

Blog-Mediated Reflection for Professional Development: Exploring Themes and Criticality of L2 Teachers' Reflective Practice

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Reflection is a key component of teacher quality assessment and a venue for professional development. Among many tools for teacher reflection, keeping blogs as a user-friendly, technology-enhanced tool has recently come to the forefront in teacher education. To contribute to the body of literature on the potentiality of blogs for teacher professional development, this study sought to investigate the use of blogs by Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers to provide a perspective on the themes in their reflection-on-action and the degree of criticality of their reflection. To this end, 32 male and female in-service EFL teachers, teaching at different language institutes, voluntarily agreed to post their classroom experiences to a blog over a 3-month period. Content analysis of the reflection tags resulted in the identification of three main reflective categories, each including a number of themes: (a) teacher-oriented category (e.g., teachers' sharing emotions, classroom management, teaching methods and techniques, use of first language [L1], and instructional ethics); (b) learner-oriented category (e.g., learners' classroom participation, language skills, motivation, and emotions); and (c) context-oriented category (e.g., assessment system, textbooks, classroom facilities, and teachers' working conditions). Moreover, the levels of reflection embedded into the tags were explored using a modified version of a reflection model proposed by Lee (2005). The findings revealed that teachers were more critical (71%) than descriptive (29%) in their reflections. These findings have implications for teachers' reflection and their professional development.

La réflexion est à la fois un élément essentiel de l'évaluation de la qualité chez les enseignantes et enseignants et un domaine de perfectionnement professionnel. La tenue d'un blogue, activité conviviale facilitée par la technologie, s'est récemment imposée comme un nouvel outil de réflexion de premier ordre dans le domaine de la formation des enseignantes et enseignants. Visant à ajouter à la littérature existante sur le potentiel des blogues pour le perfectionnement professionnel du corps enseignant, la présente étude se proposait d'examiner le recours au blogue de professeurs iraniens d'anglais langue étrangère (EFL) afin de fournir un éclairage sur les thèmes de leur réflexion sur l'action et sur le degré de criticité de leur réflexion. Dans ce but, 32 professeurs et professeures d'anglais langue étrangère en cours d'emploi dans divers instituts linguistiques ont volontairement consenti à afficher sur un blogue leurs expériences en classe pendant une période de 3 mois. L'analyse du contenu des balises de réflexion a permis d'identifier trois principales

catégories de réflexion dont chacune portait sur un certain nombre de thèmes : (a) catégorie relative aux enseignants (par ex., partage d'émotions par l'enseignante ou l'enseignant, gestion de la classe, méthodes et techniques d'enseignement, utilisation de la première langue [L1] et éthique pédagogique); (b) catégorie relative aux apprenants (par ex., participation des apprenants en classe, compétences linguistiques, motivation et émotions); et (c) catégorie relative au contexte (par ex., système d'évaluation, manuels scolaires, équipements de salle de classe et conditions de travail des enseignants). Les niveaux de réflexion intégrés dans ces balises ont de plus été explorés à l'aide d'une version modifiée d'un modèle de réflexion proposé par Lee (2005). L'étude a permis de constater que les réflexions des enseignants étaient davantage critiques (71 %) que descriptives (29 %). Ces conclusions ont des implications pour la réflexion des enseignants et pour leur perfectionnement professionnel.

KEYWORDS: reflection, reflection-on-action, blog, descriptive reflection, critical reflection

Introduction

The quality of education depends on the quality of teachers (Pollard & Tann, 1997). Reflectivity, as one of the characteristics of effective teachers and as a tool for greater self-awareness and professional expertise, has received increasing attention over the past few decades (Farrell, 2015a, 2015b; Finlay, 2008; Priddis & Rogers, 2018). Most professionals in the field have argued for the benefits of reflective practices for teacher effectiveness (Dewey, 1933; Farrell, 2007, 2015a; Finlay, 2008; Hillier, 2005; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Teachers' reflections represent the problems they encounter in their teaching and the solutions they adopt in reaction. By reflecting on their action, particularly by moving from descriptive to critical reflection, teachers become more aware of their teaching practice and, hence, can make more informed decisions in the classroom context. Teachers need to be informed of the benefits of reflective teaching as it helps them develop their power of reasoning as to why they use certain types of teaching tasks and strategies and how they can improve their teaching (Lee, 2005). Therefore, the identification of teachers' reflection themes provides better opportunity for teachers to enhance their understanding of their teaching practice, and helps teacher educators enhance teachers' reflectivity and, hence, efficacy in dealing with classroom challenges. However, there is insufficient research on teachers' reflection themes (Romano, 2006) and, more important, the level of criticality in their reflections.

One method that promotes reflection for teachers is keeping a teaching journal. Teaching journals are effective reflective tools as they provide "a place for teachers to experiment, criticize, doubt, express frustration, and raise questions" (Bailey, 1990, p. 218). The use of online journals is attracting

more attention not only for student learning and reflections (Chau & Cheng, 2010; Dos & Demir, 2013; Jimoyiannis & Angelaina, 2012; Lee, 2012; Mynard, 2007; Thorpe, 2004; Yang & Chang, 2012) but also for teacher development purposes (Cakir, 2013; Deng & Yuen, 2013; Tang & Lam, 2014; Yang, 2009). Despite the large body of research on journal-keeping in the traditional format of paper and pencil (e.g., Farrell, 1999a; Liou, 2001; Yayli, 2009), comparatively fewer studies, mainly focused on non-language teachers, have probed into the use of new technologies such as blogs for reflective purposes (Boyd, Gorham, Justice, & Anderson, 2013; Hall, 2018; Mynard, 2007; Petko, Egger, & Cantieni, 2017; Prestridge, 2014; van Wyk, 2013; Yang, 2009). With the development of new technology, which provides powerful potential to facilitate teacher engagement, blogs deserve to be increasingly introduced to the community of teachers for reflective practice as they are more interactive workbenches whereby teachers can easily share their reflection with their peers and supervisors and engage in spontaneous and online reflective practice. Moreover, unlike handwritten journals, blogs can be used to collect large-scale data for research purposes from the participants regardless of their location.

