to be at work across a wide range of activities from general to academic. Nonetheless, Akbari et al.'s framework appears to be locally inclusive in that the scale addresses the actions which are more pedagogically oriented (e.g. teaching English).

Among the frameworks already noted, Akbari et al.'s (2010) is the latest one. Their framework of reflective practice includes 5 scales, namely, practical reflection, cognitive reflection, affective reflection, metacognitive reflection, and critical reflection. The practical scale refers to the actual reflection by using tools like keeping journals. The cognitive scale denotes the individual's conscious efforts to develop professionally by reading books and journals. The affective subscale refers to the affective state of teachers. The metacognitive component deals with the knowledge an individual possesses regarding his/her personality, "their definition of learning and teaching, and their view of their profession" (Akbari et al., 2010, p. 215). The critical scale refers to the socio-political aspect of teaching and finally, the moral scale encompasses justice, empathy, and values.

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Gibbs's (1988) is one of the most popular models of reflection (see Adeani et al., 2020) and is drawn substantially upon in this study. Gibbs' theoretical model is a clear, comprehensive and elaborated model (Hussein, 2018). It includes six stages: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. Description, as the first element of the cycle, is based on the factual description of the event. Feelings refer to the emotions one has during and after the event. The third stage of Gibbs' reflective cycle is the objective evaluation of the situation. At this stage, one considers how well s/he thinks things went. Analysis deals with the things one has learned from the incident and requires one to relate the experience to the past experiences or to the theories he is familiar with. Conclusion takes into consideration what one has learned from the event and whether s/he could have responded differently to that situation. Action plan deals with how one responds better next time and considers the lessons s/he can get from the event.

In as much as English language teaching is concerned, the importance of teachers' reflectivity and the necessity of enhancing EFL teachers' reflective skills have been extensively studied and widely emphasized in the literature (Brandt, 2008; Wallace, 1991). Different studies have concluded that reflective teaching has a significantly positive impact on teachers' knowledge and attitudes (Faghihi & Anani Sarab, 2016; Kabilan, 2007; Sturkie, 2017). It has been suggested that reflection enables practitioners to question the long-established ways of teaching and to "develop more informed practice, [develop] tacit beliefs and practical knowledge explicit leading to new ways of knowing and articulating" (Crandall, 2000, p. 40). In addition, it has been argued that teachers who do not reflect on their daily practice are more likely to employ ineffective teaching strategies (Braun & Crumpler, 2004). In this regard, Burton (2009) contends that reflection should not only be an integral component of the classroom context but also of English language teacher education programs.

Postulating the practice of reflective teaching as an indispensable dimension to an adept language teacher, Wellington (1991) considers it as "a cycle of thought and action based on professional experience" (p. 4). In a complementary series of publications, Farrell catered for the factors and conditions that encourage and most likely enhance reflective teaching. Elements such as group discussions, action research, concept mapping, observation protocols, teaching journals, self and peer classroom observation, classroom video analysis, and critical friendship are among teaching procedures that foster teachers' reflective practice (Farrell, 1998, 2007). In fact, reflective teaching can potentially lead to reflective thinking as well as certain levels of self-awareness among practicing teachers. In particular, observation protocols help teachers to become more aware of what goes on in the context of the classroom and enable them to think and act critically (Farrell, 2011). In a more recent study, Farrell (2016) additionally disclosed that engaging in a group/team reflection process helps novice English as a second language (ESL) teachers gain insights from the shocks they ran into during the first teaching semester, hence enabling them to survive.

2.2 Reflective Practice in Iran

Not unlike other Asian countries, the educational system in Iran suffers from persistent pedagogic problems that have their roots in the kind of collective conception which prioritizes traditional, rote, memorization-driven, teacher-centered and receptive modes of learning dictating teaching-to-the-test in itself. Such prescriptions with profound obsessions with and inclinations to test-oriented materials seem to leave very little scope, if any, for learner-centered problem-based curricula where inculcating creativity and higher-order thinking skills prevails considerably (DeWaelsche, 2015; Kim, 2002; Lee & Sriraman, 2013).

