

Investigating In-Service EFL Teachers' Awareness of Reflective Teaching Applications in Their Teaching Practices: Challenges and Benefits

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the awareness and attitudes of in-service EFL teachers toward the applications of reflective teaching in their practices. Adopting a qualitative approach, five in-service EFL teachers were interviewed to comprehend their perceptions and integration of reflective teaching, the challenges they face in the process of implementation, and the extent of training and support they receive. At the end of the study, the findings revealed that EFL teachers have a positive attitude towards reflective teaching and use reflective practices in their teaching to a certain extent. However, the study also highlighted a need for more formal training and support from educational institutions to assist the teachers to overcome challenges and enhance the implementation of reflective teaching methods. These findings underline the importance of continuous professional development and institutional support in fostering effective reflective teaching practices among EFL educators.

Keywords: Self-reflection, reflective teaching, professional development, teachers' awareness

Hizmet İçi İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Öğretim Uygulamalarında Yansıtıcı Öğretime İlişkin Farkındalıklarının Araştırılması: Zorluklar ve Faydalar

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, hizmet içi İngilizce öğretmenlerinin yansıtıcı öğretim uygulamalarına yönelik farkındalıklarını ve tutumlarını araştırmaktır. Nitel bir yaklaşım benimsenerek, beş hizmet içi İngilizce öğretmeni ile görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiş ve onların yansıtıcı öğretime dair algıları, bu yaklaşımı derslerine nasıl entegre ettikleri, uygulama sürecinde karşılaştıkları zorluklar ile aldıkları eğitim ve destek düzeyi anlaşılmaya çalışılmıştır. Araştırmanın sonunda elde edilen bulgular, İngilizce öğretmenlerinin yansıtıcı öğretime karşı olumlu bir tutum sergilediklerini ve bu uygulamaları belli ölçüde derslerinde kullandıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Ancak, öğretmenlerin karşılaştıkları zorlukların üstesinden gelebilmeleri ve yansıtıcı öğretim yöntemlerini daha etkili bir şekilde uygulayabilmeleri için, eğitim kurumları tarafından daha fazla resmi eğitim ve desteğe ihtiyaç duyulduğu da vurgulanmıştır. Bu bulgular, etkili yansıtıcı öğretim uygulamalarının teşvik edilmesinde sürekli mesleki gelişimin ve kurumsal desteğin önemine dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öz-yansıtma, yansıtıcı öğretim, mesleki gelişim, öğretmen farkındalığı

1. Introduction

Both teaching and learning a foreign language are complicated and demanding processes requiring lots of effort and time. This is a process that changes from person to person since each learner has different learning preferences and attitudes towards languages from cultural, psychological, or pedagogical perspectives. For instance, while some of the students prefer traditional translational methods, especially the young learners tend to use technology in their learning practices. Therefore, it is of significance to be aware of the learning types of the students as teachers. “By reflecting on what they do in the classroom, teachers specifically explore their teaching practices and beliefs and whether these, indeed, work” (Valdez, Nevara, & Esteron, 2018, p.91). Apart from these, both students and teachers need to be aware of the reflection which helps them to evaluate, discover and follow their own learning. Reflective teaching encourages educators and students to assess their teaching/learning methods or classroom experiences from different perspectives. Reflective teaching is a process where teachers continuously think about their teaching, take action, and evaluate to improve how they teach and how students learn. According to Tajik and Ranjbar (2017), to support the successful integration of reflective teaching into English language teaching, teachers need to understand challenges of applying reflective teaching principles in EFL settings. Reflective teaching is often seen as a helpful tool for teachers to develop professionally and students develop personally. As also claimed by Kano, Ayana and Chali (2017), teachers can enhance their comprehension of teaching and enhance the quality of their own teaching through critical reflection on their teaching experiences. However, using it in EFL settings can be challenging due to certain reasons such as institutional rules, age groups or language skills. Some teachers may not prefer to conduct reflective teaching practices, or the students may lack of motivation in keeping journals or completing self-assessment tasks and so on. Additionally, especially pre and novice teachers may not be trained enough on the practices of reflective teaching, as claimed by Ann, Swanto and AlSaqqaf (2018). For these reasons, both students and teachers in EFL settings should be knowledgeable and aware of the reflective practices. In order to demonstrate to what extent in-service EFL teachers are aware of the reflective practices and to what extent they benefit from it, certain research questions will be addressed during this present study as follows:

1. What are EFL teachers' perceptions of reflective teaching, and how do they prefer to integrate reflection into their teaching practices?
2. What challenges do EFL teachers face while applying reflective teaching techniques in their classrooms?
3. To what extent do EFL teachers receive training or support to implement reflective teaching methods from the related institutions?