As a response to the call for more investigation into teacher reflection (Romano, 2006) and its role in teachers' continued professional development (Farrell, 2015a, 2015b; Pang, 2017), this capacity of blogs can be used to further probe into the themes on which teachers reflect. In addition, several studies have focused on the reflectivity of teachers using tools such as questionnaires, interviews, and peer observation (for a review, see Farrell, 2016a) or have used blogs for learning and teaching purposes, yet few have explored the reflection themes and the level of teachers' criticality using blogs. In view of the significance of teachers' reflection themes and the use of blogs as a possible tool for reflection, this study focused on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers who reflected on their teaching sessions through keeping an electronic portfolio or blog.

Literature Review

Types and Strategies of Teacher Reflection

Reflection, as a key component of teacher development (Richards, 1990), features highly in teacher education research. Dewey (1993) was the pioneering figure who proposed the notion of reflection. He defined reflection as an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads" (p. 6). Dewey posited that reflection springs from doubt, hesitation, or perplexity related to a situation one has experienced directly. Expanding Dewey's (1933) ideas, on which he premised the concept of "reflective practice," Schön (1983) identified two types of reflection,

which are based on the time when reflection takes place: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action, which entails thinking while doing, happens as teachers examine and evaluate their work as it occurs. Schön argued that reflection-in-action is thinking about what we are doing in the classroom as we are teaching. However, reflection-on-action refers to times when individuals consciously “review, describe, analyze and evaluate their past practice with a view to gaining insight to improve future practice” (Finlay, 2008, p. 3). Later, reflection-for-action was added as the third type of reflection, which is based on forward planning (Reid, 2004). By this type of reflection, teachers can prepare themselves for the future by using the knowledge they have obtained from what happened during classroom instruction and what they reflected on after instruction.

Based on another classification of reflection, which takes the depth of reflection as its point of departure, there are two main types of reflection: a weak form and a strong form (Farrell, 2008). In the weak form, the teacher thinks about events that may not “necessarily lead to improved teaching” (Farrell, 2008, p. 2). This weak version is also called descriptive reflection as the teacher only describes an event or experience. In its stronger form, as Farrell put it, reflective practice becomes an action where “teachers systematically reflect on their own teaching and take responsibility for their actions in the classroom” (p. 2). This version is the so-called critical reflection where the teacher not only describes but also critically examines and evaluates both the experience and the context in which it happened. Of the two forms, the stronger one, namely, critical reflection, is mainly stressed due to its potentiality to improve teachers’ practice (Farrell, 2008; Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

Different models and frameworks for reflection have been proposed since the birth of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Farrell, 2004; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Liakopoulou, 2012; Stanley, 1998; Ward & McCotter, 2004; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Lee (2005, p. 703) proposed a model consisting of three levels of reflection:

1. Recall level (R1): describing experiences and interpreting situations based on recall without looking for alternative explanations.
2. Rationalization level (R2): looking for relationships between pieces of experiences, interpreting the situation with rationale, searching for “why it was,” and generalizing or coming up with guiding principles.
3. Reflectivity level (R3): approaching experiences with the intention of changing/improving in the future, analyzing experiences from various perspectives, and envisioning the influence of cooperating teachers on students’ values/behavior/achievement.

Besides different models for reflection, different strategies or tools for facilitating reflective practice exist. Action research, teaching journals, teacher development groups, blogs, surveys, reflective dialogs, lesson reports, autobiographies, collaborative diary-keeping, audio and video recordings, teacher narratives, portfolios, observations, and questionnaires are some of

these strategies (Farrell, 2008; Motallebzadeh, Hosseinnia, & Domskey, 2017; Mynard, 2007; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Among these reflective strategies, blogs, in line with the rapid expansion of technology, are receiving more attention as a new platform for reflection (Garza & Smith, 2015; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010; Mynard, 2007; Yang, 2009). Yang (2009) defined a blog as “an online journal that users can continuously update . . . online . . . without having to understand HTML [Hypertext Markup Language] or web scripting . . . furthermore, a blog is interactive in the sense that readers can respond with comments in just a few steps” (p. 13).

Blogs deserve more attention due to their ease of use, effective establishment, maintenance of online communities, and user-friendly environment for members to use comment tags (Byingtonm, 2011). Although blogs are used mainly for personal and journalistic purposes, there has been increasing interest in their adaptability for student projects and teacher education (Byingtonm, 2011; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008; Yang, 2009). The interactive nature of blogs makes them effective reflective tools. Members can post messages, raise questions, and receive comments and multiple responses not only from other blog members but also from outsider visitors (Byingtonm, 2011).