Following the educational reform in Western and East Asian countries, the Ministry of Education in Iran has recently integrated the teaching of creativity, critical and reflective thinking to almost all levels of formal education in the form of textbooks entitled "thinking." Still steps away from the target condition where individual learners can reflect on their courses of action, this new move is potentially capable of influencing in-service teachers in two interconnected and complementary ways, i.e., to equip them with sufficient tools to help their students get familiar with different steps to critical reflection and to help themselves teach reflectively.

Despite such an attempt to incorporate higher-order thinking methods and materials into the curriculum, there is a major controversy about whether it is a culture-specific concept. On the one hand, it has been argued that higher-order thinking is not culture-bound and is a property that belongs to all cultures (e.g., Kumaravadivelu, 2003). On the other hand, there are scholars who identify higher-order thinking as a legacy of Western culture (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; McGuire, 2007) and as they assert, the "mismatch of educational actuality and the growing need for teachers and students to learn to think differently elicits several concerns" (Sellars et al., 2018, p. 3). Despite the controversy over

the issue, the traditional view of teaching prevails in Asian countries and teachers experience a process of proletarianization (Safari, 2016). This is the process in which memorization is encouraged rather than enhancing the cognitive abilities of students (Stapleton, 2011). In such a context, teachers appear to consider their responsibilities as managing and implementing the curriculum rather than participating in curriculum development (Giroux, 1988, cited in Safari, 2016).

Likewise, social conformity which has turned to be the norm in a country like Iran acts as a barrier to higher-order thinking and prevents its realization. Conformity encouraged by the current sociopolitical norms defies the Western heritage and outcasts any non-conformity to the national norms (Enayat et al., 2015). Affected by such circumstances, English language teaching (ELT) in Iran has neglected learners' needs and failed to appreciate teachers' autonomy (Atai, & Mazlum, 2013) resulting in teacher-oriented pedagogy which, in Safari's (2016, p.4) terms "is in conflict with liberation, equality, social justice, and democracy" rules. It is not surprising therefore to find EFL teacher education neglecting the call for the emancipation of teachers. Since such courses present idealized one-size-fits-all approaches to EFL teachers, they disregard teachers' personal experiences (Karimvand et al., 2014).

In sum, as Sangani and Stelma (2012, p. 116) argue, in developing contexts like Iran higher-order thinking and reflective practice among teachers are influenced and shaped by

- The hierarchical nature of educational systems, and the associated lack of autonomy on different levels;
- The absence of a culture of 'openness' and 'questioning';
- Challenging working conditions, including time, financial, and other resource constraints;
- (Lack of) pedagogical and content knowledge;
- The extent to which reflective practice is supported/scaffolded.

This designates that there are various factors which bar teachers' reflection; however, despite barriers, hasty conclusions in this regard may overshadow possible realities. Although it seems that reflective teaching practices are currently not adequately incorporated into the Iranian English language teacher education curriculum, nonetheless, the results of studies carried out to date herald a more promising future. In the past few years, a number of studies have addressed, albeit not comprehensively, the practice of reflective teaching by Iranian EFL teachers. Among the major themes in this particular line of inquiry lie the influence of Iranian English teachers' reflection on EFL learners' speaking proficiency (Rahnama et al., 2016), the effect of reflective practice on enhancing teaching quality (Moradkhani et al., 2017), the influence of using two distinct types of reflective practice on enhancing in-service EFL teachers' critical thinking ability (Sabah & Rashtchi, 2017), the effect of reflective teaching on Iranian EFL students' achievement (Kheirzadeh & Sistani, 2018), the relationship between EFL teachers' reflective practices and their teaching effectiveness (Motallebzadeh et al., 2018), and the English language teachers' perception of their level of reflection (Faghihi & Anani Sarab, 2016).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed method design into EFL teachers' perceptions of reflective practice and the barriers to teachers' reflectivity. A mixed method design, a follow up selection model, was implemented since it combines qualitative and quantitative research that in itself minimizes the limitations of both approaches used distinctly (Creswell, 2013).