3. Literature Review

There are several types of methods, techniques, and approaches in teaching English as a foreign language. Grammar translation method, direct method, communicative approach, or the lexical approach can be shown as some of the examples as stated by Richards and Rodgers (2014). Within these methods, it can be seen that there is a variety of different applications and practices. Since the learners needs evolve every day to a certain extent by means of the developments in technology and the other aspects in people's lives, it also affects foreign language learning types and reasons as well. According to Galante, “Historically, English Language Teaching (ELT) methodologies have evolved from a constricted methodology-based to a complex post-method instructional practice” (2014, p. 57). Learning styles changed over the time and therefore, the need for new methods arose accordingly. At this point, there was a shift from method era to post-method era (Masouleh, 2012). Both the learners' and teachers' role changed in language learning process. For instance, teachers also need to be autonomous learners as claimed by Samancı and Arıkan (2010). Apart from this, teachers are mentors, facilitators, and researchers nowadays, whereas they were seen as authorities in the past. When it comes to the students, their roles also changed from being passive listeners to the active participants.

In post method era, the new terms arose such as flexibility, diversity, reflection, eclecticism, which includes combination of the methods. Eclectic teachers are the ones who are able to see the value of offering their students to learn by means of a variety of different tools and techniques (Cadario, 2014). Since every student learns differently, using only one method cannot be considered as beneficial to apply in the classroom settings. In the lights of these, in order to support students to discover how they learn best, reflective practices are used in post method era. According to Richards (1995), reflection is monitoring and reflecting on one's own teaching using observation of the classroom's learning process. "Practical reflection highlights concentration on professional practice, what it means, and why it is important" (Oo & Habok, p. 128). The roles of teachers benefitting from reflective practices are being autonomous, being aware of their own ways of teaching (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021; Soundiraraj & Babu, 2022). When it comes to the roles of students, they are seen as active participants, critical thinkers, and feed-back givers. In applying reflective practices in EFL classrooms, teachers can benefit from lots of self-assessment techniques. For instance; they can keep teacher diaries, record their own lessons to watch and evaluate later on, by requesting feedback from their peers and so on (Fonkamo & Zeru, 2022; Ferdowsi & Afghari, 2015). After implementing these techniques, they can see if there are any missing or negative parts in their practices so that they could also guide the students at the end. Applying reflective teaching in EFL settings has certain benefits such as learning how to think critically, developing professionally, improving strategies for better teaching environments and being more confident about how they continue their practices (Farrell, 2007). According to Fat'hi and Behzadpour, "Reflective teaching provides ELT practitioners and language teachers with a variety of techniques to become more conscious of their own actions and feelings in and outside the classrooms" (2011, p.249).

However, as opposed to the benefits and advantages of applying reflective teaching in the classrooms, there also might be certain inhibitors in applying this at different age groups and language levels. For example, while recording the lessons, teachers may act differently than an ordinary session (Tuncer & Özkan, 2021). Also, the large classes may inhibit teachers from applying reflection in the lessons. In addition to these, in a study conducted by Afshar and Farahani (2018), lack of motivation and lack of knowledge are among the biggest inhibitors in the implementation of reflective teaching. Subsequently, the institutional problems hinder applications of reflection in the classes. In the light of these findings, it can be concluded that reflective teaching is helpful both for teachers and for students, however, there might be certain inhibitors in applying this practice in the EFL classroom settings. The teachers or students may not be willing to apply it, or they may not be aware of this from time to time. At the end of this study, it is aimed to demonstrate to what extent EFL teachers are aware of the reflectional practices and to what extent they benefit from it in their classrooms.