Research on Types and Strategies of Teacher Reflection

Only a few studies have investigated the reflection topics and level of reflection of EFL teachers (e.g., Farrell, 1999b, 2013; Liakopoulou, 2012; Liou, 2001; Romano, 2006; Yang, 2009). Focusing on in-service teachers, Farrell (1999b) investigated the reflection themes of three experienced teachers in Korea who formed a teacher development group and reflected on their work weekly. Personal theories, theories of teaching, approaches and methods, evaluation of teaching, self-awareness, questions about teaching, and problems in teaching were the main topics discussed. In a more recent case study, Farrell (2013) found self-awareness as the main topic for reflection. Romano (2006) asked four elementary practicing teachers to identify, describe, and reflect on their “bumpy moments” in teaching for 12 weeks and to report the sessions every other week. Management issues turned out to be the major concern of the teachers. Pre-service teachers’ reflection has been the subject of a few studies (e.g., Liakopoulou, 2012; Liou, 2001). Replicating Farrell’s study, Liou (2001) analyzed 40 observation reports by pre-service teachers and found seven main reflection topics: theories of teaching, approaches and methods, evaluating teaching, questions about teaching, self-awareness, classroom management, and evaluation of the lesson plan. In Liakopoulou’s (2012) study, the trainee teachers focused on topics such as the forms and methods of teaching. Although the above studies provided a picture of teachers’ reflective themes, they were limited to a rather small sample size or to pre-service teachers.

Regarding the level of reflection, in-service teachers have shown criticality in their reflections (Farrell, 1999b). However, as numerous studies show,

pre-service teachers have been more descriptive (Killeavy & Moloney, 2010; Liakopoulou, 2012; Yayli, 2009). In a survey of teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching and journal writing as a way of reflection, Yayli (2009) analyzed reflective journals written by 62 pre-service EFL teachers. The results showed that the teachers were mostly descriptive rather than critical in their reflections. In Liakopoulou's (2012) study, content analysis of reflection reports prepared by 68 pre-service teachers showed that most of the participants engaged in descriptive reflection, and very few practiced critical reflection. Killeavy and Moloney (2010) also investigated the reflective development of newly qualified teachers. Each participant kept a blog for a 4-month period and was asked to share their blog address with at least one other peer in the program and to respond using posts on their peer's blog. The results showed that most of the postings were descriptive in nature rather than critical. Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2018) also found that teaching experience had an impact on EFL teachers' perceptions of reflective teaching. These studies indicate that the criticality of reflection is tied to teaching experience.

Despite the body of research on teacher reflection and the potentiality of blogging for reflective purposes among teachers from non-language content areas, there is a scarcity of research on their use for reflection among second language (L2) teachers (Garza & Smith, 2015; Yang, 2009). Garza and Smith (2015) used blogging to examine pre-service teachers' reflections about their practice. The use of reflective writing through blogging helped identify pre-service teachers' reflections on the mechanistic aspects of teaching without a critical examination of the nature of what was observed. However, Garza and Smith's findings indicated the potential of blogging to structure reflective thinking and to enhance the teachers' understanding about teaching and learning. Focusing on blogs, Yang (2009) investigated the use of blogs as a reflective tool in the training processes of EFL student teachers. All of the participants were reflective, though not all critically reflected on their experiences. Yang observed that blogging promoted descriptive and critical reflections.

The above review shows that all of the studies investigated the reflection topics and level of reflection of pre-service teachers except those few studies (e.g., Farrell, 1999b; Romano, 2006) that worked with in-service teachers. In-service teachers are responsible for teaching their classes whereas pre-service teachers only observe teaching sessions or teach classes as practicing experience. Therefore, in-service teachers may encounter problems that pre-service teachers may never face. In view of this, the present study aimed to focus on a larger sample of in-service teachers to explore their reflection themes via a blog. Moreover, although a few relevant studies have been conducted (e.g., Killeavy & Moloney, 2010; Mynard, 2007; Yang, 2009), there is still a dearth

of research on the potentiality of blogs as reflective tools among L2 teachers. To bridge this gap, the following questions were raised:

- (1) What themes emerge out of EFL teachers' classroom reflection-on-action via a blog?
- (2) What type of reflection-on-action, descriptive or critical, do EFL teachers practice in their blogging?

Method

Participants

A criterion-based selection method (Dörnyei, 2007), rather than a random one, was chosen as the sampling method. In this method, the researcher specifies the criteria essential to the purposes of the study and looks for those candidates fulfilling those specific attributes. The participants of this study were chosen in terms of three constant criteria: (a) being an English-language teacher, that is, in-service teachers, (b) teaching at language institutes rather than schools or universities, and (c) teaching adults rather than children or young adults. Out of 42 in-service EFL teachers who were invited to participate in this study, 32 teachers agreed to participate on a voluntary basis. They taught general English at various proficiency levels at different language institutes in Iran. The participants consisted of 13 male and 19 female teachers. They differed in the length of teaching experience, ranging from 1 year to 22 years. Table 1 includes demographic data on the participants.

Table 1
Participating Teachers' Demographic Information

Gender	Frequency
Male	13
Female	19
Teaching Experience	
Up to 3 years	5
3-10 years	17
More than 10 years	10
Education	
BA/BS	3
MA/MS	25
PhD	4

Instrumentation

A blog was designed by the authors to collect the reflection tags teachers wrote based on their classroom experiences. An orientation session was held

for teachers on what reflection is and how to work with the blog. Therefore, the participants could easily log in using the name of the blog, their user-names, and passwords, and post their reflection tags to the blog. Owing to the delimitation of the study to independent reflection, each teacher tagged their reflection individually without having access to other teachers' tags. This procedure prevented teachers from being directed by other teachers' reflection tags. The teachers were requested to assign a password to each of their comment tags, that is, blog entries, in the process of writing and posting them to the blog. Hence, each teacher's reflection tags became invisible to the other teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the 32 in-service EFL teachers who participated in the study, orientation sessions were held individually or in groups on issues such as using the blog, writing reflection tags, assigning passwords, and posting the tags to the blog. Each teacher wrote a reflection tag per week, in at least 100 words, during a period of 3 months based on their classroom experiences. The teachers were asked to post at least 10 reflection tags during this period. In their reflection tags, they reflected on what had happened in their classes. Whereas more interested teachers sent more than 10 reflection tags, others posted less than 10 tags. Regular e-mails and messages were sent to the participants to encourage and remind them to write their reflection tags. At the end of the data collection period, 300 reflection tags were collected.