3.2 Research Sample

A total number of 98 available EFL teachers (76 males and 22 males) with B.A (Bachelor of Arts), M.A (Master of Arts), and Ph.D. degrees were chosen as the participants. The sample included two groups of teachers. The first group comprised the teachers who worked full time in institutes and the second group consisted of the high school teachers who worked limited hours as their part-time job in institutes. The EFL teachers' teaching experience varied from less than one year to 15 years, and their age ranged from 22 to 46 years. An attempt was made to involve teachers who were teaching various levels at language schools (ranging from elementary to advanced). 89 of the EFL teachers held English-related academic degrees including Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), English Literature, and

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English Translation, while the other nine participants' academic degrees were from other fields of study. All participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

3.3 Research Instruments and Procedure

3.3.1 The English Language Teacher Reflection Inventory (ELTRI)

To measure reflective teaching, the English language teacher reflection inventory developed by Akbari et al. (2010) was used. The researchers proposed an operational definition of reflection and constructed a scale for the measurement of reflective practice. The questionnaire includes 29 items on a five-point Likert scale, consisting of five options of never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always. The scale comprised 5 bands, namely, practical reflection, cognitive reflection, affective reflection, metacognitive reflection, and critical reflection.

3.3.2 The Semi-Structured Interview

To consolidate the findings of the ELTRI inventory, a semi-structured interview with 20 volunteer EFL teachers was conducted. As the first step, the researchers made sure that the interviewees were well aware of the purpose of the study and well-motivated to take part in the interview. Two experts in the field of applied linguistics were asked to review the interview questions and the guidelines for validity purposes. The interviews were conducted in Farsi since it was assumed that the teachers could express their ideas freely in their mother tongue. The teachers were asked to remember a typical day they had recently in their classroom and think about the experiences they had during the specific situation. In particular, based on Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle, the interviewer, who was the first researcher, asked them some questions to probe into the EFL teachers' level of reflection (see the interview guide, Appendix A). The interviewer also used a reflective practice checklist (see Appendix B) to rate the participants' level of reflection. Each interview lasted for 30 minutes. With the participants' consent, the responses were recorded and transcribed. It should be mentioned that each interview was translated into English by the researchers. Then the data were transcribed and codified.

3.3.3 The Open-ended Questionnaire

To construct the BRPQ based on solid grounds, an open-ended questionnaire that drew on the related literature was developed (see Appendix C). There were two general questions in the questionnaire. The first question inquired if they reflect on classroom events. This was followed by a question that directly asked teachers to explain what bars their reflective practice. The respondents were notified that they could choose either Farsi or English to answer the questions.

3.4 Barriers to Reflective Practice Questionnaire (BRPQ)

In order to develop the questionnaire, both content and construct validity types were investigated. The steps taken were as follows:

After analyzing the data based on the open-ended questionnaire, the related literature (e.g., Avarzamani & Farahian, 2019; Newton, 1997; Soodmand & Farahani, 2017) as the theoretical foundation for developing the scale was consulted and the first pool of the items including 25 items was developed. To achieve items with higher indices of clarity, based on consultation with four experts in the area, two items were removed and the rest were revised. Then, a principal component analysis was employed to validate the scale. The results of the correlation matrix revealed that 5 items had to be eliminated. After rerunning the factor analysis, the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) was 0.71 indicating the suitability of the data. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity also reached statistical significance ($\chi 2$ (511) = 6314.42, p = 0.000 < 0.05). All 18 items had acceptable loadings based on a principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation. Each item was followed by a 5-point Likert scale including 1 "not at all", 2 "to a small scale", 3 "to some extent", 4 "to a moderate extent, and 5 "to a great extent." The reliability of the scale was ensured since the estimated Cronbach α was found to be adequate (.83).