4. Method

4.1. Setting and Participants

This study has been conducted qualitatively by means of 5 interview questions. The participants are in-service EFL teachers who are working with different age groups and language levels for their teaching practices. 5 students participated in this research. The number of female participants is 4 whereas the number of male participants is 1. Their age range is between 22 and 27 with the mean of 24,6. Participants were chosen randomly, representing different backgrounds, ages, and work experiences that relate to the research topic. Random sampling was used in this study to give each participant an equal chance of being selected. This helps to make the sample more representative and the results more reliable (Mulisa, 2022).

4.2. Instruments

In conducting this qualitative research, certain interview questions developed by the author were addressed to the participants in order to measure to what extent in-service EFL teachers are aware of the reflective practices and to what extent they prefer benefitting from this. Interview questions were addressed to the participants to perceive more detailed information on their perceptions.

4.3. Procedures

This research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase of the study, the interview questions were addressed to the participants to collect more detailed information. Subsequently, thematic analysis was

conducted in order to analyze the information collected from the participants by means of the interview questions. "Thematic analysis is an appropriate method of analysis for seeking to understand experiences, thoughts, or behaviors across a data set" (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 846). "Theme" can be described as the subjective meaning and cultural-contextual message of data" (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). In the light of these, the themes extracted from the data were analyzed to uncover deeper insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the qualitative data.

5. Findings

To analyze the qualitative data collected from the participants by means of the interview questions, the recordings were transcribed. Subsequently, the thematic analysis was conducted and the answers coming from teachers were classified under 5 categories as follows; understanding reflective teaching, incorporation of reflective practices, impact on students, challenges in applying reflective teaching and training/support.

5.1. Understanding Reflective Teaching

When the participants were asked about the first interview question which is "can you define what reflective teaching means to you in the context of EFL instruction?", they answered as;

Table 1

Codes and themes for the reflective teaching perceptions of in-service teachers

Definition of reflective teaching	Self-evaluation	"Reflective teaching is kind of an evaluation of one's own teaching and learning English." (P1)
		"Understanding how effective our teaching is and improving it further." (P2)
		"Being aware of one's mistakes and good practices." (P3)
		"Assessing whether lessons are beneficial and adjusting accordingly." (P4)
		"Evaluating classroom activities based on student feedback." (P5)

These findings imply that EFL teachers are aware of reflective teaching practices and are mostly positive about these applications.

5.2. Incorporation of Reflective Practices

When the participants were asked about how they prefer to incorporate reflective teaching in their own practices, they mostly agreed on giving feedback to students and obtaining feedback from them. They also elaborated that they try to support students to keep journals and diaries after the lessons. The results of this theme suggest that the teachers try to integrate reflective teaching into their classroom activities as much as they can.

Table 2

Codes and themes for how in-service teachers incorporate reflective teaching in their own practices

Implementation of Reflective Teaching	Informal self-reflection	"After my classes, I critically reflect on the teaching process to identify both successful aspects and areas in need of improvement." (P1)
		"I use communication clues such as 'Do you understand?'" (P2)
		"I conduct informal discussions about lessons and well-being." (P3)
	Formal strategies	"I used to self-assess by making a list." (P1)
		"I encourage students to keep journals and read them weekly." (P4)
		"I collect verbal feedback and adjust my lessons accordingly." (P5)

5.3. Impact On Students

When the participants were asked to clarify how they think reflective teaching practices impact EFL students' learning experiences and language proficiency development, they mostly agreed upon the fact that reflective practices help learners improve and discover their own learning experiences. They also explained that reflective teaching practices enhances student engagement and participation in the classes. The result of this theme claims that reflective applications in the lessons assist learners to be more aware of their own learning processes.