A content analysis of each teacher's reflection entries, tagged to the blog, was conducted to explore what themes emerge. The themes found in the previous studies informed the content analysis, but it was not limited to those themes. To analyze the data, this study adopted a grounded theory approach, which is a controlled, systematically inductive approach to the development of theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In grounded theory, instead of data being placed into predetermined categories, the categories emerge from the data during coding. The themes were refined over time by the authors to ensure a maximum agreement on the themes. Each blog entry contained one theme or numerous separate themes. The emergent themes were then classified into macro and micro categories. The data were analyzed using the procedure of data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which takes place through the process of coding and involves assigning units of meaning to data chunks.

To investigate the level of reflection applied for each reflection tag, that is, descriptive or critical reflection, a modified version of Lee's (2005) model was employed. For this study, descriptive reflection was defined as the Recall level (R1) in Lee's (2005) model. Analysis of the Rationalization level (R2) and Reflectivity (R3) level in Lee's model showed that both these levels have elements of criticality. Therefore, critical reflection was considered as a combina-

tion of both Rationalization (R2) and Reflectivity (R3) levels. All the tags were subjected to content analysis to identify the teachers' level of reflection. To ensure the accuracy of the judgements made on the level of reflection by the authors, a third rater was informed of the process and asked to read all the tags and judge their levels of reflection. As expected, the raters did not agree on a number of tags. These tags became the subject of more discussion and analysis by the raters. As a result, the raters reached agreement on these tags.

Results

Reflection Themes

All the reflection tags, that is, blog entries, were first coded and then analyzed for recurring themes. The themes identified in the previous studies were used for initial coding of the data. However, in the process of analyzing these data, several new themes emerged. Careful content analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three main reflection categories, each including a number of themes. Table 2 presents the categories and themes along with their frequencies and percentages. As the table shows, the teachers reflected on three categories of themes, with the teacher-oriented category (57.59%) making up more than half of their reflection themes, followed by the learner-oriented category (26.07%) and the context-oriented category (16.34%).

Table 2
Reflection Themes Emerging from Teachers' Classroom Reflections via the Blog

Category	Frequency	% of Total
Teacher-Oriented Category	349	57.59
Learner-Oriented Category	158	26.07
Context-Oriented Category	99	16.34
Total	606	100

Each reflection category and its themes are presented below, accompanied by excerpts from teachers' postings on the blog. All the excerpts were copied intact from the teachers' blogging.

(A) Teacher-Oriented Category

The teacher-oriented category refers to those themes related to teachers and their teaching practice (Table 3). This category includes 10 themes. In what follows, those with the highest frequencies are described in detail.

Table 3
Teacher-Oriented Reflection Themes

Category	Themes	Frequency
Teacher-Oriented Category	1. Sharing Emotions	99
	2. Classroom Management	78
	3. Relationship Management	35
	4. Problem-Solving Follow-Ups	34
	5. Teaching Methods and Techniques	29
	6. Use of L1	24
	7. Teachers' Instructional Ethics	15
	8. Advice-Seeking	13
	9. Error Correction	12
	10. Teachers' Classroom Preparation	10

Note. L1 = First language.

Sharing Emotions: Teachers' postings revealed that they had experienced different emotions while teaching. These emotions included anxiety and uneasiness, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, exhaustion, sadness, happiness, disappointment, irritation, humiliation, guilty conscience, hatred, anger, hopelessness, and perseverance. For instance, Teacher 21 (T21) described anxiety and uneasiness in Week 2:

I believe that in some classes there is a problem with the atmosphere of the class that bugs you and in my opinion it can be the worst problem for a teacher. This semester I have a class in which the atmosphere is really heavy and strained. . . . (T21, Week 2)

Classroom Management: This theme included three components: (a) time management, (b) heterogeneous classes, and (c) discipline problems.

Time management was an issue of concern to the teachers. As Teacher 2 (T2) pointed out,

. . . I guess I need to teach a bit faster. Otherwise, I won't be able to finish the book . . . (T2, Week 15)

Heterogeneous classes in terms of students' age, gender, and proficiency level were challenging to the teachers, which made them reflect on it. Dealing with teenagers, old students, disabled students, zero beginners, and students of the opposite gender was problematic.