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

The data for the present study were collected in two phases (see figure 1). As the first phase, in order to determine the EFL teachers' degree of reflectivity, the participants were recruited and the ELTRI was distributed among them. The participants' consent was obtained and they were reminded that they were free to withdraw at any time. Some teachers received the instruments via email and others who were available during their tea break at the language schools were

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met in the teachers' office and filled in the scale in person. To consolidate the findings, after a week, the same twenty teachers were invited to a semi-structured interview.

Since the obtained results pointed to low levels of teachers' reflective practice, as the second phase, the open-ended questions were given to the interviewees and they were asked to send the answers via WhatsApp to the first researcher. Finally, to triangulate the data of the open ended questionnaire, again after a week interval, all the participants received the BRPQ questionnaire. Of all 98 teachers who received the digital questionnaire, 80 sent it back via email and 18 were collected in a face to face meeting. It should be mentioned that in all stages of the study the obtained information was treated with confidentiality.

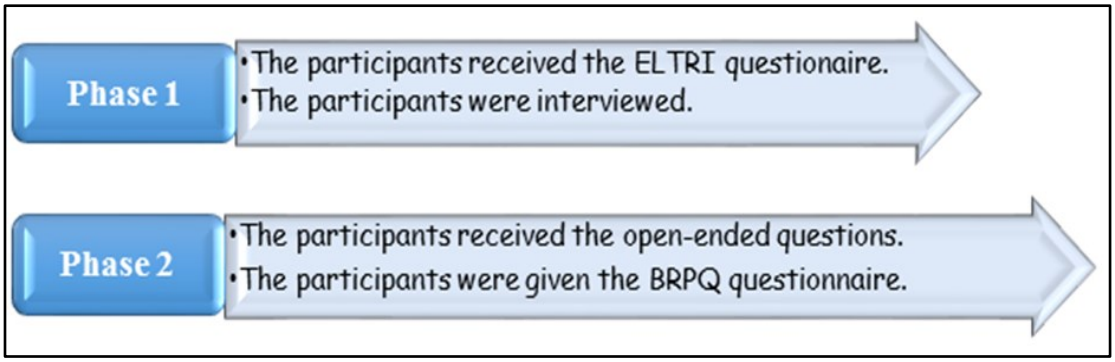

Figure 1. Steps in the procedure

3.6 Data analysis

In the present study, descriptive and inferential statistical methods were employed to analyze the collected data. The results of the questionnaires in the form of quantitative data were fed into SPSS 21 which was followed by using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (KS test) to ensure the normality of distribution. The qualitative data collected by means of the open-ended questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

4. Results

In the case of the ELTRI, all the mean scores were under 3.00. It should be noted that in the 5-point Likert scale, 3 represented the average value, strongly agree received 5, and strongly disagree received 1. This indicates that the EFL teachers did not seem to get involved in reflective practice. To check whether the results were statistically significant, a one-sample t-test was run. Table 1 shows the results of the descriptive statistics performed for this purpose.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the ELTRI inventory

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
the ELTRI inventory	98	2.669	.302

As depicted in Table 1, the overall mean score of reflective practice was 2.43, which was smaller than 3.00 indicating that EFL teachers did not practice reflection at high levels. To find out whether the result was statistically significant a one-sample t-test was conducted (see Table 2).

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Table 2. One-Sample t-test results for the ELTRI inventory

	Test value= 3					
	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Inventory	-10.804	97	.000	-.330	-.391	-.269

A one-sample t-test was conducted to see if the difference between the mean of the sample with the value of 3 was significant. As Table 2 illustrates, the mean for the sample is significantly different from 3. Therefore, it could be concluded that Iranian EFL teachers did not get involved in reflection in their classroom practice. As already stated, to consolidate the findings of the ELTRI analysis, an interview was held and the interviewees' responses were analyzed to find one or more of six stages of Gibb's reflective cycle.