Table 3

Codes and themes for how in-service teachers perceive the impact of reflective practices on learning experiences and language proficiency development

Impact on student learning	Improved engagement	"Students see that their thoughts are valued, increasing participation." (P4)
		"Reflective teaching helps students shape the class with our guidance." (P2)
	Enhanced proficiency	"It leads to better learning experiences and language development." (P1)
		"Students with lower attention spans improved their language proficiency." (P3)

5.4. Challenges in Applying Reflective Teaching

Within this theme, the participants pointed out the challenges teachers encounter with reflective teaching such as students feeling shy to share and teachers needing to understand their own strengths. To handle these challenges, support is crucial, such as providing training and creating spaces where feedback is encouraged. When the participants were asked about the certain challenges that they encounter during their classroom practices, they answered as follows:

Table 4

Codes and themes for the challenges of reflective practices

Challenges of Reflective Teaching	Workload and time constraints	"Teachers have a heavy workload, making reflection difficult." (P1)
		"It requires a solid basis in teaching and experience." (P2)
	Student resistance	"Some students may avoid reflection, perceiving it as a chore." (P3)
		"Students are not familiar with the process and may hesitate." (5)

5.5. Training and Support

The answers given to the last question which is about the training that the in-service EFL teachers receive during their educational practices, two of the participants reported that they were not trained enough about the applications of reflective teaching. However, three of them claimed that they received training on reflection during their bachelor's degree as well their master's degree. These findings suggest that it is crucial to train pre-service EFL teachers on reflective practices and support the in-service teachers to apply it in the lessons.

Table 5

Codes and themes for the training that the in-service EFL teachers receive during their educational practices

Training and support	Formal education	"I encountered reflective teaching in my master's studies." (P1, P3, P5)
		"My MA degree helped me understand its benefits." (P4)
	Peer collaboration	"I ask my colleagues to observe my lessons and exchange ideas." (P4)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Applications of reflective teaching in EFL settings is of importance since it provides both learners and students another aspect into their own learning processes. In a study conducted by Fatemipour (2009), it was revealed that reflective practices enhance teachers' performances to some extent. In another study conducted by Ferdowsi and Afghari (2015), it was also revealed that EFL teachers have positive attitudes towards reflective teaching applications in EFL settings which is in line with the conclusions of this study. Additionally, in a study conducted by Farrell in Korean EFL context, it was elaborated that EFL teachers mostly aware and benefit from reflective practices (1999). Their reflectivity level changes: however, they try to benefit from it to a certain extent. Nonetheless, under certain circumstances, it may be difficult to implement reflection into classes such as having limited time and repetitive processes as claimed by Kis and Kartal (2019). Therefore, certain reflective tasks can be given to the students as homework so that they could evaluate themselves without a time pressure.

According to the findings of this case study, in-service EFL teachers generally have a positive attitude and awareness of reflective teaching practices as well as the other studies mentioned above. Most of the participants confirmed the benefits and have incorporated these practices into their teaching to a certain degree. For instance, they suggested that they support the students to keep journals and diaries about their lives for an improved writing. Also, they stated that giving importance to students' feedback is crucial, therefore, they exchange ideas in the classes. When it comes to the certain challenges, they claimed that it may cause another workload on teachers. Additionally, they may not have free time to evaluate the self-assessment tasks as well. At the end, it can be said that EFL teachers find reflective practices as a helpful tool. However, the fact that two out of five teachers uttered not having received formal training in reflective teaching underlines a significant area for improvement. This suggests that more professional development programs focusing on reflective teaching are needed. By providing ongoing support, educational institutions can help teachers use reflective practices more effectively. This research emphasizes the importance of continued focus on teacher training and support in reflective teaching methods.

7. Implications

According to the findings of the study, it can be claimed that a majority of the participants who are in-service EFL teachers are aware of the benefits and challenges in the application of reflective teaching. They are also aware of the fact that implementation of reflective teaching in EFL classrooms assist students to gain deeper insight into how they learn best. Therefore, schools and the other educational institutions should give importance to support their teachers in terms of these sorts of applications in the educational settings. Apart from this, the related study highlights the need for professional development programs in the faculties of education including reflective practices as well. Furthermore, continuous support and resources should be made available to assist teachers in adopting and maintaining reflective practices in their classrooms. In this way, students will be able to observe their own way of learning and improve themselves by examining if there are any missing parts with the help of journals they keep and feedback they get from their teachers or peers. When it comes to the teachers, they will be able to develop new techniques to improve their teaching practices by means of the reflective applications such as getting feedback from the students or using self-assessment checklists.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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