I have a class with different gender, age, educational background, English proficiency level . . . It creates a lot of problems for me . . . (T19, Week 2)

Discipline problems were also challenging to teachers, as described by Teacher 5:

I'd always thought handling teenage girls would be much easier than handling teenage boys. However, in a class yesterday, I had a really tough time . . . my class yesterday was beyond my imagination . . .
(T5, Week 8)

Relationship Management: This reflection theme embodied various relationships: (a) teacher-student, (b) teacher-teacher, (c) student-student, (d) teacher-parents, and (e) teacher-institute. For instance, the importance of teacher-student relationship is reflected in Teacher 6's (T6) decision on prioritizing this relationship over teaching lessons. Also, Teacher 10 (T10) found student-student conflictive relationship of significance to reflect on. The two statements below document the teachers' reflection on relationship management:

It was the first session of my class. I decided to take more time to know my student before going to the lesson. I spent about 45 minutes of the class to get to know students precisely . . . (T6, Week 7)

I still predict some minor conflicts among them [students] because of some rival talks between them in terms of school, English knowledge . . . (T10, Week 1)

Problem-Solving Follow-Ups: In some of the reflections, the teachers engaged in providing solutions to the problems they encountered in their classes and reported the results of their problem-solving attempts. The results reported by the teachers were either success or failure in solving the problems. However, in some cases, the results of the attempts to solve the problems could only be observed in the long run. Hence, no result was reported by the teacher. In the following excerpt, Teacher 14 (T14) reports on the results of using a new successful technique in her class to motivate students:

. . . having run in my classes, I found it effective since it changed the atmosphere of the class. The students got more motivated . . . I think this technique can make a positive contribution to students' motivation to learn . . . (T14, Week 7)

Teaching Methods and Techniques: The methods and techniques used for teaching were subject to more reflection by the teachers, especially when the methods were imposed on them by the institute, and they did not have the right to adapt them:

The methodology we're applying in ILI [Iran Language Institute] has fundamental problems; the main one is that it makes the learning

process SUPER boring. My students hate the laborious repetitions and they don't like to memorize the dialogue . . . (T25, Week 3)

Use of L1: Use of the learners' mother tongue by both the teachers and learners and their attitudes toward its use was of concern to teachers. As a teacher stated,

As I entered the class for the first time I started speaking English from the very beginning with no Farsi words . . . (T4, Week 10)

In addition to the above themes, there were other lower frequency themes falling within the teacher-oriented category: *Teachers' Instructional Ethics* (teachers' awareness of their strengths, weaknesses, duties, and moral issues), *Advice-Seeking* (requests for advice and help from colleagues), *Error Correction* (how and when to correct learners' errors), and *Teachers' Classroom Preparation* (being well-prepared before attending the class).

(B) Learner-Oriented Category

The learner-oriented category encompassed those themes related to learners and their learning. This category included five themes (Table 4). Table 4 provides evidence that the teachers devoted most of their reflection to learners' classroom participation and responsibility ($n = 44$) and were the least reflective of learners' emotions ($n = 17$). Each theme falling within this category is described below.

Table 4
Learner-Oriented Reflection Themes

Category	Themes	Frequency
Learner-Oriented Category	1. Learners' Classroom Participation and Responsibility	44
	2. Learners' Emotions	17
	3. Development of Learners' Language Skills	40
	4. Learners' Motivation and Self-Confidence	38
	5. Feedback from Learners	19

Learners' Classroom Participation and Responsibility: Teachers were usually unhappy and dissatisfied with learners who did not take any responsibility for their learning. Physical rather than mental attendance in classes, insufficient preparation for sessions, and unwillingness to participate in classroom activities were instances of the students' irresponsibility:

. . . after calling the roll, I asked students to open their workbooks.
I noticed that some students did not do their workbooks . . . (T8, Week 1)

Learners' Emotions: One of the issues that received attention from the teachers was learners' emotions and feelings. The importance of learners' emotions is evident from Teacher 15's (T15) reflection note:

In one of my classes that are held at three o'clock, the students are always tired and sleepy as they come to class after school. Some of them even don't have enough time to grab a bite to eat before coming to class . . . (T15, Week 7)

Development of Learners' Language Skills: Development of learners' four language skills and the subskills of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation was another topic of reflection:

Students found it a bit problematic to understand the difference between present perfect simple and its continuous form (the grammar I was teaching) . . . (T2, Week 3)

Learners' Motivation and Self-Confidence: The teachers had great concern about learners' motivation and confidence. Their consciousness about the need to raise students' motivation is indicated by Teacher 4 (T4):

The only problem I felt I couldn't manage to solve was that Hoda a student of mine showing not that enthusiasm in towards English . . . I'm still thinking about how to make her more motivated and interested . . . (T4, Week 2)

Feedback from the Learners: Some of the teachers were interested in the feedback they received from the learners. It seems that they used the feedback to evaluate their teaching and what they had done:

I just found out that I'm not as popular at the ILI as I used to be . . . Recently, I've heard from one student who is close to me that a few of her classmates can't stand me any longer. I asked her for the reason in wonder . . . (T9, Week 2)

(C) Context-Oriented Category

The context-oriented category refers to those themes akin to the context of teaching. The teachers failed to control these themes as they fell within the power of the institutes. This category included five themes illustrated in Table 5. Among the themes, assessment system ($n = 24$) and supervisor observation ($n = 12$) constituted the most and least frequent, respectively. The nature of the five themes is described below.

Table 5
Context-Oriented Reflection Themes

Category	Themes	Frequency
Context-Oriented Category	1. Assessment System	24
	2. Textbook and Syllabus	23
	3. Classroom Facilities	21
	4. Teachers' Working Conditions	19
	5. Supervisor Observation	12

Assessment System: Evaluating both learners' learning and the efficiency of the assessment system of the institute was of interest to teachers.