Table 3. Themes, coding categories, and the frequency of interview data

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Description	20	100%
Feeling	14	70%
Evaluation	10	50%
Analysis	3	15%
Conclusion	3	15%
Action plan	3	15%

As Table 3 shows, all participants could describe the activity or the situation they had in their minds. However, it was not clear whether they could recall and describe the majority of the events which occurred daily in their classroom. Only 70 percent could discuss the feelings that were triggered by the event. 50 percent of interviewees reported that they focused on the positive and the negative aspects of the situation and evaluated what went good or bad about it. Moreover, 15 percent of the teachers reported that they analyzed different aspects of events that went well or poorly and asked themselves about the reasons. Again, only 15 percent of the EFL teachers explained that they got to a conclusion about the particular event and the same percent planned to improve it in the future.

Overall, the obtained results from the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview indicated that the EFL teachers' level of reflection is not satisfactory. EFL teachers further clarified the inhibitors that limited reflective practice in the instruction through an open-ended questionnaire.

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Table 4. Obstacles to reflective practice reported by EFL teachers

Obstacles to EFL teachers' reflective practice	Response percentage
Lack of familiarity with the concept	75
Top-down curriculum	46.87
Heavy workload	43.75
Poor working conditions	37.5
Lack of support from the administration	31.25
Crowded classes	31.25
Teachers' lack of motivation	25

As depicted in Table 4, the lack of familiarity with the concept was cited by 75 percent of the respondents. Other major obstacles included top-down curriculum, heavy workload, poor working conditions, lack of support from the administration, crowded classes, and teachers' lack of motivation. As already stated, based on the results obtained from the open-ended questions and the literature a questionnaire was developed. By doing so, the researchers triangulated the findings regarding the barriers. The analysis of the BRP questionnaire can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. The mean and standard deviation of the BRPQ items

Item No.	Item	N	Mean	SD	Meaning
1	Appropriate resources are not provided.	98	2.47	.749	Negative
2	EFL Teachers are not familiar with the concept of reflection.	98	2.55	.801	Negative
3	EFL teachers have not been trained to be reflective.	98	3.06	.670	Positive
4	Type of assessment does not lead to reflection.	98	2.96	.752	Negative
5	The educational system does not provide an appropriate condition for reflective practice.	98	3.59	.606	Positive
6	EFL teachers lack the motivation to practice reflection.	98	2.86	.857	Negative
7	EFL teachers are accustomed to sticking to conventional methods of teaching which do not necessitate reflectivity.	98	2.89	.913	Negative
8	EFL teachers have no say in curriculum development and just are required to implement what they have been told to do.	98	4.20	.745	Positive
9	Inappropriate course books do not allow for EFL teachers' innovation.	98	2.53	.921	Negative
10	EFL teachers do not think that self-reflection may improve their practice.	98	2.64	.922	Negative
11	EFL teachers do not consider reflective practice as an aid to their practice.	98	2.70	1.19	Negative
12	For years, the common practice in the country has been teaching with no reflection.	98	3.73	.819	Positive

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13	EFL teachers lack access to databases to keep themselves more updated like reflective teachers.	98	2.79	1.20	Negative
14	EFL teachers do not have opportunities to share their experiences with other teachers and to benefit from theirs by participating in related workshops or seminars.	98	2.85	.930	Negative
15	Authorities disrespect EFL teachers' autonomy which is a prerequisite to teaching more reflectively.	98	3.94	.829	Positive
16	EFL teachers' workload is an inhibitor to their reflection.	98	3.44	.975	Positive
17	EFL teachers' low language proficiency is a barrier to reflective practice.	98	2.65	.761	Negative
18	Writing reflective journals, observing other classes, and being observed is burdensome for EFL teachers.	98	2.57	.896	Negative

Based on Table 5, six items received the highest mean scores. Item 8 received the highest mean indicating that as restricted by the top-down curriculum, EFL teachers do not play any significant role in the process of curriculum development; therefore, they are not inclined to show high degrees of reflection. The second highest mean belongs to item 15, disclosing that most of the teachers are required to follow what is dictated by the experts "detached from the realities of the language classroom life" (Safari, 2016, p. 2). In such a context, teachers may lose their autonomy and change to passive technicians (Apple, 1986). Item 12, as the third highest mean, portrays the prevalent teaching practice in the country, that is, teaching the way they are taught. Item 5, as the fourth highest mean, states that the educational system does not provide an appropriate condition for reflective practice. Item 16 refers to teachers' workload which may result in teachers' burnout (Kovacs, 2010) limiting their motivation to reflect on their practice. Some teachers reported that 'EFL teachers are not familiar with the concept of reflection', that is why they do not critically reflect on daily classroom events. The sixth highest mean is item 3 which emphasizes a lack of appropriate pre-service and in-service training in EFL educational context to raise teachers' awareness and to help them enhance their higher-order thinking skills.

There were three other items that exceeded the expected value. Item 4 underscores the negative effect of assessment on EFL teachers' reflection. Item 7 highlights the fact that teachers who make use of conventional teaching methods may neglect innovative teaching practices and neglect the fact that there are new perspectives towards learning and teaching. Item 10 draws one's attention to EFL teachers' unfamiliarity with new theories in their careers. To make sure the descriptive results of the BRP questionnaire were reliable, a one-sample t-test was run. As shown in Table 6, the overall mean score of the BRPQ was 3.05, which exceeded 3.00. To find out whether the result was statistically significant, a one-sample t-test was conducted (see Table 6).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for the BRPQ

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The BRPQ	98	3.0504	.21882

Based on Table 7, the t-test was significant at the level of 0.05 (t=2.28. df=97, p=0.025<0.05). Thus, the difference between the BRPQ mean and the expected value (3) was significant. In other words, the EFL teachers showed degrees of agreement regarding the barriers to reflective practice.

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Table 7. One-Sample T-Test results for the BRPQ

	Test value= 3					
	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
The BRPQ	2.280	97	.025	.050	.006	.094

5. Discussion

In the present study, we sought the level of reflection of EFL teachers. In addition, we investigated the barriers to reflection. Based on the results, it was found that Iranian EFL teachers did not get involved in high levels of reflection. The findings of the interview also demonstrated that the teachers applied Gibbs' (1988) first, second, and third levels of reflection and there were a few teachers who used critical reflection. The findings are in line with Faghihi and Anabi Sarab (2016), Marzban and Ashraafi (2016), and Rashidi and Javidanmehr (2012) who report that Iranian EFL teachers are not actively engaged in reflection.

There are two lines of explanation for such a finding. The first explanation is based on the assumption that in Asian countries the traditional view of teaching and learning is prevalent and the transformative approaches to education are in place (Avarzamani & Farahian, 2019). In such a context, teachers lack the necessary higher-order thinking to become critical agents in the educational setting (Giroux, 1988). In other words, it seems that Iranian teachers who have once been students in the same educational context knowingly or unknowingly follow the route(s) their own teachers had adopted (Fahim, & Ahmadian, 2012). They do not expect their students, as Rear (2017) puts it, to question their authority and do not create an environment in which their students engage in problem-solving activities. Perhaps, sociopolitical norms and social conformity have been barriers to Iranian EFL teachers' development of higher-order thinking. In sum, there is the possibility that higher-order thinking is context-dependent and culture may facilitate or debilitate its development (Enayat et al., 2015). This, as O'Sullivan (2002) believes, does not mean that teachers in developing countries as Iran cannot reflect, but that they have not been trained to be reflective. More research studies should be conducted in this regard and caution should be exercised in any hasty conclusions.

There is another plausible explanation for the findings of the first research question in line with the views of scholars who do not consider higher-order thinking as culture-bound (e.g., Davidson, 1998; Gieve, 1998; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). As such, there should be other reasons such as the hierarchical nature of educational systems, challenging working conditions, and the lack of pedagogical and content knowledge as the possible negative influences affecting reflective teacher development (Sangani & Stelma, 2012) in developing world context.