Nobody can deny the role of quizzes in the evaluation of students' performance. . . . The 21st session is allocated to the final exam and apart from this exam there is no other exam in our syllabus. Since our students have got used to study only when they have an exam, the lack of either any quizzes or mid-term exams seems a deficiency in the syllabus. (T18, Week 5)

Textbook and Syllabus: Teachers faced difficulty dealing with the textbooks and syllabuses imposed by the language centers. Teacher 18 (T18) criticized the textbooks in Week 1:

Our books in the Adult Department of the ILI are boring and there is no doubt about it . . . In one of our levels we work on "be going to" for 5 or 6 sessions so everybody was bored to death. (T18, Week 1)

Another teacher manifested the problem with the syllabus:

Vocabulary teaching should be done at the end of the class time according to the syllabus, so everybody is tired! The students are more concerned with time to go home, rather than listening to some out-of-context, disjointed vocabulary items! (T5, Week 15)

Classroom Facilities: Classroom facilities, such as light, the cooling system, whiteboards, class size, and the number of students, were sources of problems for teachers:

The whiteboard of my classroom is the most frightening object in my life. It is so difficult to clean the board that I spent a great deal of energy and an unusual amount time to get rid of what is written on it. (T18, Week 10)

Teachers' Working Conditions: Teachers' working conditions such as workload, working hours, payment, finding subteachers, and having some days off were important points of reflection to the teachers. The following excerpt is a tag by Teacher 9 (T9):

I was terribly shocked when I first found out that there was no break between my first and second class in my new branch in the north . . . to me, it is really humiliating and offensive. . . . (T9, Week 10)

Supervisor Observation: Supervisor observation and its influence on both the teacher and the learners was a topic of reflection:

Shock-observer, rhyming with shock-absorber, is a humorous nickname given to observers by one of the colleagues! I was observed today. Although the class was an elementary level which I had taught hundreds of times, and although I have every confidence in myself as a capable teacher with a good command of English, I was SHOCKED. And so were my students . . . (T5, Week 11)

Level of Reflection

The second purpose of this study was to identify the level of reflection applied by the teachers. Table 6 presents the findings.

Table 6
Level of Reflection in Comment Tags

Level of Reflection	Frequency of Reflection Tags	Percentages
Descriptive	87	29%
Critical	213	71%
Total	300	100%

As Table 6 shows, critical reflection (71%) was applied more than descriptive reflection (29%). The difference was rather great. Descriptive reflection was used to only recall classroom events. For instance, Teacher 20 (T20) reported on one of her classroom problems in Week 2. The teacher merely described a teaching session by recalling the experience, without making any attempts to look for alternative explanations:

In some classes I really have problem with facilities of the class for instance the cassette player when it is hard to play it back and forward or find the track easily u prefer not to go through that part of a lesson as much as possible. Or White board which is the essential part of each class. In some classes they are hard to erase . . . (T20, Week 2)

While explaining a session in detail, Teacher 8 (T8) failed to have a critical view toward his teaching and only reported on what had happened in Week 4:

As I entered the room, I smiled a polite greeting. Before getting down on my business, I exchanged pleasantries and greetings with my students. After calling the roll, I asked the students if they had

any questions or problems with regard to the materials that I have taught in the previous sessions. Being made sure that they did not have any questions or problems, I asked them to open their workbooks. There was a set of activities there. First, I checked their workbooks then I required them to read each part. One by one, each student read out loud the questions and provided the class with his response . . . (T8, Week 4)

In 71% of the reflection, teachers tended to more critically reflect on their classroom experiences. In the following reflection tag, Teacher 9 (T9), in Week 1, started with recalling some of her experiences. She then looked for the relationships between pieces of her experiences, interpreted the situation, and searched for “why it was”:

After teaching English for about 10 years, I just noticed how impatient I am as a teacher. I think I am popular enough among the students. Many of them change their classes every term to attend mine but it doesn't suffice. I've recently heard from some parents and students that they are always anxious and nervous in my classes. That's why they cannot perform well in the class. They answer simple questions wrongly and make a lot of slips. I wondered why . . . (T9, Week 1)

Finally, she approached this experience with the intention of changing/improving it in the future.

. . . Maybe I expect too much of them or need to work on my tolerance of their mistakes.

In the following reflection, Teacher 5 (T5) reports on a teaching session in Week 3:

I was doing transformational spoken drills, typical of ILI books in line with the so-called Audio-lingual approach to language teaching. A student couldn't do the transformation and therefore one of my bright students came up with the correct sentence. Meanwhile, there were some noise and talking in the back of the class. Although I'm usually calm and cheerful in my classes, I put on an angry face, frowned and somehow shouted at the students to be quiet. Perhaps it was the first time that the students of that class had seen such an aggressive behavior of me and became as quiet as a mouse! To go on with the transformational drill, I addressed the same bright student who had come up with the correct sentence some seconds ago, to do the next one. And to my surprise he began stammering and couldn't! As if he had seen a ghost, startled and unable to respond properly! . . . (T5, Week 3)

The teacher then went on critically making conclusions about the influence of the teachers' mood on learners' performance:

This experience helped me find out that teacher's mood has an immense effect on the students' performance. I realized that my mood as a teacher has a great effect on the atmosphere of the class and students' performance. I need to be more careful!

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore in-service EFL teachers' reflection on their classroom experiences via a blog. Analysis of the reflection reports tagged to the blog provided insights into various issues teachers considered to be important in their teaching. Analysis of these data showed that teachers reflected on three main categories, each including many themes: (a) teacher-oriented category (e.g., teachers' sharing emotions, classroom management, relationship management, teaching methods and techniques, use of L1, instructional ethics, and error correction); (b) learner-oriented category (e.g., feedback from learners, learners' classroom participation, language skills, motivation, and emotions); and (c) context-oriented category (e.g., assessment system, textbook and syllabus, supervisor observation, classroom facilities, and teachers' working conditions). With the highest frequency (57.59%), teacher-oriented themes turned out to be of the greatest importance to the teachers. Teachers' reflection was focused on teacher-related issues such as classroom management, teaching methods and techniques, relationship management, and classroom preparation. Learner-oriented themes (26.07%) and context-oriented themes (16.34%) ranked second and third, respectively.