In keeping with both views, the findings of the present study suggested that there are various obstacles that hinder the full realization of reflective teaching. The challenges the teachers met can be classified into three categories of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors that inhibit reflective practice. EFL teachers' lack of freedom to have their voice, lack of respect towards EFL teachers' authority, lack of attention to reflective teaching as the accepted norm in the country, lack of support from the administration, teachers' heavy workload, teachers' lack of familiarity with the concept of reflection, lack of appropriate pre-service and in-service training in EFL educational context were among the challenges EFL teachers faced. In a similar study, Tajik and Ranjbar (2018) identified three categories of obstacles including institutional problems, self-directional problems, and problems with reflective teaching principles in the Iranian EFL context. However, they did not refer to sociocultural factors in their study.

Among all factors found in the present study, EFL teachers' lack of familiarity with the concept of reflection needs special attention. This, as teachers reported, has roots in institutes' lack of proper attention to teachers' development. In a similar context, Harun and Al-Amin (2013) found that the lack of proper teacher education programs in this regard resulted in teachers' unwillingness to doing reflective teaching.

Another barrier reported by the EFL teachers was the top-down curriculum. As Tajik and Ranjbar (2018, p. 152) suggest, "teachers are often stripped of their professional voice and given little freedom to make pedagogical reasoning." What is evident in both public schools and private language schools in Iran is that EFL teachers are

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deprived of any right to have their voice in curriculum development, implement their own methodology and choose the right type of assessment. In such a situation where teachers cannot oppose the rigid structure, they choose to remain submissive and lose the much-needed autonomy. This is the type of education which is in conflict with liberation and democracy. If EFL teachers are given the privilege to participate in the development and implementation of the objectives of the course and have a chance to choose their teaching methods, this may liberate EFL teachers and help them to be critical thinkers who would ultimately act as active practitioners in educational settings.

As EFL teachers' reported, heavy workload and poor working conditions hamper their reflection. Teachers' workload negatively impacts teachers' lives inside the school, raises their stress level, and interferes with their lesson planning (Minott, 2010). Perhaps, the workload is partly due to teachers' current poor socioeconomic conditions which leave no room for teachers to engage in higher-order thinking (Bawaneh et al., 2020) and leave them unmotivated to analyze, evaluate, change, and develop their practice. This complies with the findings of Soodmand and Farahani (2017) who considered teachers' low salary demotivates teachers to think reflectively. Among various factors impeding teachers' reflection, Rashidi and Javidanmehr (2012) also mention that the poorly paid job leaves no motivation for teachers to reflect.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the present study shed light on the barriers to EFL teachers' reflective practice and in a broader perspective the inhibitors to critical pedagogy in Iran. It seems that reflective thinking is not welcome by Iran's ELT curriculum as long as EFL teachers are required to be submissive and to conform to what is prescribed by the curriculum and/or the sociocultural factors. In the postmodern era where much credit is given to critical pedagogy in ELT and the bulk of research is devoted to investigating higher-order thinking, there is a need for Iranian EFL teachers to consider, evaluate, and analyze their teaching experiences in the light of the new theories. As Larrivee (2000, p. 293) puts it, "unless teachers develop the practice of critical reflection, they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations."

Inadequate teacher pre-service and in-service training, lack of support for inexperienced and novice teachers coupled with teachers' low motivation as the result of heavy workload have resulted in low levels of reflection among Iranian EFL teachers. Another result emerged from the study was the negative impact of low wages and financial constraints. Such resource constraints may be a result of an unsatisfactory economic situation.

Back to the controversy about whether higher-order thinking is culture-bound, Davidson (1998) rightly argues that even if one accepts that higher-order thinking is less practiced in some cultures, this does not mean that the teaching of *thinking* in such contexts should be brought to a standstill. This necessitates empowering EFL teachers to take a reflective approach towards their practice and raise their awareness towards the importance of keeping an eye on their emotions, experiences, and responses and evaluating and monitoring their own actions.

Teacher educators and trainers may be encouraged by the findings of the present study to promote EFL teachers' reflective practices in both pre-service and in-service courses and raise their awareness towards the possible barriers. A further study might be carried out to investigate EFL students' views towards the barriers to reflective practice and compare the results with those of the teachers.' It is also suggested that the role of EFL teachers' motivation as a barrier to their reflective practice be more extensively investigated.

6.1 Implications

The outcome of the present study implies that all three institutional, personal, and sociocultural factors should be taken into consideration in a broad perspective of critical pedagogy. Based on such a perspective, the ultimate goal of teacher education is not turning teachers to reflective practitioners but to enable them to be 'transformative intellectuals' (Giroux, 1988) "who consider …transforming undesirable social and cultural conditions through critical reflection and action" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, cited in Abednia, 2009, p. 264). In such a context, EFL teachers' mentality can be geared towards investing their own enlightened practice informed by the current theories. This may help them reflect on their own experiences, and if needed transform the experience into practice.

Like any other study, this study also had some limitations. First, in the paper, it was mentioned that the participants were available EFL teachers. This sampling method may have affected the results since the available sample may not be representative of the teachers who are aware of the barriers to reflective practice. More specifically, the findings may not have echoed motivated teachers' voices and there is no guarantee that the participants were motivated enough

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to participate in the study. Further studies could replicate the study using highly motivated EFL teachers. Second, interesting findings can be achieved if the views of EFL teachers of public schools and language schools are compared. Such a study can help researchers draw meaningful comparisons between different contexts of EFL teaching in Iran. Finally, further research can involve the triangulation of the data. More precisely, further studies could be carried out to ask EFL teachers to write journals on the process of their reflection in their daily practice. Analysis of the journals could enable researchers to have a more vivid picture of the issue at hand since there is the possibility that the interviewees participated in the interview in a cautious, reserved manner, and thus, not reported their genuine reflective practice process. We also suggest that future studies take into consideration the role of EFL teachers' level of education and compare views of teachers with their educational backgrounds.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

While or after daily teaching activities and in your classroom practice you often think about a typical experience you had during a specific situation. Remember an activity you recently had in your classroom. What type of questions you may ask yourself?

1. Description
   - A. What happened?
   - B. When and where did it happen?
   - C. Who was present?
   - D. What did you and the other people do?
   - E. What was the outcome of the situation?
2. Feeling
   - A. What were you feeling during the situation?
   - B. What were you feeling before and after the situation?
3. Evaluation
   - A. What was good and bad about the experience?
   - B. What went well?
   - C. What didn't go so well?
   - D. What did you and other people contribute to the situation (positively or negatively)?
4. Analysis
   - A. Why did things go well?
   - B. Why didn't it go well?
   - C. What knowledge – my own or others (for example academic literature) can help me understand the situation?
5. Conclusion
   - A. What did I learn from this situation?
   - B. How could this have been a more positive situation for everyone involved?
   - C. What skills do I need to develop for me to handle a situation like this better?
   - D. What else could I have done?
6. Action plan
   - A. How can I act differently the next time?
   - B. How can I develop the skills?

Adopted from: Gibbs (1988) cited in University of Edinburgh (2019). Reflection toolkit. Retrieved from https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience/gibbs-reflective-cycle

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APPENDIX B

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE CHECKLIST

To what extent does the EFL teacher reflect? Yes No

She can remember and describe the situation in detail and ask the questions (Appendix A) to get a better understanding of the situation.

She thinks about feelings or thoughts that she had during the experience. The purpose is not to discuss the feeling in detail or comment on it directly.

She evaluates what worked and what didn't work in the situation. She needs to imagine how things were when the incident happened. She also needs to pay attention to the reaction of other people when the incident happened.

She analyzes and extracts meaning from the events. She also tries to find out what lesson she has gained from the event.

She looks back at the event and thinks what else could be done in that particular situation.

She also thinks after events to improve and plan for future action.

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Appendix C

The Open-ended questionnaire

Think about a recent experience in your classroom.

1. Do you think that while teaching or after the class was over you reflected on the event? Did you ask yourself the following questions?

   - What did I do?
   - What went well and what could have been better?
   - If a similar situation occurs what I would do differently?
   - What do I learn from the experience?

2. What obstacles limit your ability to incorporate reflective practice in your instruction? What hinders you from asking the above-mentioned questions?

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