The literature on reflection shows that only a few of these themes have been identified: teaching methods and techniques (Farrell, 1999b; Liou, 2001; Liakopoulou, 2012; Yang, 2009), classroom management (Liou, 2001; Romano, 2006), teachers' classroom preparation (Romano, 2006), time management (Romano, 2006), and advice-seeking (Yang, 2009). Teacher-oriented themes such as teachers' sharing emotions, relationship management, and teachers' instructional ethics are seemingly newly found themes, showing the variety of topics teachers reflect on. It follows that, besides the common themes of teaching methods and techniques, classroom management, and time management, teachers have a wider range of concerns. How they feel, how they manage their relationships with parents and institutes, and how they evaluate their activities are significant to them as well.

Moreover, particularly in this study, teachers were found to reflect on context-oriented themes, including textbook and syllabus, classroom facilities, teachers' working conditions, supervisor observation, and assessment system. Teachers specified the need for having the opportunity to select the teaching materials themselves rather than being predetermined by the

institutes. They also preferred to design their own syllabus based on their learners' needs and teaching contexts. The goal of institutes for enforcing uniformity among all the teachers in teaching syllabus and methodology seems unfavorable to the teachers, leaving no room for creativity. As blog entries show, classroom facilities cause serious problems and influence teaching. Teachers like to focus on more important issues than the heating system and whiteboard. Besides facilities, supervisor observation also was a source of tension for teachers, even for the experienced ones. This indicates that new methods of supervision and observation are required to diminish the impact of observers' presence to a minimum. Furthermore, teachers were dissatisfied with their working hours and payment. All these concerns, revealing the basic needs of classrooms, can have an immediate influence on the quality of teaching and, hence, on the quality and success of language education. It can be argued that, through regular reflection on their practice, teachers can gradually identify sources of problems they may confront while teaching. Teachers need to know that reflection is a problem-solving activity that increases their effectiveness (Day, 1999). Some classroom issues, such as problems with the syllabus, may be explicit whereas other issues may be rather implicit, taking time to surface. Reflection is useful for the identification of both types of issues, especially the implicit ones. Reflection also helps teachers focus on their underlying beliefs and assumptions. Reflective teachers build a repertoire of experiences called exemplars (Schön, 1983). Once they confront a problem, they examine its context and start looking for a similar problem in their repertoire of exemplars, which they have solved successfully in the past. They use this similar experience to deal with their current problem and also frame a new situation and update their exemplars. As a result, through reflection and the process of framing and reframing, teachers build up a set of strategies, identify their underlying beliefs, and become more effective teachers. Without regular, systematic reflection, such professional development is unlikely to happen (Schön, 1983).

Reflection themes found in the present study are partly in line with those reported by other studies. For instance, Liou (2001) found reflection themes such as theories of teaching, approaches and methods, evaluation of teaching, self-awareness, and classroom management. Unlike the present study, Liou did not report on themes such as teachers' working conditions, classroom facilities, and time management. However, the participants of Liou's study were student teachers rather than in-service ones. Hence, they did not notice themes such as teachers' working conditions and time management as they were not responsible for teaching the classes themselves. Likewise, two other studies reported on reflection themes partly similar to those identified in the present study. Studying peer collaborative reflection through blog postings, Yang (2009) found that the EFL student teachers reflected, *inter alia*, on theories of teaching, instructional approaches and methods, and self-awareness. Self-awareness was also the main theme identified by Farrell

(2013) in his case study. This can be parallel to the theme specified as teachers' instructional ethics in the present study.

Compared with the studies by Farrell (2013), Liou (2001), Romano (2006), and Yang (2009), there is a noticeable difference in the number and range of themes found in the present study. Working with in-service teachers rather than pre-service teachers for rather a long period of time allowed this study to find a wider range of topics, most of which have not yet been identified by other studies on reflection. The considerably greater number of participants and reflection tags in this study were important; the large sample size helped extract different themes out of the reflection tags.

Regarding the level of reflection, diverse findings in the literature abound. The present study observed that the teachers were more involved in critical reflection than descriptive. About 71% of the reflective tags were critical, and 29% of them were descriptive. This substantiates the findings reported by Farrell (1999b). In Farrell's case study, all three experienced EFL teachers were reflective to a certain extent, although they varied in their degree of reflectivity in each or all of the categories they reflected on. However, the finding of the present study on the level of reflection contradicts those of Yayli (2009), Yang (2009), Killeavy and Moloney (2010), and Liakopoulou (2012). Table 7 summarizes the findings of the similar studies regarding the level of reflection.

Table 7
Level of Reflection Found in the Literature

Researcher	Participants	Findings
Farrell, 1999b	In-service teachers	More critical reflection
Yayli, 2009	Pre-service teachers	More descriptive reflection
Yang, 2009	Pre-service teachers	More descriptive reflection
Killeavy and Moloney, 2010	Newly qualified teachers	More descriptive reflection
Liakopoulou, 2012	Pre-service teachers	More descriptive reflection

Whereas the present study explored in-service teachers' reflection, the participants in the studies conducted by Yayli (2009), Yang (2009), Killeavy and Moloney (2010), and Liakopoulou (2012) were pre-service teachers. The difference in the types of participants can be a reason for the discrepancy between the findings. It seems that pre-service teachers are rather descriptive in their reflections but in-service teachers are more critical. As pre-service teachers start their career and encounter and accumulate various teaching experiences, they move toward having a more critical view of classroom events. This is in alignment with Soodmand Afshar and Farahani's (2018) findings in a similar Iranian context, showing that the more experienced teachers manifested a higher degree of reflective practice.

Conclusion and Implications

This study focused on the concept of reflection, which has become “a dominant paradigm in language teacher education research and programs worldwide” (Liou, 2001, p. 197). It investigated EFL teachers’ classroom experiences through their longitudinal reflection on action via a blog to find the problems and critical moments they faced in their classrooms, which provided the themes for their reflection. The findings showed that the teachers mainly reflected on three main categories made up of 20 themes. Only a few of these themes had been identified in previous studies. The greater number of reflection tags in the present study helped extract comparably far more themes. In conclusion, teachers have a wide range of classroom concerns and problems. Some of them are limited to the immediate classroom environment, including learners’ classroom participation and responsibility, development of learners’ language skills, raising learners’ motivation and self-confidence, classroom management, use of L1, and classroom facilities. However, some are related to the wider out-of-classroom context, including broader themes such as teachers’ working conditions, textbook and syllabus, teaching methods and strategies, and teachers’ instructional ethics. To conclude, reflection on teaching is essential for teachers because, as Henderson (1996) contends, “If you, as a teacher, are not thoughtful about your professional work, how do you expect your students to be thoughtful about their learning?” (p. vii).

Regarding the level of reflection, the present study found that the in-service teacher participants practiced more critical reflection than descriptive. This finding and the literature review show that the level of reflection is intertwined with teaching experience. Pre-service teachers are descriptively reflective of the events, but in-service teachers more critically reflect on their experiences. It seems that as teachers gain more experience, they move beyond the mere narration of their experiences and take into account the broader contexts in which the events happen. There are many new, challenging situations for novice teachers to contend with in the classroom. As they successfully overcome these challenges and obtain more experience, they start questioning broader issues such as syllabus, textbook, and working conditions. Hence, they become more critical of what happens around them in their profession.

These findings are beneficial to teachers because, as Liakopoulou (2012) argued, a systematic description of reflection content and types of reflection “provides us with a clear framework which can be utilized as a springboard by trainee teachers and full-time teachers to approach the task of teaching from a reflective perspective” (p. 42). These themes are worthy of attention as they can have immediate and long-term influence on teachers’ teaching and students’ learning. Although the unique nature of each teaching session makes it impossible to predict what may happen in a teaching session in advance, teachers can develop an awareness of the problems they may face.

This helps them equip themselves with solutions to solve or get along with potential sources of problems. Teachers should be informed that, through regular reflection on their teaching, they can gradually identify sources of problems in their classes and better prepare themselves to face them. Without reflecting on their practice, they become slaves to routines (Farrell, 2007). This reflection is mostly helpful for novice teachers, who are usually busy struggling with several new issues in their classes when they start teaching. For novice teachers, reflection-on-action is beneficial as they do not usually find enough time during their teaching session to have reflection-in-action. Novice teachers need to receive sufficient support on how to engage in systematic reflection. However, to not be “eaten by the profession,” they need to start earlier than that to learn and practice reflective teaching in their teacher education courses (Farrell, 2016b). Hence, they will not be eaten by their profession—Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)—and quit their jobs.

More important, as the findings of recent studies conducted in Iran, which is the context of the present study, reveal, Iranian EFL teachers neither possess the knowledge nor show higher levels of reflection (Marzban & Ashraafi, 2016; Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, 2017; Soodmand Afshar & Farahani, 2018). For instance, Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2018) found that EFL teachers are not familiar with diaries, teaching journals, and similar self-reflection tools. Thus, policy makers and teacher educators need to include reflective teaching and reflection tools, especially technology-enhanced ones, which are more popular with young EFL teachers, in teacher education courses. The present findings can inform such courses about teacher reflection themes and critical classroom episodes. These themes manifest the issues of great concern to teachers, which can serve as appropriate topics for inclusion and discussion in teacher education and professional development programs. Besides working on these potential sources of problems, teacher educators could try to familiarize teachers with the concept of reflection, emphasize the benefits of regular reflection on teaching, and consider workshops for teachers on how to reflect on their practices. Language institutes need to provide opportunities for teachers to practically reflect on their teaching sessions and share their experiences with their colleagues. Overall, teachers' reflections not only benefit their professional development but also provide invaluable data to enrich teacher education programs by adding reflection as a component of these programs. In addition, researchers can replicate this study by focusing on collaborative diary-keeping.

A few limitations cause restrictions on the generalization of this study's findings. The first limitation is the length of comment tags. The teacher participants were required to write a reflection tag per week. The minimum length of each tag was set to one paragraph, about 100 words. However, some of the teachers sent long tags, explaining the events in detail, whereas others' tags were rather brief. As each tag could contain more than one theme, longer tags

resulted in greater numbers of themes being extracted. The second limitation is the length of the study. The literature shows that longitudinal studies are done with a small number of cases. However, the present study was conducted with 32 teachers for 3 months as a longitudinal study. If the number of the participants were smaller, it would be possible to work for a longer time. Future studies could take these limitations into account to provide more in-depth insights into language teachers' reflection themes.

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